

DOCTORAL THESIS

Parental emotional attachment and fear of intimacy of emerging adults in Hong Kong: the effect of differentiation of self

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood has been described as a distinctive stage of life between adolescence and young adulthood, in which the hallmark of development is signified by the achievement of intimacy in romantic relationships. From a family systems perspective, the degree to which parents have resolved their own emotional attachment contributes to the capacity of emerging adults to develop intimacy in romantic relationships without inhibition from fear of closeness.

This study empirically examines the relationship between parental emotional attachment and the fear of intimacy of emerging adults by exploring the mediating role of differentiation of self. One of the most important and original contributions of this study is the development and validation of the Parental Emotional Attachment Scale (PEAS) which measures the intensity of parental emotional attachment.

This study applies a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design with four samples of emerging adults in Hong Kong. First, interviews ($N=24$; $M_{age}=23.6$; 54% female) are conducted to explore the variations in subjective experiences with family of origin and fear of romantic intimacy. Building on the qualitative data from the interviews, the PEAS is developed through two pilot studies with two separate samples (combined $N=551$; $M_{age}=20.6$; 61% female). The PEAS is validated and then applied in the main study ($N=755$; $M_{age}=21.8$; 55.4% female).

An exploratory factor analysis yields four factors with 34 items, including Parental Emotional Fusion, Parental Emotional Separateness, Parental Emotional Over-functioning and Parental Emotional Projection, which explain for 46.81% of the total variance. The

four-factor structure is confirmed by using a confirmatory factor analysis. The results indicate substantial correlations between the PEAS and the Chinese version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, which supports the convergent validity of the PEAS. The results also show that the PEAS has sufficient reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$) and validity to support its application in the Hong Kong Chinese population.

Concurrently, it is found that parental emotional attachment is negatively correlated with the level of differentiation of self, and positively correlated with the fear of intimacy. In addition, differentiation of self significantly mediates the relation between parental emotional attachment and fear of intimacy. Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis reveals that parental emotional over-functioning, emotional cutoff and emotional fusion with family are predictive of the fear of intimacy.

The overall findings highlight differentiation of self as an underlying mechanism through which parental emotional attachment affects the level of fear of intimacy of emerging adults. Besides, emerging adults who experience greater parental emotional over-functioning, emotional cutoff and emotional fusion with family show higher levels of fear of intimacy. These findings jointly imply the importance for emerging adults to differentiate from their family of origin by balancing closeness and separateness, bridging emotional distance, reducing emotional cutoff and recognizing their own adaptive patterns in relationships, which serve as a practical framework for the future development of relationship education and counseling of emerging adults in Hong Kong.

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