

Emotional differentiation and mental health of adolescents: A literature review

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Abstract. Adolescents are in the stage of frequent mental health problems, it is of great practical significance to pay attention to the mental health of teenagers. Affective differentiation refers to people's perception of subdivided emotions, which is believed to be closely related to people's mental health. However, little is known about the relationship between adolescents' mental health factors and emotional differentiation. In this regard, this paper aims to clarify the relationship between emotional differentiation of adolescents and different mental health factors through literature review and sorting, and based on this, put forward protective measures for adolescent mental health from different levels. This paper has important implications for promoting the emotional differentiation and mental health development of adolescents.

Keywords: Teenagers; Emotional differentiation; Mental health.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, with the frequent occurrence of malignant mental health events among adolescents and the sudden impact of COVID-19, the psychological well-being of adolescence has always been the focus of social attention (Husky et al., 2020; Fancourt et al., 2021; Shanahan et al., 2022). It is well known that the adolescents are in a critical period of growth and development. On the one hand, some studies have pointed out that 50% of mental health problems occur before the age of 18 (Kessler et al., 2005; Sawyer et al., 2012), on the other hand, studies have also shown that compared with childhood, adolescents receive more psychological and physical stress (Larson et al., 2002; Steinberg, 2015). Therefore, it is of practical significance to pay attention to the mental health of adolescents, especially in the special period of the the COVID-19 epidemic.

Emotional differentiation, as a technical term in psychology, refers to the accuracy with which people can identify subdivided emotions (Erbas et al., 2019; Nook et al., 2021). Relevant studies have shown that emotional differentiation is closely related to people's mental health, but so far, there is no consensus on the effect of emotional differentiation on various mental health factors in adolescents. As an emerging topic, a large number of studies have emerged from all over the world in recent years, such as the United States, the Netherlands, Israel and other countries (Plonsker et al., 2016; Nook, 2018; Lennarz et al., 2018), providing us with a broad perspective. A study has pointed out that the subjective well-being of adolescents is closely related to their emotional differentiation, and the cognition of their negative emotions is a major factor to improve their happiness (Lennarz et al., 2018). Another study, comparing the experimental and control groups, found that emotional differentiation had a positive effect on people's moral perception (Cameron et al., 2013). Other studies have found that MDD is associated with an inability to distinguish between negative emotions, so emotional differentiation can help alleviate depression (Widdershoven et al., 2018; Demiralp et al., 2012). All these studies show us that emotional differentiation is closely related to people's mental health. From the perspective of life course, a study has pointed out that emotional differentiation presents U-shaped nonlinear development during 5-25 years of age, with the lowest degree of emotional differentiation during adolescence (Nook et al., 2018). Therefore, it is of great theoretical value to pay attention to the relationship between emotional differentiation and mental health of adolescents.

Based on the above background, our study deeply considers the following three questions: (1) what is the specific correlation between emotional differentiation and mental health of adolescents? Does adolescents' emotional fragmentation boost their mental health or does it not? (2) If the emotional

differentiation of adolescents does play a role in their mental health, what are the specific mechanisms by which the emotional differentiation of adolescents plays a role in their mental health? (3) What is the direct or indirect effect of teenagers' emotional differentiation on their mental health? Does adolescent emotional differentiation play a moderating role in the relationship between other factors and adolescent mental health? Driven by the above problems, this study takes adolescents as the subdivided research object, and through combing past literature and methods, deeply explores the relationship between emotional differentiation and subdivided mental health of adolescents. Overall, the study is of great significance for enriching the previous literature and understanding the mental health inequalities of adolescents.

2. Literature review

As we all know, the relationship between emotional differentiation and adolescent mental health has always been an important topic of academic attention, and in recent years, due to the severe situation of external COVID-19 pandemic and the development of internal psychological technology, this topic has shown a rising research heat. However, to date, we have found that the subdivided relationship between emotional differentiation and different mental health symptoms in adolescents is not well demonstrated. For example, some studies have found that emotional differentiation in adolescents is a very important factor in promoting their mental health, but others have found that its effect is actually not statistically significant. These conflicting results proved that the current academic circles on the relationship between the emotional differentiation and adolescent mental health did not agree. Therefore, this study hopes to help the academia and society to have a further understanding of this interesting topic through sorting out, which is also the significance and value of the literature review in the second part of this paper.

First and foremost, among all the mental health problems of adolescents, depression is one of the most important (Avenevoli et al., 2008). Previous studies have confirmed that depression reduces adolescents' mental and physical functions and increases the risk of disease and death (Li et al., 2009; Chiao et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2021), ranked 13th in the disease burden of all diseases in the world and 11th in China (The Lancet, GBD 2019 Diseases and Injuries Properties, 2019). Therefore, it is significant and necessary for us to first explore the relationship between emotional differentiation and depressive symptoms in adolescents. In this field, most studies have directly used emotional differentiation in adolescents as an independent variable to explore its role in depressive symptoms. For instance, many studies have shown that higher emotional differentiation helps adolescents to identify more subtle emotional changes and promote their mental health. In turn, Adolescents who experienced greater mental health problems tended to have lower levels of psychological differentiation. In addition, some studies regard emotional differentiation as a moderating factor and find that it plays a alleviating role in the negative effect of daily stress on adolescents (Starr et al., 2020). A more detailed study studies the specific path of emotional differentiation from two aspects: negative emotional differentiation and positive emotional differentiation. Finally, it is found that different aspects and levels of emotional differentiation play a moderating role in the process of People's Daily events and self-thinking affecting their depression (Starr et al., 2017), which has important implications for refining this aspect of research.

In addition to depression, emotional differentiation of adolescents will also have a differentiated impact on other aspects of their mental health. At present, research efforts in this aspect are made to explore multi-dimensions through different research methods and measurement tools, but unfortunately, the relevant literature is not rich and the existing results are inconsistent. For example, a study compared the differences in describing negative images and stacking words between 18 adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and 26 adolescents with normal development, and concluded the relationship between ASD and emotional differentiation (Erbas et al., 2013). Another study using SCL-90 looked prospectively at the relationship between emotional differentiation and broad indicators of psychopathology in 401 participants aged 15 to 18 over a

period of one year and found that lower emotional differentiation in adolescents was a good predictor of symptoms one year later. And this effect is not related to daily stressful events (Schreuder et al., 2020). Other studies have explored the relationship between adolescents' emotional differentiation and their parents' mental health, and found that adolescents with higher positive and negative emotional differentiation scores also had lower levels of depression in their parents, and their attachment to their parents was more in the safe range (Starr et al., 2020). These are interesting studies that nicely expand the topic of emotional differentiation and mental health in adolescents.

In conclusion, all these studies show that there is a close relationship between the emotional differentiation of adolescents and their different mental health states, and these studies undoubtedly provide us with very valuable research reference. But at the same time, through combing the literature, we also found there are still some limitations: first of all, on the research methods, at present most of the research is conducted using cross-sectional data, the lack of a longitudinal research data, this makes it difficult to grasp the relationship between emotional differentiation with the mental health of teenagers. At the same time, the current research is basically quantitative data analysis, without the support of corresponding qualitative interview data, which is not conducive to our further understanding of the real psychological feelings of young people. In addition, the particularity of adolescence makes this group vulnerable to the influence of peer groups, family background and other aspects, so many studies may have omitted variable bias due to ill-considered. It is also important to note that the emotional differentiation of adolescents is also a factor worthy of further subdivision, because we all know that adolescents are inherently different in the degree of differentiation between different categories and more detailed emotions under a certain category. Therefore, relevant research also needs to do more detailed research on the classification of emotional differentiation itself. Finally, the timeliness of the current research is still lacking. We are currently in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but no research has integrated the sudden COVID-19 epidemic into the research, which is not conducive to reflect the relationship between emotional differentiation and mental health of adolescents in this new situation.

3. Suggestion

Combined with the review of various literatures, this paper puts forward the following three suggestions to help promote the level of mental health of adolescents. First and foremost, adolescents are affected by multiple fields, so their mental health is in a highly changeable stage. At this time, the outside family, school and all aspects of society should give full attention to the mental health of adolescents. In addition, in this article, through combing the literature, we found that adolescents emotional differentiation ability in many aspects to the mental health of teenagers have a positive impact, that is, the emotional differentiation with higher levels of mental health of the students are often better. As a result, we should pay special attention to the degree and characteristics of emotional differentiation of teenagers, and when necessary, we can consider professional psychological measures to intervene, to help improve students' emotional differentiation ability. Last but not least, the emotional differentiation of adolescents is constantly changing, and since relevant studies have not explored the emotional differentiation of adolescents at different stages sufficiently, we should pay great attention to the appropriateness while guiding and promoting the emotional differentiation of adolescents. In order to avoid the accumulation of young people's emotions and produce new problems such as excessive sensitivity, it is necessary to learn the corresponding and correct emotional dissipation ability while teaching teenagers to improve their emotional differentiation ability correctly.

4. Conclusion

As developing individuals, understanding the various relationship between emotional differentiation and mental health of adolescents is helpful to understand the management and

understanding of their mental health, so as to explore more refined intervention measures. Through a detailed review of previous literature, this paper summarizes the relationship between emotional differentiation of adolescents and many mental health factors, such as depression, autism, future mental health problems, and even the mental health of parents. On the whole, this paper finally found that higher emotional differentiation is helpful to improve the mental health of adolescents, and even has an effect on the mental health of those around them. Based on these analyses, this study further provides some certain optimization paths for the mental health of adolescents from different levels, aiming to help the academic community and society recognize the important relationship between the emotional differentiation of adolescents and their mental health, and make some contributions to promote the mental health development of adolescents and alleviate the inequality of mental health.

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