

Analysis and social work intervention of adolescent premature dating from a social-ecological perspective

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Abstract: By applying social ecological theory and social work concepts and methods to analyze the phenomenon of adolescent early dating, it is found that the causes of adolescent early dating involve changes in physiological and psychological structures, the influence of family atmosphere, school education, peer group effects, and the impact of social environment and traditional culture on three levels. Social work can intervene in the social ecological system of adolescents through professional methods such as case counseling, group work, and community work, carrying out practical work in their individual, family, school, and community aspects, and contributing to the resolution of adolescent early dating issues.

Keywords: Social Ecological Theory, Adolescents, Early Dating, Social Work

1. Introduction

Early dating refers to the premature establishment of romantic relationships among minors. From a traditional perspective, many people oppose early dating, considering it an undesirable behavior among adolescents and a symptomatic problem of adolescence. Faced with adolescents who engage in early dating, parents and teachers often resort to extreme measures to stop it, such as scolding, punishment, and disciplinary actions. However, these methods often fail to address the root issues and can even harm the mental and physical health of adolescents. Psychological analysis reveals that early dating among adolescents is essentially their desire for intimate relationships, an expression of seeking rights and emotional democratization, and a way to seek a sense of self-presence. However, we should also recognize the negative impacts of early dating on the growth of adolescents. In terms of gender relationships, if not handled properly, early dating can "lightly affect study and life, severely damage family atmosphere, affect class discipline and school order, and in severe cases, may lead to premarital sex, illegal and criminal activities, and other deviant behaviors" [1]. In response to this phenomenon, exploring the deep-seated reasons for adolescent early dating and reasonable and feasible intervention methods has become a consensus among many scholars.

China's academic community has a relatively short history of research on adolescent early dating, with only over 20 years. Looking at the research outcomes, studies on adolescent early dating mainly include the following aspects: research on influencing factors, typological research, research on harm and impact, and research on strategies. Among them, research on the influencing factors of adolescent early dating has always been a hot topic in the academic community. Chen Rui Shan, from a psychological perspective, believes that complex psychological factors such as the need for solace, the desire to compete with peers, and the need for compensation are one of the reasons for adolescent early dating [2]. Chen Ling and Zhao Ding Jian believe that curiosity about the opposite sex, the awakening of sexual consciousness, imitation of film and television works, and lack of communication with parents are the causes of adolescent early dating, and they have proposed some targeted measures from an educational perspective [3]. Wang Yong de, from an educational perspective, believes that the main reasons for adolescent early dating are physiological, social, family, and school-related [4]. Han Yue, from a social work professional perspective, analyzes the subjective and objective reasons for early dating from the perspective of adolescents and puts forward targeted suggestions from an empowerment perspective [1]2. Some scholars have also analyzed the reasons for early dating from the perspectives of mental health and sociology. In the research on the

influencing factors of early dating, scholars have traditionally divided it into physiological, psychological, family, school, and social aspects, but the analysis is often isolated and not systematic. This article, from the perspective of social ecological theory and combining social work concepts and methods, analyzes the reasons affecting adolescent early dating from micro, meso, and macro levels, and attempts to explore the intervention of social work methods in the phenomenon of adolescent early dating, hoping to provide a new perspective for research.

2. Social ecological systems theory perspective

Social Ecological Systems Theory is a subtype of general systems theory, with the core viewpoint that there is continuous exchange and interaction between organisms and environments (such as family, institutions, groups, communities, etc.). "Starting from an ecological perspective, it focuses on different levels of systems, values the exchange between people and the environment, examines the system as a whole, and pays attention to the stress and balance within and between systems" [5]. Charles H. Zastrow is one of the most famous representatives of modern social ecological theory; he distinguishes three basic types of social ecological systems: micro systems, mezzo systems, and macro systems. "Micro systems refer to seemingly individual persons within the social ecological environment; individuals are both a type of biological social system and a social, psychological social system. Mezzo systems refer to small groups, including families, occupational groups, or other social groups. Macro systems refer to social systems larger than small groups, including culture, community, institutions, and organizations" [6]. Human behavior constantly affects micro, mezzo, and macro systems, and these three systems influence each other, interweave, and jointly impact human behavior. Adolescent early dating is a social phenomenon, which can be analyzed within the social ecological system and explored for its underlying causes and intervention strategies from the perspective of adolescents' interaction with their environment.

3. Analysis of the causes of adolescent early dating from a social ecological perspective

Applying the social ecological perspective involves analyzing individuals within their environment, focusing on the relationships between people and the impact of the social environment. Charles Zastrow divides the social ecosystem into "three types" [7], and our analysis of the causes of adolescent early dating can also be carried out from these three aspects. As shown in Figure 1.

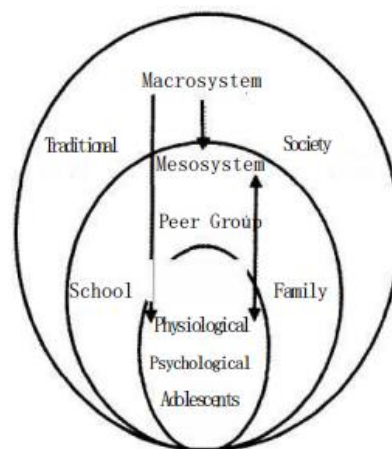


Figure 1: Interaction Diagram of Environmental Influences on Adolescent Early Dating

3.1. Microsystem

The physiological and psychological changes in adolescents are important reasons for early dating among teenagers. The special physiological and psychological structure of adolescence serves as a fundamental factor for early dating among adolescents.

3.1.1. *Physical aspect*

"Adolescence is referred to as the 'second growth period' in a person's development, characterized by significant, profound, and intense physiological changes" [8]. Due to the secretion of sex hormones, the development of primary sexual characteristics in adolescents is remarkable, and secondary sexual characteristics also emerge, marking the onset of reproductive or procreative capabilities. As adolescents' sexual consciousness matures, they progress through phases of calf love towards older individuals of the opposite sex, a frenzy of approaching the opposite sex, and romantic love, during which the number of individuals who enjoy making friends with the opposite sex significantly increases. During adolescence, due to physiological reasons, certain parts of the human body begin to secrete "pheromones," which can be transmitted through the air to stimulate the opposite sex and coordinate their physiological activities. The more of these hormones are secreted, the greater the attraction to the opposite sex becomes. "As sexual psychology matures and sexual awareness develops, adolescents of both sexes shift from curiosity about their own genital organs to curiosity about sex, experiencing sexual impulses and desires" [5]. Many adolescents, influenced and driven by physiological factors and needs, begin to interact with the opposite sex and maintain ambiguous relationships. Some adolescents may exert great effort to suppress their desires for the opposite sex, keeping them in a state of longing, while others may openly declare their admiration for the opposite sex, leading to romantic relationships and thus early dating. However, this purely physiological attraction of adolescence cannot be considered true love.

3.1.2. *psychological side*

Adolescence is a transitional and critical period for individuals to move from immaturity to psychological maturity. During this stage, teenagers are easily prone to psychological confusion and abnormal psychology due to their own and external environmental influences. The immaturity in psychology is highly likely to lead to early romantic relationships among teenagers. The specific psychological characteristics are manifested in the following aspects.

3.1.2.1. *inquisitive mindset*

Adolescents generally have a strong sense of curiosity, and with physiological maturity, their curiosity about the opposite sex gradually increases, especially "sexual curiosity." Under the influence of sexual maturation, many teenagers try to satisfy their curiosity about the physiological structure and emotional world of the opposite sex by interacting with them. However, if they are merely attracted to each other out of curiosity and mistake the hazy feelings for love, it can easily lead to tragedy.

3.1.2.2. *psychology of imitation*

In modern society, movies and television shows contain many segments about love, and adolescents can easily be exposed to these through the internet and television. The emotional plays of adults and romantic love stories inevitably disseminate some concepts to adolescents that are not suitable for their age group. The notions of "a talented man and a beautiful woman" and "a gifted scholar and a fair lady" deeply imprint themselves on their minds. They take these as standards in terms of clothing, grooming, and behavior, imitating and learning from them with great enthusiasm.

3.1.2.3. *psychology of pleasure*

The love of beauty is a natural human instinct, and everyone has the right to pursue beauty. Most boys are attracted to girls who are slim and delicately beautiful; most girls are attracted to boys who are strong and well-built, and these preferences are understandable. Truth, goodness, and beauty are often associated with each other. Adolescents easily make associations with truth and goodness under the guise of beauty and yearn for the beautiful. This natural physiological response brings psychological pleasure and motivates them to continually pursue the opposite sex.

3.1.2.4. *psychology of rebellion*

Adolescents generally exhibit rebellious psychology during puberty, wanting to try the more others oppose. Especially against what teachers and parents disapprove of, they are more inclined to take action to prove that their own ideas are correct. Early romantic relationships are a form of resistance against the

suppression from teachers and parents. Although sometimes adolescents have some understanding of their rebellious behaviors, due to their psychological immaturity, it is difficult for them to exercise self-control.

3.1.2.5. keeping up with the joneses

Although some teenagers take their emotions seriously, there are also those who are driven by vanity, befriending members of the opposite sex merely to follow trends and engage in competitive comparison. Many people use the presence and number of opposite-sex friends as a measure of their own abilities and worth. To avoid losing face, they go to great lengths to find the opposite sex. For example, in early romantic relationships, some teenagers constantly change their opposite-sex friends, treating emotions as a game, and boasting about their "achievements" to win the envy and approval of others. Little do they know, this is a behavior that is harmful to both themselves and others.

3.1.2.6. psychology of emptiness

Middle school life can be quite monotonous and oppressive, and many teenagers cannot find a sense of belonging in their academic workload and interpersonal relationships, feeling fear and emptiness. They need various activities to pass the time and enrich themselves, so dating becomes an option for many. Additionally, because adolescence is marked by significant conflicts between the subjective self and the objective self, many people cannot find appropriate outlets, and thus, they crave understanding and care from friends, especially those of the opposite sex.

3.2. Madhyamaka

Adolescents' growth is closely related to their surrounding environment, including family atmosphere, school education, and peer group effects, all of which have a significant impact on their development. In the mesosystem, the influences of family, school, and peers are another important reason for early romantic relationships among adolescents. The unfavorable environment in which adolescents are placed is an objective cause leading to early dating.

3.2.1. *family environment*

The personalities of parents and the interpersonal atmosphere in a family can all have an impact on a child's growth. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, adolescents have a need for belonging and love during puberty. A harmonious and happy family can generally meet these needs for their children. However, if the family structure is incomplete, parents are too busy with work, or the parenting methods are inappropriate, leading to an unhealthy family atmosphere and unstable parent-child relationships, adolescents may not receive the love and care from their parents. This can easily lead them to seek a sense of belonging and love from friends of the opposite sex, resulting in emotionally compensatory romantic relationships.

3.2.2. *school environment*

Schools are the primary activity venues for adolescents, and the education they provide has a profound impact on the psychology and behavior of young people. With high academic pressure and monotonous extracurricular activities, early romantic relationships become a way for adolescents to vent. Additionally, most schools are sensitive to sex education, and many do not offer courses in this area, lacking proper guidance on adolescent views of gender. Some teachers adopt an evasive attitude towards early romance, ignoring it, which encourages the trend; others harshly suppress it, damaging the self-esteem of adolescents and causing a rebellious psychology. Improper school education is undoubtedly a significant influencing factor in the emergence of early romantic relationships among adolescents.

3.2.3. *peer group environment*

A peer group is an informal primary group composed of many individuals with similar ages, hobbies, and values, united by emotional bonds and having close relationships. Peer groups are an important social interaction target during adolescence, and within these groups, due to group culture, there is a tendency to engage in imitation and blind conformity. If one member of the group engages in early romantic relationships, it can easily lead to other members of the group following suit.

3.3. macro system

The situation of adolescent early romantic relationships is closely related to the current broader social environment.

3.3.1. social environment

The improvement in the standard of economic living has promoted the early maturation of adolescents' sexual psychology, and mass media also exerts a subtle influence on the emotional development and sexual psychological development of adolescents. Scenes about love are ubiquitous in the streets and alleys, on the internet, and on television, and even pornographic stories, novels, and videos also stimulate the nerves of adolescents. Society has too much hype about early romantic relationships, leading some adolescents to feel that it is a social trend. In the ocean of "love," adolescents with immature minds find it hard to resist temptation and are prone to early dating.

3.3.2. cultural atmosphere

With the development of society, Chinese and Western cultures are interwoven and integrated. Western culture is passionate and advocates for emotional expression, which has a significant impact on adolescents who are pursuing personal liberation and are in a rebellious phase. Without positive guidance, some adolescents may deliberately imitate and view early romantic relationships as a symbol of fashion and individuality.

Adolescents' own physiological and psychological factors, as well as family, school, peer groups, and the broader social environment, all have a profound impact on the growth of young people. The social ecological theory tells us to be good at looking for the various deep-seated reasons affecting human behavior from the perspective of the interaction between people and their environment. Social workers should start by changing the relationship between people and their living environment, analyze the reasons for the occurrence of early romantic relationships among adolescents, and use social work concepts and methods to help adolescents prevent early dating and solve the problems that arise from it.

4. Social work intervention in adolescent early dating

Social work intervenes in adolescent early dating by applying the social ecological theory, focusing on the composition of the individual and the environment as the focus of intervention, placing adolescents within systems, and following the basic concept of "people in context." While adhering to the basic values of social work, such as respect, acceptance, and individualization, it emphasizes the interaction between people and the environment, constructing a model for social work intervention. Social workers must recognize that early dating is not entirely caused by individual reasons; some factors in the social environment also contribute to early dating. Therefore, interventions should be carried out at the individual level of adolescents, the environmental level, and the interactive level between adolescents and their environment. At the same time, as human beings, adolescents' relationships with various systems are dynamically changing. Social workers must judge the relationship between adolescents and their environment with a developmental perspective, place adolescents within systems to solve problems, and mobilize various social forces to participate.

First, intervene at the individual level of adolescents. Targeting the microsystem, with the aim of improving adolescents' self-awareness and mental health, counseling can be conducted through individual cases and group methods. Assist adolescents in understanding the basis of romantic relationships and adopt different guidance plans for different individuals. Especially for adolescents who have already developed or are developing a crush, "positive guidance should be used for diversion" [8]226, help them recognize the main tasks of adolescence, and encourage them to continuously improve themselves, striving to find true love after they have the ability.

Second, intervene in the family growth environment. Within the family system, parent-child relationships greatly influence the formation of adolescents' views on love. For parents worried about their children's early dating, social workers should help them realize that comprehensive and rigid supervision is unscientific; they should respect and understand their children, changing their existing parenting methods. For families with poor parent-child relationships, community workers can organize more group and community activities to bring parents and children closer together during these activities.

Third, intervene in the school education environment. In response to the simplified and public handling methods of school teachers towards adolescent early dating, social workers can assist schools in recognizing the inappropriateness of their supervision methods, advocate for individualized treatment of students, fully understand, and help solve their confusion from the students' perspectives. At the same time, staff can organize group activities to allow adolescents to interact with the opposite sex in the activities and encourage normal interactions and mutual assistance among them. This not only enriches the extracurricular life of adolescents but also teaches them how to handle interactions with the opposite sex and gain normal friendships.

Fourth, intervene in the community and social environment. Community workers use social administrative work, together with community residents' committees, to start from the community to create a good community atmosphere for the healthy growth of adolescents [9]. At the same time, social workers advocate to society and government departments to resist negative culture, promote the formulation and implementation of relevant policies, purify the social atmosphere, and reduce the negative factors that induce early dating among adolescents.

Social work intervention in adolescent early dating is still in the exploratory and perfecting development stage and has not yet formed a systematic and mature model. Ecological systems theory can provide us with a good theoretical perspective. Guided by this theory, through the joint efforts of society, schools, families, and adolescents, the prevention and resolution of adolescent early dating issues will certainly make greater progress.

5. Conclusion

This study employs the social ecological systems theory and the concepts and methods of social work to conduct an in-depth analysis of adolescent early dating. The research finds that the causes of adolescent early dating are complex, involving various levels such as physiological and psychological changes, family atmosphere, school education, peer group effects, social environment, and traditional culture. The article emphasizes that professional social work methods, such as case counseling, group work, and community work, can effectively intervene in the social ecological environment of adolescents, carrying out practical work at different levels including individuals, families, schools, and communities, to provide support for addressing adolescent early dating issues.

The article also points out that the study of adolescent early dating issues in the academic community in China has a relatively short history, but it has covered various aspects including influencing factors, typological classification, harms and impacts, and countermeasures. Researchers from different disciplinary perspectives have dissected the reasons for early dating, but often lack systematicity. This paper sets out from the perspective of social ecological theory, attempting to provide a new analytical framework and exploring the application of social work methods in intervening in adolescent early dating phenomena.

Overall, this study provides new perspectives and strategies for understanding and dealing with adolescent early dating issues, emphasizing the important role of social work in promoting the healthy growth of adolescents. By comprehensively considering factors at various levels such as individuals, families, schools, communities, and society, it is possible to more effectively prevent and resolve adolescent early dating issues, help adolescents establish correct views on love, and promote their comprehensive development.

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