

The Lasting Impact of Parental Conflict on Self-Differentiation of Young Adult Offspring

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Abstract : Bowen's concept of self-differentiation describes a healthy balance of autonomy and intimacy in close relationships, and it has been widely researched in the context of family dynamics. The current study aimed to clarify the impact of family dysfunction on self-differentiation by specifically examining conflict between parents, and by including young adults, an underexamined age group in this domain (N = 300; ages 18 to 30). It also identified a protective factor for offspring from conflictual homes. The 300 young adults (recruited online through Mechanical Turk) completed the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC), the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), and the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R). Analyses revealed that interparental conflict significantly impairs self-differentiation among young adult offspring. Specifically, exposure to parental conflict showed a negative impact on young adults' sense of self, emotional reactivity, and interpersonal cutoff in the context of close relationships. Parental conflict was also related to increased psychological distress among offspring. Surprisingly, the study found that parental divorce does not impair self-differentiation in offspring, demonstrating the distinctly harmful impact of conflict. These results clarify a unique type of family dysfunction that impairs self-differentiation, specifically in distinguishing it from parental divorce; it examines young adults, a critical age group not previously examined in this domain; and it identifies a moderating protective factor (a strong parent-child bond) for offspring exposed to conflict. Overall, results suggest the need for modifications in parental behavior in order to protect offspring at risk of lasting emotional and interpersonal damage.

Keywords : divorce, family dysfunction, parental conflict, parent-child bond, relationships, self-differentiation, young adults

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