



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

Amanda Gail Whitacre, Ph.D.,

Nicholas Papouchis, Ph.D., Lisa Wallner Samstag, Ph.D., and Philip Wong, Ph.D.
Long Island University, Department of Psychology—Brooklyn, NY

Abstract

Bowen's concept of self-differentiation captures a healthy balance of autonomy and intimacy in close relationships. Widespread research has been conducted on self-differentiation and elements of family dynamics, highlighting significant connections. The current study included an underexamined age group (N=300; ages 18 to 30 years) to clarify the impact of family dysfunction on self-differentiation of offspring—specifically the impact of interparental conflict. The study found interparental conflict to be significantly impairing. Although parental divorce has historically shown an impact on offspring's development, this study did not replicate such findings, but rather found that exposure to conflict was at the source. Additionally, the study found a strong parent-child bond to be a protective factor against impaired self-differentiation among young adults with conflictual parents.

Background

Ideally, young adulthood marks the development of a stable sense of self, the forming of mature relationships, and the achievement of healthy self-differentiation from one's family of origin (Bowen, 1976; 1978). Young adults with high self-differentiation are able to strike a balance between independent thought (autonomy) and emotional closeness with others (intimacy) (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003), while poorly differentiated individuals have difficulty managing emotions, thinking clearly, and maintaining individuality.

The extant literature demonstrates how maladaptive family dynamics can impair self-differentiation (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003; Michael, Torres, & Seemen, 2007; Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004), particularly among young adult offspring (Johnson, Thorngren, & Smith, 2001). Unfortunately, most studies confound divorce and/or family conflict with interparental conflict, making it impossible to tease apart which dysfunctional family element leads to impairments in self-differentiation. Fortunately, theory and research have also identified protective factors that may help offspring exposed to interparental conflict (Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). This study aimed to clarify the harmful and protective impacts of such familial constructs on self-differentiation.

Figure 1

Multiple Regression of Interparental Conflict on Self-Differentiation

	B	SE	β	t	p	R ²	ΔR^2	F
Emotional Reactivity								
Interparental Conflict	-0.65	0.10	-0.34	-6.21	.00**	—	0.11	—
Overall Model					.00**	0.15		16.49
I-Position								
Interparental Conflict	-0.39	0.12	-0.19	-3.33	.00**	—	0.03	—
Overall Model					.00**	0.06		9.24
Emotional Cutoff								
Interparental Conflict	-0.89	0.12	-0.38	-7.19	.00**	—	0.14	—
Overall Model					.00**	0.19		23.02
Fusion								
Interparental Conflict	0.30	0.12	0.14	2.44	.05*	—	0.02	—
Overall Model					.00**	0.04		5.79
Overall Self-Differentiation								
Interparental Conflict	-0.46	0.08	-0.33	-6.00	.00**	—	0.11	—
Overall Model					.00**	0.13		22.10

Method: Participants/ Procedure/ Variables/ Measures

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 300 young adults (N = 300; ages 18 to 30; M = 26 years old; SD = 3.11), recruited online through Mechanical Turk (MTurk); all participants completed the measures online. 43% were female and 56% were male, (1% no response). 45% experienced less than six months of interparental conflict; 29% experienced six months to six years of interparental conflict; and 19% experienced more than six years of interparental conflict, (7% declined a response). 76% of participants were born within the United States; 17% were born in India, (7% born elsewhere). All participants resided in the United States at the time data was collected.

Variables

Participants were measured on four variables: their degree of self-differentiation, the length of their exposure to interparental conflict, the degree of closeness with each parent, and their psychological distress (based on number of symptoms endorsed).

Measures

Participants completed the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; α for this sample = .91), the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; α for this sample = .92), the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; α for this sample = .89, .90), and the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R; α for this sample = .99).

Main Hypotheses

- It was expected that among young adults, higher levels of **interparental conflict** (CPIC) would significantly correlate with **components of self-differentiation** (DSI):
 - Higher levels of emotional reactivity;
 - Lower levels of stability of self;
 - Higher levels of emotional cutoff or emotional fusion.
- It was expected that higher levels of **interparental conflict** would significantly correlate with **overall self-differentiation**.
- It was expected that the presence of **parental divorce** would predict lower overall **self-differentiation**.
- It was expected that **parent-child bonds** (PBI) would moderate the relationship between **interparental conflict** and **self-differentiation**.

Statistical Analyses and Results

The alpha level was set to .05 for each analysis. All variables were normally distributed with no significant skewness or kurtosis. As expected, a multiple regression analysis revealed that interparental conflict significantly impairs overall self-differentiation ($F(2, 292) = 22.10, p < .00; \beta = -.33, p < .00; R^2 = .13$). Specifically, multiple components of self-differentiation are impacted: Young adults' sense of self $F(2, 292) = 9.24, p < .00; \beta = -.19, p < .00; R^2 = .06$, emotional reactivity ($F(3, 291) = 16.49, p < .00; \beta = -.34, p < .00, \text{ where } R^2 = .15$), and degree of interpersonal cutoff ($F(3, 291) = 23.02, p < .00; \beta = -.38, p < .00; R^2 = .19$). Notably, a multiple regression analysis showed that parental divorce does not significantly impair self-differentiation ($\beta = .07, p > .05$). Positively, a moderator analysis with multiple regression revealed that a strong parent-child bond protects young adult offspring with conflictual parents from further impairment in self-differentiation. Analyses revealed that the predictor variables remained significant (Interparental conflict: $\beta = -.21, p < .00$; Parent-child bond: $\beta = .16, p < .05$), and the moderating variable was also significant ($\beta = -.17, p < .00$), with an improved explanation for the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .18, p < .00; F(4, 290) = 15.43$) as compared to the original model. Exploratory analyses showed that more impaired self-differentiation was significantly related to higher psychological distress (SCL-90).

Figure 2

Bivariate Correlations Between Covariates and Dependent Variables

Covariates	Sex (M=1, F=2)	Age (Ascending)	Cultural Background (U.S. Born=1, Non-U.S. Born=2)	Age at Time of Divorce (Ascending)
Dependent Variables				
Self Differentiation (DSI)	—	—	-.16**	0.73
Emotional Reactivity	-.13*	—	—	0.76
I-Position	—	.15**	—	0.37
Emotional Cutoff	.17**	—	-.18**	0.99
Fusion	—	—	-.13*	0.68

Figure 3

Moderator Analysis of the Parent-Child Bond and Interparental Conflict on Self-Differentiation

	Beta In	B	SE	β	t	p	R ²	ΔR^2	F
Controls									
Sex	0.09	—	—	—	1.64	0.10	—	—	—
Age	-0.09	—	—	—	-1.55	0.12	—	—	—
Cultural Background	—	-0.18	0.07	-0.15	-2.77	.00**	—	0.02	—
Parent-Child Bond	—	0.01	0.01	0.16	2.37	.02*	—	0.02	—
Interparental Conflict	—	-0.29	0.09	-0.21	-3.12	.00**	—	0.11	—
Parent-Child Bond x Interparental Conflict	—	-0.09	0.03	-0.17	-3.09	.00**	—	0.03	—
Overall Model						.00**	0.18		15.43

Discussion

This study examined the negative impact of interparental conflict on self-differentiation in order to expand upon the research of family dynamics and consequences. Results highlighted that the impact is long-lasting, with offspring demonstrating impairment well into young adulthood. The study also found that lower self-differentiation is significantly related to higher psychological distress.

Notably, the study did not confirm previous findings that parental divorce is negatively associated with self-differentiation, distinguishing it from the impact of conflict itself (Chung & Gale, 2009; Johnson & Nelson, 1998). Prior studies did not always distinguish between interparental conflict and parental divorce, potentially confounding their true impacts. Additional studies are needed.

On a positive note, the study also found that stronger parent-child bonds protect against impairment in self-differentiation after exposure to parental conflict. Thus, the study's overall findings highlight hopeful areas for clinical intervention and behavioral change with at-risk individuals and families.

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