

The Impact Of Perceived Parenting Styles On Problem-Focused Coping Among Young Adults: The Mediating Role Of Self-Differentiation

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Abstract: This study investigated how Chinese college students in Hong Kong perceive their parents' styles and how these perceptions influence their self-differentiation and problem-solving coping mechanisms. Perceived authoritarian parenting impeded self-differentiation, while authoritative parenting fostered it. Students with higher self-differentiation tended to employ reflective coping and exhibited less likelihood of distancing from problems. The level of education is linked to the degree of differentiation, implying that academic experiences contribute to forming personal identity. Authoritative parenting enhanced reflective coping directly. Moreover, contrary to the initial hypothesis, self-differentiation did not mediate the connection between perceived parenting and reflective coping styles.

Keywords: Coping strategies, mediating role, parenting style, self-differentiation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress can significantly impact college students from late adolescence to early adulthood (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Many new college students jump out of the structured education and into a more challenging and independent environment. Lazarus (1984) described stress-coping as a series of emotional and cognitive strategies individuals employ to manage particular stress-inducing situations. Researchers are interested in why some young people made efficient coping efforts while others did not. Parenting is a crucial source of individual differences in understanding the coping styles in a particular culture. For example, earlier studies in the United States have found that perceived parental warmth would predict fewer adverse reactions to stress in adolescents compared with those who reported more parental harshness (Wagner et al., 1996). Evidence also showed an association between parenting warmth and supportiveness with adolescents' problem-focused coping (Dusek & Danko, 1994). More recent empirical evidence showed that adolescents perceiving parents as more warm would employ more active problem-focused coping, whereas higher punishing, indulgent or uninvolved parenting predicted more use of avoidance and poorer emotional adjustment (Moon-Seo et al., 2021; Nijhof & Engels, 2007; Wolfradt et al., 2003).

Researchers developed the Theoretical Coping Framework to explain how parents influence their children's coping through children's self-system development of motivation (Skinner & Edge, 2002). To be specific, when children view parents as accessible and warm, they tend to seek parents' advice on coping and employ coping strategies that directly approach the problem itself. Other researchers posit that positive parental support would enhance children's psychological resources, such as self-esteem, encouraging problem-approach coping behaviours (Wolfradt et al., 2003). A longitudinal study in China supported this transactional model (Gao et al., 2021), finding that authoritative parenting partially explained the reciprocal link between children's self-esteem and their choice of proactive coping methods bi-directionally. The described explanation of coping is grounded on the perspective of children's dynamic self-valuation in stressful situations because it is changeable across significant life stages. It poses a problem that assessing how children perceive their parents in the current developmental stage may not predict their coping ability in the late adolescent or young adult stage (Reitz, 2022).

Another influential factor that fosters an individual's problem-focused coping strategies lies in their level of differentiation. Bowen contributes to the conceptualization of self-differentiation by presenting an individual's relatively stable psychological sense of self (autonomy) within even close relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In Bowen's hypothesis, mature self-differentiation in early adulthood reflects one's ability to balance autonomy and connectedness with the original family, manifesting as a high level of emotion regulation and stress adjustment. The transmission hypothesis of self-differentiation is partially supported in

US-based studies, proving that early parental environments are connected to the self-differentiation in the later developmental stage (Schwartz et al., 2006; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

In addition, Bowen postulated that when facing a stressful situation, a highly differentiated person can regulate emotions and is cognitively active in addressing the problems. Several studies have examined how the self-differentiation-influences individuals' stress coping strategies. Murdock and Gore (2004) found that individuals with higher self-differentiation would prefer coping connected with more reflective problem-resolution. Other researchers find that higher self-differentiation is connected with more adaptive coping and enhanced problem-solving skills in the family context (Seda Sahin et al., 2010). At the same time, these studies did not decide whether self-differentiation would predict a person's universal coping styles in a wide range of stressful situations. In addition, none of the existing studies have examined the influence of self-differentiation, by which perceived parenting may contribute to children's stress coping ability in their early adulthood. Therefore, from both the theoretical and practical perspectives, it is worthwhile to examine coping as a psychosocial outcome of self-differentiation level as an extension of Bowen's theory into the Chinese cultural context.

Within the Chinese family and youth counselling area, the impacts of parenting and self-differentiation in stress coping among young adults have received increasing attention. Chinese cultural values, emphasizing family cohesion and respect for authority, can significantly shape how individuals perceive and manage stress. Research conducted in China indicates that authoritative parenting, which features strong warmth and firm control, is linked to improved psychological well-being and more proactive coping methods in teenagers (Gao et al., 2021). A study by Gao et al. (2021) provided empirical evidence supporting Bowen's theory, showing that authoritative parenting in Chinese families promotes self-esteem and approach coping strategies among children. This bi-directional relationship implies the importance of considering cultural context when exploring psychological constructs like the self-differentiation and coping mechanisms. This suggests that the findings from U.S.-based research on the benefits of perceived parental impacts also apply to young adult populations in Hong Kong society.

Bowen's theory and related studies have posited pairwise relationships between perceived parenting styles, coping, and differentiation-of-self. Specifically, previous studies found that perceived parental warmth and autonomy granting increased levels of differentiation reported by young adults in colleges (Ragelienė & Justickis, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2006). Higher self-differentiation predicts higher preference for problem-focused coping in college students (Murdock & Gore, 2004). However, there has been limited research on the mechanism of these relationships within the Chinese cultural context.

Thus, the present study explores the connections between college students' perceptions of parenting styles, self-differentiation, and coping mechanisms within Chinese society. By examining these relationships, the study will provide insights into the extension of Bowen's theory in the Chinese context and contribute to understanding how cultural factors influence the development of coping mechanisms. The findings are expected to inform school counselling practices aimed at improving the coping abilities of Chinese college students under stressful situations.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Problem-Focused Coping Styles

Lazarus and Folkman define coping styles as a series of cognitive and behavioural methods people use to address stress and its related emotions (1984). Folkman believes a person's coping style is a consistently changing process from encounter to encounter (1991). Minor distinctions are made between coping styles and strategies. Generally, coping styles are seen as more consistent in one person regardless of the situation, contrary to coping strategies. Before the person selects particular coping strategies, the cognitive appraisal process functions through evaluating the potential pros and cons of the situation, as well as the personal options for coping. The appraisal is a dynamic process determined by the individual's motivation, beliefs and personal resources (Folkman et al., 1986).

Although Folkman (1991) believes that individual coping is changeable across situations, he and his colleagues differentiated eight coping methods into two primary strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused (Folkman et al., 1986). The problem-focused pattern is targeted at changing a troubling situation causing distress. The person may apply a problem-focused strategy when he or she views the particular

situation as alterable through personal actions of change. If the actual situation seems hardly to change, the person tends to switch to internal adaptation to manage the distress triggered by it. Emotion-focused strategies are more effectively adopted when there is nothing we can do, so we can only change how we think and feel. These strategies may include emotional distancing from the situation, avoiding the stressors, distancing one's feelings and associated actions, seeking support from others, embracing duties and positive reappraisal.

Roth and Cohen (1986) described another classification of coping strategies that includes two fundamental attitudes towards stress: approach and avoidance. These terms denote the cognitive and emotional actions directed at confronting or distancing oneself from stressful situations. The approach strategies are helpful in a more controllable situation when the person would acknowledge changes and take appropriate action. The avoidant strategies help reduce short-term stress and prevent anxiety from becoming overwhelming in the initial period. It also allows for increasing hope and courage, preparing for the threat. However, excessive avoidance may impede appropriate actions, cause emotional numbness, disruptive behaviours and ignore symptoms related to trauma.

One criticism of coping assessments of problem and emotion-focused strategies is that they might mix up coping actions with feelings of distress (Heppner et al., 1995). Aiming to clarify the operational concept of coping, Heppner and her colleagues developed a measurement focused on the problem-oriented coping style that discriminates between approach and avoidance of stressful situations. This measure also includes the immediate consequences of the coping activities to clarify whether coping was helpful. The resulting instrument, the problem-focused coping inventory (PFSOC), described three coping styles: Reflective, Suppressive, and Reactive.

The reflective coping style focuses on cognitive efforts to address issues and actively engage in coping mechanisms. In contrast, the Reactive Style highlights the internal processes that drain internal resources or disrupt problem-solving efforts. While it bears a resemblance to the emotion-focused strategies identified by Folkman, within the PFSOC model, it measures explicitly emotional responses that obstruct problem-solving (e.g., one item reads "I continue to feel uneasy about my problems. Which tells me I need to do some more work." (Heppner et al., 1995, p.282)).

The suppressive coping style involves evading and denying issues during problem-solving. This approach identifies two avoidance strategies within problem-focused coping, each assessing distinct facets of the coping process. Research findings indicate that both Suppressive and Reactive coping styles are linked to maladaptive attachment styles (such as anxiety and avoidance), psychological distress, and interpersonal difficulties (Wei et al., 2003). Previous studies have shown that perceived problem-solving coping acts as a mediator of the association between attachment anxiety and psychological distress.

2.2 Perceived Parenting Styles

Parenting greatly influences how children learn to manage stress. Power (2004) highlighted that the products of parent-child interactions are an essential resource for children dealing with stressful circumstances. Specifically, how parents handle their children's emotions and assist them in solving problems is crucial in enhancing children's ability to cope with stress. The early parent-child interactions may affect how adults respond to academic-related stress. Such long-lasting influences have been delineated in the attachment research developed by Bowlby (1969). Moreover, researchers have been studying the associations between children's attachments and coping styles in adulthood (Greenberger & McLaughlin, 1998; Ognibene & Collins, 1998). Research has shown that the dynamics between parents and their children may impact how well college students perform.

Researchers widely adopted a typological perspective to examine parenting styles developed from Baumrind's model to evaluate the effects of parent-child relationships on children. She proposed this model based on the longitudinal research of child rearing, named the Family Socialisation and Developmental Competence Project. Drawing from empirical findings, she categorized parenting styles in terms of the degree of demand and responsiveness exhibited by parents, distinguishing between restrictive and supportive behaviours. Baumrind developed a model that identifies three main parenting styles: Authoritative parenting combines warmth, demonstrated through encouraging self-expression and autonomy, with expectancy for adaptive behaviour enforced through consistent, reasonable rules. The authoritarian style is marked by excessive control and justification of parental authority. Conversely, permissive parenting involves minimal control, granting adolescents considerable freedom in their actions (Baumrind, 1991). Additionally, Maccoby and his

colleagues (1983) further divided permissive parenting style into two subtypes: indulgent, featured by high affection and low regulation, and neglectful, with both low affection and control, as well as a disengagement from parental responsibilities.

Most researchers have found that authoritative parenting is linked to adaptive psychosocial functioning, whereas authoritarian parenting is linked to adverse functioning outcomes (Baumrind, 1991; Chen et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2023). Parenting styles have adverse effects and are more commonly connected with problematic acts in childhood and adolescence (Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2019). A growing body of literature investigates the links between parenting factors and children's adjustment to stressful events (Dusek & Danko, 1994; Harvey & Byrd, 2000; Vélez et al., 2011). Specifically, family environment is proposed as the most effective context for children's socialization of coping behaviours (Dusek & Danko, 1994; Harvey & Byrd, 2000). Consistent and responsive parent warmth and authoritative parenting styles have been proven to predict positive child adjustment in major life stresses, leading to positive outcomes such as better academic performance (Baumrind, 1991; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Children prefer to approach problems and use active coping strategies more often when their parents display interactive and respected qualities, such as affection, familial backing, discipline, and cohesion (Dusek & Danko, 1994; Vélez et al., 2011).

Multiple studies have explored how perceived childhood parenting styles and psychosocial factors would affect young adults (i.e. college students), manifesting as mood, self-esteem, self-identity, and locus of control (Barton & Kirtley, 2012; Cordeiro et al., 2018; Hong & Dyakov, 2021; Szkody et al., 2021). Additionally, several studies investigated how students' views of parenting styles were related to their reactions to stress in terms of life and study, revealing significant associations between authoritative parenting and academic outcomes (Simon et al., 2019). However, Renk and Smith (2007) failed to identify distinct associations between them, as Hispanic students were unaffected by their parents' attitudes regarding their academic grades. The mixed outcomes suggested a need for further research on the explanatory factors of parenting factors on stress outcomes.

2.3 Self-differentiation: A potential mediator

Bowen's family system theory provides a theoretical foundation explaining the influences of parenting on individual stress coping in college students. Bowen pointed out that individual functioning mainly evolves within the context of family interactions in response to diffuse anxiety. These processes, referred to as family patterns, emerge within nuclear and extended family systems and are transmitted across generations. Self-differentiation is one primary concept of Bowen's family systems theory. It describes the characteristics of individuals who operate independently rather than being emotionally dependent on family dynamics (Murdock, 2013). It can be defined in a continuum: once the differentiation point is reached, it refers to the ability to make decisions based on intellect rather than emotions. A highly differentiated person would better cope with stress without emotional turbulence (Simon et al., 2019). They are also able to keep intimacy with others and maintain autonomy at the same time. On the other end, fusion is characterized as being emotionally reactive in response to stress and being stuck in the position of their original family relationships (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Less differentiated individuals would be more emotionally overwhelmed by stress, or conversely, shut down emotionally when responding to stress. They also have more difficulty balancing intimacy and independence (Skowron et al., 2009).

Empirical research has demonstrated negative correlations between self-differentiation, perceived stress and stress-related dysfunctions (Murdock & Gore, 2004; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron et al., 2009), which resonates with family system theory that persons with a higher differentiation level could bear more stress before displaying dysfunctional symptoms (1988). The possible explanations from Bowen's theory would be that highly differentiated persons can better withstand the effects of stress because they tend to regulate their emotions, are more resistant to changes, and employ more active coping strategies (Murdock & Gore, 2004). As forementioned, problem-focused coping is widely proven to be connected to positive outcomes, while other coping styles are generally associated with less promising outcomes.

Cross-sectional research indicates that self-differentiation could forecast individual preferences for applying practical problem-solving skills for stress management (Skowron et al., 2009). According to Murdock and Gore (2004), individual variations in coping strategies mirror how people manage stress based on their level of differentiation. They investigated how the differentiation level moderates the association between perceived stress and problem-focused coping aspects. Self-differentiation interacted with higher stress to

predict reflective coping style, whereas self-differentiation with lower stress would predict suppressive and reactive coping.

Another important aspect of the self-differentiation is that it is assumed to be transmitted across generations in the nuclear family, which, by Bowen's conceptualization, is referred to as the cross-generational family process. Contradictory evidence supports Bowen's hypothesis of transmission. However, a study conducted in the Philippines provided no evidence that the degree of self-differentiation is passed down from generation to generation (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). A recent study on Polish families discovered that the levels of self-differentiation were similar among members of the nuclear family (including parents and children), thereby demonstrating the multigenerational transmission of self-differentiation (Józefczyk, 2023).

In summary, the described studies indicate that specific parenting methods would foster developmentally adaptive differentiation of their children through the transmission process of differentiation level from parents to their children. A previous study supported the idea that (2016) high self-differentiation in parents is positively associated with authoritative parenting styles. Moreover, Gorbani and Amani (2015) found that authoritative parenting predicted their children's level of I-position (one dimension of self-differentiation) and its hostile relations with emotional cut-off. For example, Ragneliene and Justickis (2016) found that democratic parenting styles are related to higher self-differentiation in adolescents, while control-driven parenting (authoritarian style) is related to lower self-differentiation.

However, the influence of parenting styles is indirectly exerted on children by altering their perception of parenting. Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2008) emphasizes that how children perceive and evaluate parenting is crucial in shaping their developmental outcomes. Children who perceived more attentive parenting styles tend to have higher self-differentiation (Schwartz et al., 2006). Further, the way parents perceive stress and deal with related anxiety will exert influences on their children's perceptions through family interactions. Furthermore, the relationships between how children perceive parenting and their self-differentiation are influenced by gender. Scharwart and other researchers (2006) found that male students tend to perceive their parents as disapproving and have a lower self-position. Female students who did not receive adequate emotion-coaching from their parents tend to report experiencing greater emotional fusion and less emotional cutoff. The described studies indicate that as children grow into young adults, those who inherited higher differentiation from their authoritative parents tend to address stressful situations with more proactive and problem-focused attitudes.

From the above review, a well-established link emerges among children's perceived parenting styles, self-differentiation, and the preference for problem-focused coping. People who perceived their parenting as authoritative tend to have higher self-differentiation, decreasing their possibility of using avoidance coping styles. However, the author has not found studies investigating how self-differentiation might bridge the perceived parenting and college students' coping methods. Conducting such research could be valuable for clinical interventions and youth consultations in educational settings. If self-differentiation mediates the impact of perceived parenting on coping strategies, interventions could be designed to enhance students' self-awareness and support them in differentiating from their families of origin, shifting their coping strategies towards being more problem-focused and less emotion-driven. Consequently, the central question of this study is: Does self-differentiation explain the relationship between students' perceived parenting style and their problem-solving preferences?

2.4 Research Questions

Building on the systematic review, this study tested the connections between perceived parenting styles, coping strategies, and self-differentiation among young adults in Hong Kong's Chinese community. The research focused on understanding how different types of perceived parenting influence the coping mechanisms college students employ when they face problems. By examining these dynamics, it aims to explain the trait factors that affect young adults' coping with stress in the Chinese context.

The research questions guiding this study were twofold: First, will specific perceived parenting styles predict the coping styles college students use in problem-solving situations within Chinese society? This question aimed to identify whether particular parenting approaches are associated with distinct coping strategies among young adults. Second, can the self-differentiation explain the relationship between young adults' coping styles and perceived parenting styles? This question sought to determine if the degree of self-

differentiation mediates the influence of perceived parenting on coping behaviours, offering insight into the underlying mechanisms driving these relationships.

2.5 Hypotheses

Based on Bowen's theory and existing literature, the present study examines the relationships among perceived parenting styles, self-differentiation, and coping strategies of Chinese students in Hong Kong. The first hypothesis suggests that perceptions of parental styles will predict self-differentiation and coping styles among Chinese students in Hong Kong. This hypothesis is grounded in earlier findings, which suggest that parenting practices contribute to the variation in individual differentiation levels and stress management in adolescents and young adults. The second hypothesis focuses on the role differentiation of the self. Specifically, it proposes that mature self-differentiation would explain the positive association of perceived parenting and preferred choice of problem-oriented coping. This hypothesis is further subdivided to explore two aspects of perceived parenting styles: authoritative and authoritarian. Thus, the study hypothesizes the following:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived Parenting styles would significantly predict Chinese young adults' problem-focused coping styles.

Hypothesis 2: Self-differentiation will mediate the relationship between perceived parenting styles and coping styles.

- a. Self-differentiation will play a mediating role in the connection between authoritative parenting styles and reflective coping style.
- b. Self-differentiation will play a mediating role in the connection between authoritarian parenting style and reflective coping strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

This study has passed the approval of the City University of Hong Kong Ethics Committee. A total of 149 Chinese students from four colleges in Hong Kong completed the online survey. The study included 47 males (31.5%) and 102 females (68.5%), with an average age of 22.75 years ($SD = 2.271$) and an age range of 18 to 26 years. The proportions of education level: undergraduate, postgraduate and doctorate students accounted for 34.9%, 50.3% and 14.8% of the participants, respectively.

3.2 Measurement

3.2.1 Perceived parenting style:

The present study used the Chinese translated and adapted version of Buri's (1991) Parental Authority Questionnaire (C-PAQ; Zhou et al., 2010) to measure college students' ideas of their parents' parenting styles. In Bowen's assumption, students' functioning is more related to their cognitive and emotional reactivity towards parent-child interaction than their parents' actual behaviours. The initial PAQ was designed based on Baumrind's parenting theory and explicitly developed for late adolescents and young adults reporting parenting behaviours. Two subscales are included, measuring perceived authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles. The authoritarian subscale consists of ten items (e.g. "As I was growing up, parents have always believed that in order for their children to behave appropriately, parents should use more coercive methods"), and the authoritative subscales consists of ten items (e.g. "my parents always encouraged me to communicate with them when I felt that the family rules were not reasonable.") Participants will identify the more influential parent, either mother or father, during their developmental years and rate the perceived parenting style of that parent. This approach helps clarify the impact of parenting styles and improve response accuracy (Chan & Chan, 2005). They will respond with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The sum score of each subscale will measure one particular parenting style. The PAQ has demonstrated good validity in Asian contexts (Ang & Goh, 2006) and reliably identifies parenting styles among emerging adults in Hong Kong (Chen, 2014). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .84 for the perceived authoritative subscale and .78 for the perceived authoritarian subscale, indicating good reliability.

3.3 Coping styles:

The Chinese version of the problem-focused coping style inventory (PFSOC) was used to assess the coping skills (Chang et al., 2012; Heppner et al., 2016). The development of the PFSOC originates from the framework that views coping as a consistent trait, reflecting specific patterns in cognitive processes, behaviours, and emotional responses. The 13-item adapted PFSOC was adapted by Taiwanese researchers and consists of three subscales: reflective (e.g. "I think my problems through in a systematic way"), suppressive (e.g. "I avoid even thinking about my problems") and reactive styles (e.g. "I get preoccupied thinking about my problems and over emphasize some part of them") that differentiate in the problem-resolution styles. Participants were instructed to rate their general ways of approaching problems. They then respond on the items of a five-point scale ranging from (1) "rarely" to (5) "almost all of the time". Total scores for each subscale indicated the frequency of each coping style, with higher subscale scores signifying more frequent use of the corresponding coping style. The construct and discriminant validity of the three-factor Chinese PF-SOC were verified in a Taiwanese Study (Chen, 2014). Regarding reliability, Cronbach's alpha values are .79 for Reflective, .77 for Suppressive, and .61 for Reactive coping.

3.4 Self-differentiation

Self-differentiation was assessed using the revised Chinese version of the Self-differentiation Inventory (DSI-R) by Wu and Wang (2010). Skowron and his colleagues (1998) developed the first revised version of the scale based on the original 40-item Self-differentiation Inventory (DSI). Wu and Wang (2011; 2010) further adapted it into a 27-item Chinese version. The final scale comprises four dimensions: emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, I-position, and fusion with others. Emotional reactivity reflects an individual's tendency to overreact to external stimuli emotionally; emotional cutoff represents the inclination of individuals to avoid close interpersonal relationships and distance themselves from others; And I-position demonstrates a person's capability to preserve a clear sense of self and hold firm to their perspectives during interpersonal exchanges and disputes. Fusion with others indicates an over-involvement in relationships with others. Individuals exhibit a greater degree of self-differentiation when they achieve higher scores on the I-position dimension and lower scores on emotional reactivity, cutoff, and fusion with others. Participants will respond on a six-point Likert Scale, ranging from (1) "totally strongly disagree" to 6 "strongly agree". All other items are reverse-scored except the positively framed items in the I-position subscale. This research concentrates on the comprehensive effect of self-differentiation, utilizing the total scale score rather than scores from individual subscales. The Chinese version of the DSI-R has shown strong validity among college students in China. The Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was .87 in the present study.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Descriptive Information

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for perceived authoritarian, authoritative parenting styles, reflective coping strategy, self-differentiation and demographic variables, and the correlation coefficients among all study variables. The correlation matrix revealed significant relationships between all study variables ($p < 0.05$). Each of the three coping styles was significantly correlated with both perceived parenting styles. Specifically, a high level of reflective coping was moderately associated with a higher level of perceived authoritative parenting and a lower level of perceived authoritarian parenting. Reflective coping was positively correlated with self-differentiation. In contrast, suppressive coping exhibited opposite correlation patterns with perceived authoritarian and authoritative parenting compared to reflective coping. A significant perception of authoritative parenting was moderately linked to a reduced perception of authoritarian parenting.

Three demographic variables, including gender, age, and education level, were examined as study variables. Gender showed no significant relations with all of the study variables. Age had small-size associations with both perceived authoritarian parenting and self-differentiation, but no significant relationship with perceived authoritative parenting or coping styles. Higher educational attainment was associated with a rise in perceived authoritative parenting and a reduction in perceived authoritarian parenting. However, education level was not significantly associated with self-differentiation or coping styles.

The correlations of these demographic variables with study variables inferred no spurious relationship within the mediation relationship in hypothesis 2.

4.2 Hypothesis One

4.2.1 Perceived Authoritarian and Authoritative Parenting Styles on Reflective Coping

The first regression analysis focused on determining the predictive value of young adults' perceived parenting styles for reflective coping, while controlling for self-differentiation in the initial step. The results indicated that the first step was statistically significant ($F = [1, 147] = 38.683, p < 0.001$), with self-differentiation as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.456, p < 0.001$). The second step also proved significant ($F [3, 145] = 19.168, p < 0.001$), with both self-differentiation ($\beta = 0.349, p < 0.001$) and perceived authoritative parenting ($\beta = 0.272, p < 0.001$) being significant predictors of the reflective coping style.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlation matrix

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. perceived authoritative parenting style	30.05	5.43								
2. perceived authoritarian parenting style	29.89	7.39	-.388**							
3. reflective coping style	17.32	4.77	.401**	-.306**						
4. reactive coping style		2.49	-.0126	0.019	.173*					
5. suppressive coping style	15.01	3.34	-.215**	.254**	-.377**	.252**				
6. differentiation of self	97.87	18.08	.301**	-.431**	.456**	-.290**	-.515			
7. gender (1=Male; 2=Female)	1.68	0.47	-0.007	0.002	-0.082	-0.04	0.019	-0.076		
8. Age	22.76	2.271	0.067	-.182*	0.035	-0.003	-0.106	.205*	-	
9. Education level(1 = undergraduate; 2=postgraduate; 3=doctorate)	1.8	0.68	.207*	-.340**	-0.078	0.006	0.106	.165*	-	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.2.2 Perceived Authoritarian and authoritative parenting on suppressive coping

The second regression analysis explored the prediction power of perceived parenting styles on suppressive coping mechanisms, with self-differentiation-control in the initial step. The results reflected that the first step was statistically significant ($F = [1, 147] = 52.970, p < 0.001$), with self-differentiation being a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.515, p < 0.001$). The second step also yielded significant results ($F [3, 145] = 17.737, p < 0.001$), again highlighting that self-differentiation ($\beta = -0.488, p < 0.001$) served as a significant predictor for suppressive coping style.

4.3 Hypothesis Two

Structural Equation Modelling was performed to examine the indirect effects in the hypothesized mediation model. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was initially carried out to evaluate the measurement model. Each iteration of the measurement model incorporated one of three latent factors: perceived authoritative parenting style, perceived authoritarian parenting style, and reflective coping style. Self-differentiation was excluded from the CFA process as it was considered an observed variable represented by total scores. No parcelling was deemed necessary because the subjects-to-items ratio exceeded the minimum accepted ratio of 5:1 (Bandalos, 2002). As the primary focus was on the structural (mediation) model, several adjustments were made to improve model fit based on recommendations from MPlus model modification indices. Consequently, two items from the perceived authoritarian parenting factor were removed due to low factor loadings, and one item originally from the perceived authoritative parenting factor was reassigned to the perceived authoritarian parenting factor. The CFA process indicated that the ultimate three-factor model demonstrated acceptable fit indices ($\chi^2 = 351.241^*, p < .001; df = 201; CFI = .92; SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .07$). This model proved to be significantly superior compared to a two-factor model where perceived authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles were combined into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 466.419^*, p < .01; df = 204; \Delta\chi^2 = 115.178, p < .01, \Delta df = 3$). Additionally, the three-factor model outperformed a one-factor model that nested all perceived parenting and reflective coping variables into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 614.677^*, p < .01; df = 209; \Delta\chi^2 = 263.467, p < .01, \Delta df = 5$). Thus, the hypothesized model has an acceptable validity.

A structural model is displayed in Figure 1 with two perceived parenting styles as predictor variables, self-differentiation (an observed variable) as the mediator variable, and reflective coping style as the outcome variable was generated and tested. The resulting structural model showed an acceptable model fit: ($\chi^2 = 395.313^*, p < .001; df = 201; CFI = .90; SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .07$). As shown in Figure 1, perceived authoritative parenting directly and significantly predicted negative reflective coping style. Perceived authoritarian parenting significantly predicted negative self-differentiation, and in turn, significantly predicted negative reflective coping style. The result indicated a complete mediation model in which perceived

authoritarian parenting would affect the tendency of negative reflective coping entirely through the mediation path of self-differentiation.

The direct effect of perceived authoritative parenting on reflective coping style is significant, with an estimate of .548 ($p < 0.05$) and a 95% CI ranging from 0.062 to 1.831. This result suggests that students perceiving their parents as authoritative tend to exhibit a higher reflective coping style. However, the analysis revealed that the indirect effect of perceived authoritative parenting on reflective coping style via self-differentiation was insignificant. The estimated value was .094, with a 95% confidence interval from -0.073 to 0.471. This suggests that self-differentiation does not mediate in this relationship.

For perceived authoritarian parenting, the direct effect on reflective coping style is insignificant, with an estimate of .121 and a 95% CI ranging from -0.673 to 1.138, suggesting no direct association between perceived authoritarian parenting and reflective coping style. Moreover, the indirect effect through self-differentiation is also insignificant, with an estimate of -.221 and a 95% CI ranging from -0.718 to 0.024. This indicates that self-differentiation does not mediate the relationship between perceived authoritarian parenting and reflective coping.

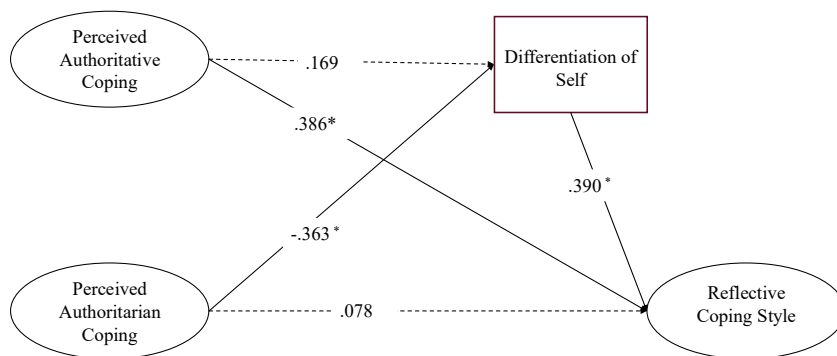


Figure 1. Mediation model of associations between different parenting styles and reflective coping style * $p < .05$

5. DISCUSSION

This research explored how Chinese college and university students in Hong Kong perceive parenting styles and their connections to self-differentiation and problem-focused coping mechanisms. The correlation matrix results initially indicate several significant correlations, highlighting the complex interactions between perceived parenting styles, self-differentiation, and coping strategies. Specifically, perceived authoritarian parenting shows a medium-size negative correlation with self-differentiation ($r = -.431$, $p < .01$). Meanwhile, perceived authoritative parenting is positively correlated with self-differentiation ($r = .301$, $p < .01$). These findings align with previous studies, such as Ragneliene and Justickis (2016), which suggest that authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and structure, fosters a higher level of self-differentiation. In contrast, perceived authoritarian parenting style, defined by experiences of strict and punitive parental attitudes, appears to impede the development of self-differentiation in young adults.

Additionally, the result showed that self-differentiation had a negative correlation with reactive coping styles ($r = -.290$, $p < .01$) and a positive correlation with reflective coping style ($r = .456$, $p < .01$). These findings align with previous finding suggesting that individuals with higher self-differentiation prefer to employ proactive coping strategies (Bowen, 1985). However, the data also reveals an interesting contradiction to Bowen's theory that self-differentiation remains stable in adulthood. Specifically, the correlation between self-differentiation, age, and education level ($r = .165$, $p < .05$) indicates that age or education attainment might predict enhanced levels of self-differentiation. This finding challenges the idea that self-differentiation is unchanging across adulthood in Bowen's theory, proposing instead that self-differentiation level may improve over time and experience.

Hypothesis 1, which explored the influence of perceived parenting styles on coping strategies, received partial support. Reflective coping style refers to the tendency of an individual to cope with problems in a thoughtful and solution-oriented manner. In contrast, suppressive coping refers to the tendency of an individual to avoid problem-solving as a coping mechanism. Results have shown that higher perceived authoritative parenting predicted a higher level of reflective coping style, which was consistent with the previous finding that perceived authoritative parenting is positively associated with active problem coping (Wolfradt et al., 2003). Furthermore, individuals with a higher level of self-differentiation were more inclined to employ reflective coping methods and less likely to use suppressive coping techniques. This finding reinforces previous studies suggesting that those with elevated self-differentiation are more predisposed to engage in problem-focused coping strategies. (Guo et al., 2022).

These findings in the examination of hypothesis 1 collectively suggest that while self-differentiation remains a robust predictor of both reflective and suppressive coping styles, the perceived authoritarian parenting style itself does not independently predict these coping strategies when controlling for self-differentiation. These results are consistent with Murdock's study (2013), postulating that interaction effects of self-differentiation and potential predictors might exist on young adults' coping strategies, and indicate a need for further research to uncover the underlying mechanisms that govern these associations. However, unlike the study by Murdock and his colleagues, the present study did not examine the potential moderating effect of self-differentiation, as the research focus is on whether it may function as an explanatory factor for the study variables. In future research, it is valuable to examine further the potential interaction of self-differentiation with other influencers on an individual's psychosocial functioning.

Hypothesis 2, which investigated whether self-differentiation mediates the predictive effects of two perceived parenting styles on reflective coping, yielded mixed support. The original hypothesis was based on Baumrind's (1991) theory that individuals who experience parental warmth and active interaction with parents are likely to develop problem-solving tendencies in the face of stress. Additionally, it was postulated that perceived parenting attitudes positively predict the individual's level of self-differentiation, which in turn positively influences their ability to cope rationally under stress (Guo et al., 2022). Specifically, it was expected that those raised by authoritarian parents would be less inclined to solve problems effectively.

Hypothesis 2 is partially supported according to the findings of the present study. Specifically, in the mediation model, self-differentiation did not mediate the indirect path from perceived authoritative parenting style to reflective coping, as indicated by the non-significance level (indirect effect $\beta = .094$, $p > 0.05$). Instead, a significant adverse direct effect was observed (direct effect $\beta = .548$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that perceived authoritative parenting directly increases reflective coping without being mediated by self-differentiation.

The results did not support the hypothesized mediation effect for perceived authoritarian parenting either. While the direct effect of perceived authoritarian parenting style on reflective coping style was not significant (direct effect $\beta = .121$, $p > 0.05$), the indirect effect through self-differentiation also remained non-significant (indirect effect $\beta = -.221$, $p > 0.05$). This indicates that neither direct nor mediated pathways between perceived authoritarian parenting and reflective coping were validated in this study.

These findings suggest that while individuals who perceive more authoritative parenting tend to employ reflective coping strategies, the mediator role of self-differentiation in the study is unclear and may not be as influential as previously thought. Furthermore, contrary to expectations, authoritarian parenting did not show a negative influence on reflective coping through self-differentiation, highlighting the complexity of these relationships and the need for further research to understand these dynamics better.

One plausible explanation for these incomplete findings is the omission of critical variables that could be correlated with both predictor variables (perceived parenting styles and self-differentiation) and the dependent variable (reflective coping). The absence of these variables may have skewed the positive relationships between perceived authoritative styles and reflective coping, and between self-differentiation and reflective coping. For example, perceived stress positively leads to maladaptive coping (Hampel & Petermann, 2006), suggesting a negative correlation with problem-oriented coping. In addition, Murdock and her colleagues (2004) found that the perceived stress variable interacts with the self-differentiation to predict variations in psychosocial functioning. When perceived stress levels are elevated, individuals with greater self-differentiation tend to exhibit fewer dysfunctions than those with lower self-differentiation. Thus, the lack of

control over perceived stress could explain the differentiation's unexpected non-significant mediation effect in the current study.

Other critical variables that might have influenced the results include trait anxiety and depersonalization. Both these variables were known to negatively correlate with self-differentiation, particularly showing an adverse relationship with I-Position dimension, while positively correlating with the other three dimensions, manifesting as emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff and fusions with others. (Peleg & Messerschmidt-Grandi, 2019). Trait anxiety and depersonalization are negatively correlated with active coping styles (Wolfradt et al., 2003) and show a negative relationship with perceived authoritative parenting. The interaction of these variables may partially account for why mature levels of self-differentiation failed to explain the links between perceived parenting and coping styles.

In addition to the omitted variables, another factor that may have contributed to the unexpected findings is the method used to measure the self-differentiation. Particularly, the present study treated self-differentiation as an observed variable in SEM analysis rather than a latent factor by variant factor loadings of observed items. This method could result in the primary loss of important variance within the latent construct and introduce bias in the factor analysis. Each dimension represents unique facets of one's differentiation. Prior research by Lampis and his colleagues (2020) revealed that a poor level of I Position and elevated emotional cut-off and fusions with others would predict increased anxiety issues among young adults. Consequently, exploring how these specific dimensions of differentiation influence coping styles warrants further investigation.

6. CONCLUSION

Counsellors can use these insights to enhance their support for students in several dimensions. Interventions that foster students' self-differentiation can be highly beneficial. By strengthening each dimension of differentiation—especially enhancing the I-Position—counsellors would help students develop insights into an independent sense of self, which has the potential for autonomy when facing stressful situations. Techniques such as Bowen family system therapy can be tailored to individual needs to achieve this goal.

Counsellors should explore how students' perceived parenting styles impact students' stress coping choices. Engaging in reflective activities and discussions, students can better understand how their family dynamics influence present approaches to stress. This exploration has the potential to help students gain insights into their identity development and develop more effective coping strategies.

In Chinese culture, exploring students' definitions of "authoritative" and "authoritarian" parenting is essential. The study's findings show contradictory results compared with Western studies, suggesting that cultural perceptions and interpretations of these parenting styles may differ significantly. Counsellors should incorporate discussions on cultural nuances in these definitions to ensure students' specific cultural contexts are acknowledged and understood. Culturally tailored interventions can then be designed to help students effectively navigate their familial relationships and the associated stressors.

Moreover, equipping students with effective stress management techniques is vital. Counsellors can provide training in mindfulness, relaxation methods, and time management skills. Incorporating these techniques into regular counselling sessions can help students manage stress more effectively, positively impacting their self-differentiation and coping abilities. Counsellors may provide training and workshops in mindfulness, relaxation methods, and time management skills. Incorporating these techniques into regular counselling and group-based workshops can help students manage stress more effectively, positively impacting their self-differentiation and coping abilities. This comprehensive approach ensures that counselling interventions are holistic, culturally sensitive, and developmentally appropriate.

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