

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Emergence of Parentification in the Family Context

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Abstract:

Parentification is a process wherein children adopt and fulfil parental roles and responsibilities within their families in times of demanding situations. The present study aimed at identifying and understanding these situational factors that led to parentification in healthy families. The sample comprised of eight adolescents who were screened for the degree of parentification using the Parentification Questionnaire-Youth by Godsall and Jurkovic (1995) before an in-depth, semi-structure interview was conducted. Directed Content Analysis was used to analyze the data. Findings revealed nine factors, namely-lack of parental availability; brief period of illness in the family; socioeconomic status; gender; marital discord; culture, values and societal pressure; birth order; family expectations, parental pressure and obligations; and innate sense of responsibility/habit that led to the child assuming parental roles and responsibilities that varied from time to time across individuals.

Keywords: Parentification, role-reversal, family context, adolescents

1. Introduction

The process of Parentification can be traced back to 1967, when the term 'parental child' was coined by Minuchin and colleagues to refer to children who assume parental responsibility in the home as a result of economic and social conditions. Later, Broszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) defined the process of 'parentification' describing the expectations of a parental figure from a child to fulfil the role of a parent within the family subsystem. Therefore, parentification emerges as a result of interplay of various factors in healthy and dysfunctional families.

Parentification views caregiving by children as a process that emerges as a facet of healthy parent-child relationships, and considers the pathology as a result of assuming undue responsibilities in an unsupportive family environment. Thus, Parentification can be considered a part of healthy relationships as well as dysfunctional families. Jurkovic, Thirkield & Morrell (2001) suggested two types of parentification: emotional and instrumental. Emotional parentification occurs when children provide emotional support to other family members, such as being treated as a parent's friend and confidant. Instrumental parentification occurs when children take on family tasks that are typically done by adults, such as grocery shopping, preparing meals, managing finances, paying bills or caring for siblings.

Parentification as a process can occur within a variety of family contexts. The circumstances in which parentification most often occurs are within disorganized family systems in which a parent is incapacitated in some way. Minuchin (1974) noted that children may assume adult responsibilities as a "natural arrangement in large families, in single-parent families, or in families in which both parents work" (as cited in Burnett, Jones, Bliwise, & Ross, 2006).

According to Jurkovic (1997), circumstances like the parent falling ill unexpectedly, sibling falling sick, or a parent taking up an additional job for a limited period of time may lead to experiencing parentification. Moreover, research suggests that family context within which parentification occurs has been associated with parental alcoholism and/or drug problems, parental illnesses, psychopathology, marital conflict, economic disadvantages and family unpredictability (Burton, 2007; Earley and Cushway 2002; Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson, & Stanwyck, 2004; Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski, & Tomek, 2012).

In a study by Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, and Emery (2008), parental reliance on emotional support from children during marital conflicts was examined. Findings of the study indicated mothers seeking emotional support from children, mostly daughters more often than fathers. Furthermore, the results also revealed that while the parents described increased levels of closeness and warmth with their children, the children reported lower levels of warmth and support from their parents. These findings suggested that children experienced emotional parentification during marital conflict.

Every individual grows up in the context of many changes that occur from time to time. Adolescent development takes places with regard to the backdrop of changing social and economic circumstances.

Adolescence is the period of transition between childhood and adulthood. Transitions have certain characteristics like, an enthusiastic hope for the future; a sense of regret for the stage that has been lost; a sense of anxiety in relation to upcoming events; a major change in psychological adjustment and a degree of ambiguity of status during the transition (as cited in Coleman, 2011).

Alterations in the family structure emerge as a major influence on the adolescent development. Considering the Indian context the changes in family structure has been drastic, from large joint families to small joint families to nuclear families. Also, a range of new family arrangements are being experienced by young people, with single-parents, dual-earning parents, divorced parents, step-parents, live-in partners, gay and lesbian parents, remarriage, step-siblings and so on.

The aim of the study was to understand the adolescent's family context in which parentification emerges. Furthermore, it addresses to the limitations of various studies that suggest gaining an understanding on whether the patterns of findings are specific to children who have a parent with an illness. It is essential to understand this process with respect to adolescence because of the importance it holds as a transition stage in human development. It becomes necessary to understand the family context in which parentification occurs for the purpose of mental health professionals. For the present study factors such as lack of parental availability, socioeconomic status, gender and brief period of illness have been predetermined and other factors have been left open for the adolescent to identify instances where he/she assumes adult roles and responsibilities.

2. Method

For the present study, a qualitative research approach was used to understand the emergence of parentification in the family context of the participants.

2.1. Sample

The population for the present study included all adolescent children in the age bracket of 11-18 years in Delhi. The sampling procedure had two phases. The first phase included getting access to the sample by employing convenience based sampling. A total of 30 participants were selected from various schools and colleges and through acquaintances. These participants were the first born, had a younger sibling without any physical disability, and had both parents living together, with no major illness in the family. The second phase of sampling adopted theoretical sampling in order to ensure that the sample comprised of participants who were best suited for the study. The Parentification Questionnaire-Youth by Godsall and Jurkovic (1995) was used to screen the participants in order to assess the extent of parentification. Thereafter, on the basis of the scores obtained, eight participants were selected for the interviewing process. The sample included both male and female participants belonging to a middle socioeconomic status.

2.2. Tools

2.2.1. Socio Demographic Sheet

For the purpose of the study, a socio demographic sheet was required for the participants to fill personal and familial details.

2.2.2 Parentification Questionnaire-Youth (PQ-Y; Godsall & Jurkovic, 1995)

The participants were screened for the degree of Parentification by using the Parentification Questionnaire-Youth. The PQ-Y is a 20-item self-report instrument that measures the degree of parentification as experienced by the child. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of parentification. The PQ-Y has good psychometric properties, with a moderate internal consistency at $\alpha = .75$.

2.2.3 Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was used. A pilot study was conducted in order to evaluate whether the questions were easily understandable by adolescents. The questions were modified and reconstructed to suit the requirements of the interview. The questions in the schedule were non-directive questions that facilitated in gaining richer data about the participant's experience. The interview schedule was face validated by research experts in the field.

2.3. Procedure

For collection of data, various schools in Delhi were approached. The Bluebells School International granted permission for data collection. 20 students from the eleventh and twelfth standard met the criteria for participating in the study. The remaining 10 participants were acquaintances of family and friends who met all the above mentioned criteria. The following procedure was followed for all 30 participants. A written consent was taken from the participant and the parents before the socio-demographic sheet was filled. Thereafter, the Parentification Questionnaire-Youth was administered. The participants were instructed to read each statement, apply it to their own family situation. On the basis of their scores on PQ-Y, the final participants were selected for the semi-structured interview. The final sample comprised of eight participants who had agreed to sit for an interview. The semi-structured interview was conducted to gain in-depth and rich data about the participant's experience. Before the interview was begun with, rapport was built with the participant. The interview was conducted in the preferred language of the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded after seeking permission from the participant. 2 out of 8 participants disagreed upon an audio recorded interview. Consent for hand written notes was then taken from the participant. Interviews of all participants were transcribed and if needed, were translated.

2.4. Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews, Directed Content Analysis was used. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), directed approach to content analysis aims at validating or extending conceptually a theoretical framework or a theory. Using

this approach, predictions about the relationship among variables or the variables itself can be found which in turn helps in shaping the initial coding system.

The process of data analysis began with transcription of the interviews. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher herself. The researcher also typed out the interviews that were hand written in short hand. Since the approach for analysis of the data was Directed Content Analysis, the initial coding was done by identifying themes and categories from the existing theory and literature on parentification and by using predetermined codes. With the predetermined codes, each individual transcript was carefully read multiple times and was sorted into different categories and themes. This procedure was repeated for all the transcripts. Subcategories were made for certain codes that needed further analysis and the data were sorted into these subcategories for better clarity. Once the data was sorted and coded according to the various categories and subcategories, each interview was compared and contrasted as opposed to other interviews. The commonalities and the differences in every individual participant's experience were then explored in depth.

3. Results and Discussion

The context in which parentification emerges is an interplay of one or more factors in most of the families. Therefore, parentification has a multi-causal facet and the family context acts as an umbrella term to encompass these varieties of familial circumstances.

3.1. Lack of Parental Availability

Lack of parental availability is a situation when the parent(s) are physically or emotionally unavailable for the child. Such situations are when either of the parent(s) is not available due to their occupation. Availability of a parent plays a major role that impacts a situation in which a child feels the need to assume certain roles and responsibilities. Carroll and Robinson (2000) suggest that children of workaholic parents experience significantly high levels of parentification (as cited in Black & Sleigh, 2013). In families where both parent are employed leads to greater levels of instrumental parentification as compared to families where only a single parent is employed.

As one of the participants explains it:

"...If I am speaking of it in a stereotypical context, then the role which mothers play in people's lives otherwise...My mom's definitely been able to play that role but then few parts of it have been missed out because she was never really around that much...So yeah, definitely because my parents are working I had to take up some role..." (J.B., personal communication, 24th October'14)

Also, in circumstances when only a single parent is working mostly the father, and the mother is a homemaker, there are occasions when the mother is unavailable due to some other chore and the adolescent assumes the role of a parent.

With regard to the findings, participants revealed that though parental employment is one of the major reasons why a child assumes the roles and responsibilities, like that of a parent, but it may not be the only one in terms of the parent being unavailable. The non-working parent could also be preoccupied with some other work, wherein the adolescent substitutes his/her presence.

3.2. Socioeconomic Status

The socioeconomic status of a family is determined by their financial resources and their spending capacity within the society. In a review by Burton (2007) to understand childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families, it was found that the kind of roles and responsibilities a child would adopt will vary with regard to the type of disadvantage the family has.

For instance one of the participant mentions that:

"It's pretty obvious that if I were that rich, I wouldn't have to do these odd jobs... I would've just sent a servant to get it done... of course my Mumma doesn't make me do household jobs but otherwise going to the market to buy goods and stuff is a regular feature..." (S.S., personal communication, 25th October'14)

Similarly another participant revealed that:

"...We do end up spending about 12,000 rupees on his tuition fees every year...Uh...Every month... I am not talking about school fees, I am talking about separate tuitions that costs about 12,000 every month... That sort of leaves things a little... It makes me want to compensate by not asking for too much...So only to that slight expense may be you could say the socio economic status but...That's about it..." (R., personal communication, 24th October'14)

The findings suggest that although the participants do not belong to families that are 'economically deprived', however their socioeconomic status and certain periods of financial hardship pave their way towards assuming parental roles and responsibilities to support their family in some way.

3.3. Gender

According to Gilligan (1982) family relationships hold greater importance to women since their priorities are more towards the sustenance of relationships (as cited in Barnett & Parker, 1998). With regard to parentification, the gender differences that exist favor greater likelihood of girls developing patterns of parentification as opposed to boys (Jurkovic, 1997).

During 1970-1990s, it was assumed by clinicians and researchers that a greater population of females was parentified as opposed to males. However, the existing literature on parentification and gender reveals mixed findings that have undermined the complexity of this relationship (Hooper, Tomek, Bond, & Reif, 2014). For the present study, the sample comprised of 6 females and 2 males. About 50 percent of the sample agreed that gender influences the kind of chores that one has to undertake. Research suggests that girls are expected to take on roles and responsibilities pertaining to the household (Becker, Aldridge & Dearden 1998). As one of the participants have mentioned:

“...My gender... (thinks) uh... yeah I do think because I am a girl..I’m a girl...I think that they expect more out of me than if I would’ve...expect more out of me than they would’ve expected out of my brother... uh... because it is a preconceived notion that we Indians have in our mindsets that you know the girl child has to fulfil all the responsibilities that we have in our family and she has to ensure the well-being of the family... I am the girl child... so I am expected to look after everybody and do some basic chores like cleaning the table, helping my mother with some basic household work... yeah...” (A.C., personal communication, 26th October’14)

With regard to the Indian scenario, girls are expected to fulfil certain household responsibilities in contrast to boys. Culture and gender are complex constructs that greatly influence the extent to which parentification takes place. Similarly, another participant reveals:

“...I think being a girl, I’m obviously expected to do a lot of stuff and being in the society I am in...that is why being a girl, it automatically comes on you, and it dawns upon you that you have to learn how to do this stuff, and how to take care of the house... and I think gender plays a very big role in this... and I think boys might get a leeway out of it...” (I.C., personal communication, 27th October’14)

Contrary to what the female participants mentioned, one of the male participants expressed that gender had no role to play when assumption of roles and responsibilities are involved. Rather it is the situation upon which one acts rather than anything else.

“No... I would’ve done the same even if I wasn’t a boy...it’s nothing related with gender because it’s the conditions that require you to do something...it’s not the gender at all...that’s what I think.” (S., personal communication, 25th October’14)

However, for one of the male participants, the perception that prevails within his family is that boys shouldn’t get involved in household chores, rather doing other odd jobs like getting things repaired or buying things from the market is more acceptable with regard to their gender.

“Mummy doesn’t make me do all these household chores... she says “ladke yeh sab nahi karte hain...” (boys don’t engage in such things) but other jobs, like I went to get the computer fixed...” (S.S., personal communication, 25th October’14)

Thus, a greater clarity regarding gender, culture and parentification is needed. There is interplay of all three factors that determine the kind of roles and responsibilities one upholds. With regard to the Indian setting, cultural differences with regard to gender and parentification are very much likely to be prevalent as can be understood by the aforementioned findings.

3.4. *Brief Illness in the Family*

A person may experience many distressing occurrences that stand beyond their control. With regard to an adolescent, an unexpected event may be even more stressful than it may be for an adult. For instance, even a brief period of illness of a significant member (for example, a parent) of a family requires a reconfiguration of the family system. In these brief periods, the adolescent may need to undertake certain roles and responsibilities to fulfil the needs of a family. In a study by Ireland and Pakenham (2010), it was found that a strong association exists between secure child-ill parent attachment and greater engagement in caregiving. This could be primarily one of the reasons why a child would adopt these roles and responsibilities. For instance, one of the participants mentioned:

“... When my mother is ill and my father goes to office, there is no one at home to make food like for my siblings... So I have to do it... I take care of them and my mother...” (R.S., personal communication, 27th October’14)

Like the participant mentioned, that in situations where one of the parent is ill and the other parent is unavailable, with no one else around, the responsibilities automatically get transferred onto the adolescent. Moreover, according to Stein, Riedel and Rotheram-Boras (1999) the degree of parentification and its outcome varies with regard to the severity of the parent’s illness (as cited in Earley & Cushway, 2002). The same is reflected in one of the responses of the participant:

“A few years ago, when I was in seventh, my mother fell really ill and she was in the ICU and the condition was very serious... so... and my father couldn’t stay for long because he had his job in Pune and all... so basically when she was... when she was okay and she returned home from the hospital, we had nurses... but after sometime, when she was okay and the nurses were not there... she needed medications on a daily basis like two hours leave you have to give the medication...so... in the night also... because my father was not here...my sister was really young that time... I could not expect that my grandparents... because my grandparents are old, I can’t expect them to wake up in the night and give the medicines to my mom... because I am her daughter, I thought of it as my responsibility and I used to give her medication on a daily basis, at night also... like I used to wake up at 2, 4, 6 and then go to school... uh... get my sister ready for school for the next day...I used to do all these things for my family and my mom...” (A.C., personal communication, 26th October’14)

Research has found that half of all conditions are of physical health nature that requires care (Dearden & Becker, 2004). The severity of the illness and present circumstances at home greatly influences the degree of parentification. When two or more factors get combined, for instance parental illness and unavailability of the other parent, the extent of caretaking responsibilities also increases.

3.5. *Other Factors*

These factors are other circumstances that were elicited by the participants, their reasons why they think they had to assume certain roles and responsibilities in their family.

3.5.1. Marital Discord

Parental conflict is a difficult time for children to cope with. It may lead to changes in the family system configuration. Marital distress is one of the many factors that potentially contribute towards parentification, more specifically emotional parentification. From the perspective of Bowlby’s attachment theory, this distress may result in a parent’s inability to fulfil their role towards their child. The level of attachment is impaired due to inadequate care and nurturance, resulting to a lack of a secure base that the parent should provide the child (Bowlby, 1988).

Moreover, in a study by Davis, Sheeber, Hops, and Tildesley (2000) it was found that effort expended to mediate or resolve adult emotional difficulties increases the likelihood of failure because the problem is not within the child's control and they aren't equipped with the required skills to deal with the problem effectively.

For instance, one of the participant mentions their reaction in situations of parental conflict:

"...there are a few problems between my parents...sometimes even the mediation has to be done by me... if you know, most of the times my parents won't really talk to each other, there you could say I play the role of a pigeon (smiles)..." (R., personal communication, 24th October'14)

Like the participant mentioned, that in times of parental conflict she gets involved even if she would prefer not to. From the lens of structural family theory, a triangle gets formed which facilitates the communication between the parents.

As the same participant continues her response towards her roles and responsibilities in situations like this, it is evident that mediating between parents may be a source of an emotional turmoil for the adolescent.

"...the mediating like I said happens whenever you know...most of the times with everything that has been going on...you know my parents tend to blame each other for everything that's happening... so it sort of manifests... manifests in the form of refusal to talk to each other...so even if my dad does want to talk, my mom would invariably not want to... though they don't really have any conversations as such when I'm not around they will talk.. but when I am there and something needs to be conveyed to the other person, my mother will come to me first, then I will call my dad and then they'll sort of talk through me..." (R., personal communication, 24th October'14)

Furthermore, some studies suggest evidence towards adolescent efforts to intervene in 'emotion-charged' adult matter as a predictor of greater risk for adjustment related issues as compared to adolescents who may act out in immediate response to parental distress (Davis et al., 2000).

Another participant also mentions, that in situations where both parents end up in arguing, and the role of the adolescent is then to adopt the responsibility of the parent.

"... So the thing is that my parents haven't always been in such good terms with each other... my dad has had some sort of problems with his in laws and the same is with my mom...she's... She is not in such good terms with my grandparents... so sometimes there are small family disputes and sometimes it turns into big fights and my mom goes to her mom's house for a few days to live and my dad has to go work which is why I am left alone at home to take care of my younger brother and my grandparents..." (S.S., personal communication, 25th October'14)

For an adolescent, mediating family conflicts may not lead to positive outcomes. Rather it may cause distress due to its failure. For example, in a study by Vuchinich, Cassidy, and Emery (1988) it was found that attempts made by children towards intervening in interparental conflict by relying on less effective and constructive strategies like that of adults may lead to failures. Consequently, it led to development of faulty belief systems that increased the likelihood of unfavorable outcomes (as cited in Peris, 2006).

In certain situations, the condition at home parentification not only takes place at an instrumental level but at an emotional level as well. The adolescent is then left with no option but to undertake the roles and responsibilities to maintain equilibrium in the family.

3.5.2. Societal Pressure/Culture and Values

Our sense of responsibility to a large extent comes from the culture and the values that have been inculcated in us. The Indian society emphasizes the importance of women taking over filial responsibilities especially at a young age. In certain situations, it is reflected in the perceptions of the elderly family members. Failing to meet these expectations may become a matter of shame, which may lead to varied judgments. Therefore, it becomes important to understand a concept such as parentification from a wider lens that incorporates culture and values of the Indian society. The way the parentification process influences any individual is shaped by the interplay of various cultural factors (Hooper et al., 2014).

For instance, one of the participants very rightly mentioned how the Indian value system influences her to adopt certain roles and responsibilities in her home:

"...The values and the culture that you've been brought up to... these play a very important factor because from your childhood your mother teaches you many values that you have to inculcate in life and when the right time comes you have to do it...and there are certain cultures that we belong to and you need to contribute your own work too...so mindset, values and culture play an important role.....So yeah when someone is telling me I have to do it...the societal pressure that, what will people think about me..??..." (C.P., personal communication, 27th October'14)

In a collectivist society like that of India, children are given responsibilities at a much younger age. Some cross cultural studies suggest that taking care of younger siblings is considered as being appropriate in many societies. This practice originates from the existence of cultural differences with regard to loyalty and cooperation towards family and kinship ties (Jurkovic, Kupermine, Perilla, Murphy, Ibanez, & Casey, 2004).

Similarly, another participant mentions how culture plays a role in the way certain responsibilities are adopted:

"But the society is there, and boys are meant to help in households, but not with household chores... and within our Indian culture, it is very much prevalent..." (S.S., personal communication, 25th October'14)

Thus, in the Indian setting, it becomes important to understand the influence of existing cultures and values. Moreover, it has been believed that little or no experience with parentification can have a detrimental effect on individuals belonging to collectivist cultures (Byng-Hall, 2008, Jurkovic, 1997; Minuchin et al., 1967). In a culture with an expectation of a high degree of filial responsibility, it is a great likelihood that it appropriately cultivates support, acknowledgment and reciprocity in the family and the society. However, it is premature to assume that in the same culture assignment of certain roles and responsibilities to adolescents in the family may always

be reasonable and beneficial (Jurkovic et al., 2004). So in a country like India, where collectivism is valued and fostered, parentification is likely to exist, however its outcome may vary.

3.5.3. Parental Pressure/Family Expectations/Obligations

The Indian family system is a close network of relationships that facilitates a strong sense of obligation towards the family. And in most situations creates an expectation from the members of the family towards each other. Fulfilment of these expectations and demands may be a way to maintain family cohesion and equilibrium. Youth belonging to Latin American and Asian backgrounds consider providing family assistance a significant feature of their daily life, that provides a sense of meaning and a way to bond with the family (Hardway & Fuligni 2006).

As one of the participants mentioned, that assumption of these roles and responsibilities come as a sense of obligation along with parental pressure:

“...Because, I feel I am a member of the family...and as being a member, I feel it is my responsibility to do...and sometimes some pressure of my parents...” (R.S., personal communication, 27th October’14)

The words of the above mentioned participant reflects a sense of obligation and expectation towards and from her family with a hint of parental pressure. Su´arez-Orozco and Su´arez-Orozco (1995) have used the term “familism” to describe a member’s sense of obligations and responsibility towards other members of the family (as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2004). Research suggests that a relationship between high levels of familism and its positive outcome towards academics and social skills. This ‘culturally anchored’ process of familism then acts as a protective factor for the youth (Jurkovic et al., 2004).

Parental pressure and family expectation play an equal role in the parentification roles and responsibilities. Like one of the participants mentioned:

“...I think most of the times it’s my mom telling me it’s high time I take up on my responsibilities (smiles)...I think being the girl of the house, and plus having such a huge family, and on top of that being a girl, I think there certain responsibilities that I’m expected to do and I have to do and I have to learn to do there is no option as such for me and I think considering that I live in a joint family, and I’m considered to look after the house in a certain way and look after everyone and cater to everyone’s needs...” (I.C., personal communication, 27th October’14)

Apart from a sense of obligation, the extent of one’s assumption of roles and responsibilities comes from expectations of the other family members. Indian children are greatly involved towards ensuring wellbeing of the family as a whole, and assuming these roles and responsibilities could be one way to fulfil it. Undertaking filial responsibility may also be another way to express loyalty towards one family.

3.5.4. Birth Order

The impact of parentification may vary with regard to birth order. In the book “Not having children” by Marshall (1993), she mentions that complexity of a situation changes if the eldest child is involved in caretaking of their younger siblings (as cited in Barnett & Parker, 1998). It is a common feature for parents to seek aid from the older sibling towards caretaking responsibilities for the younger sibling(s) (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Minuchin, 1974). For the present study, the sample comprised of adolescents who were the eldest sibling. Many of the participants agreed that they had to adopt certain roles and responsibilities towards their younger sibling(s).

For instance, one of them mentions:

“... If there’s no one else and I’m the eldest...I have to take it up... Being the elder sibling, I always find this innate need to take care of him... to correct him whenever he is wrong... to let him to do well in the simplest of stuff... to do well in his studies... help him in his studies... if there’s something bad happen, I will make sure that I will tell him that its wrong and not to do so... I have this tendency of continuously protecting him from everything...” (I.C., personal communication, 24th October’14)

Though the participant expresses that the assumption of these roles and responsibilities may be situational for some individuals, but at times it may be an innate feeling that may vary with regard to the bond that the siblings might share. One of the participants mentioned:

“...when my mom is not around or my parents are not around, I am automatically the eldest...so a lot of decisions around the house, because that is my task...” (J.B., personal communication, 24th October’14)

As for others as the data reveals are situations in which the adolescent adopted parentification responsibilities was only when the parent(s) was absent and when there was nobody else to take onto that role. As can be perceived from both responses, more than just a responsibility assigned by the parent, the response also reflects a sense of responsibility that is innate and comes forth when the need arises. The elder sibling is likely to have a tendency to be protective towards their younger sibling especially in the absence of a significant adult member.

With regard to the theoretical perspective as proposed by Alfred Adler, the elder sibling or the first-born aids in the development of their younger siblings, because the first born child sets the pace (as cited in McKenna, 1995). The elder sibling may then act as a role model towards their younger sibling.

Due to a dearth of research in this area, the role of birth order on parentification is unclear, empirical literature in this field posits mixed results. However it may be said that birth order may influence the possibility of parentification.

3.5.5. Habit/Innate Sense of Responsibility

According to Lally, Potts, and Wardle (2010), a habit is an automatic behavioral response that is enacted when encountered with certain context related cues. It is acquired through similar repeated responses in the presence of the same contextual cues (as cited in Gardner & Lally, 2013).

For a parentified adolescent, it becomes habitual to adopt the roles and responsibilities of a parent as and when the situation arises. The amount of responsibility that the individual may assume may be more than what they can handle. As many participants mention, the need of the hour demands more than what they can provide, as a result of which the child gets habituated to assume greater responsibility. As one of the participant mentions their experience:

“...my family is in such a state that now it won't be such a big deal for me to help them out...because there are already so many problems... so it's kind of... it requires me to help them and I don't consider that as such a big favor on them...because you know when someone is not at home, I can't leave my grandparents alone and abandon all the work I have to do... I mean I am used to taking up responsibilities at home so I...it automatically happens that I do the same to other people who are close to me...” (S.S., personal communication, 25th October'14)

At a very young age, certain situations lead the child to feel an innate sense of responsibility towards household matters and their siblings. The parentified adolescent sub-consciously steps into the role of a parent to fill the void, be it to handle the situation or adopt the role of the parent who transferred his/her responsibility towards the family onto the child. As the child grows up with years of this feeling and experience, by default the child feels that he/she is in charge of everything.

“...there was this point in which I used to undertake these responsibilities only under certain situations but now I have been taking up this thing from pretty long... these responsibilities.. I am a little accustomed to it now, so it's like reflex action... I take charge of things very voluntarily now... and it's not pertaining to my brother... even small family errands and everything I tend to take myself in charge immediately because I am accustomed to this world... like now if I don't have responsibilities to do certain things or whatever, I would feel a little helpless and “adhoora”(incomplete) like oh, what am I doing?! I should be doing that... it's just that I am accustomed to it now...” (J.B., personal communication, 24th October'14)

Like the participant mentioned, assumption of these roles and responsibilities became like a “reflex action”. It may be interpreted as the adolescent being habituated to the extent, that the she feels incomplete if she does not have responsibilities. The impact of this habit of doing extra work may make the parentified child a workaholic in adulthood.

According to Byng-Hall (2002), assumption of parenting roles can become an integral element of a child's sense of identity to the extent that it exists for a long period of time, often a lifetime. This may impact negatively upon the child because the child is now perceived as having ‘adult-like abilities’ and hence is treated like an adult at their age. Consequently, the child views themselves as a ‘little parent’ who is able to manage the parental role and rather is needed to fulfil the duties of one. The young child assumes a ‘parentified identity’.

Certain habits may involve a positive or a negative consequence. However, in times like this, it is the responsibility of the parent to manage the situation in favor of the child's development.

Assumption of parental roles and responsibilities in healthy families is situational or influenced by cultural factors. However, at a later point in time it becomes a part of an adolescent's daily routine, which bereft he/she feels a void that becomes difficult to fill. The phenomenon is highly prevalent in collectivist societies like that of India, from a very young age however, the outcome experience varies from person to person.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Assumption of parental roles and responsibilities is a part of a child's life at some point of their existence. In healthy families, the process of parentification may be situational or may be under the influence of cultural factors. Reviewing past literature suggested factors like divorces, psychopathology, low socioeconomic status, substance abuse etc. as some of the circumstances where parentification would exist. Greater emphasis has been placed on dysfunctional families as opposed to healthy families.

The current study explored the family context or situations prevalent in healthy families during which adolescents experienced parentification. The study adopted a qualitative approach using Parentification Questionnaire-Youth as a screening tool for its sample selection followed by an in-depth interview to understand the experience of adolescents. The data was analyzed using directed content analysis.

The major findings of the study with regard to parentification in the family context revealed circumstances namely-lack of parental availability; brief period of illness in the family; socioeconomic status; gender; marital discord; culture, values and societal pressure; birth order; family expectations, parental pressure and obligations; and innate sense of responsibility/habit that varied across time and individuals. Furthermore, situations in which parent(s) are unavailable played a major role that impacted a situation in which a child felt the need to assume certain roles and responsibilities. Even if the parent was unavailable due to a period of brief illness, the adolescent became a substitute for the parent at least towards their younger sibling for that brief period of time.

Moreover, the present study suggests that in collectivist cultures like that of India, the adolescent assuming caretaking roles experience an innate sense of responsibility that can only be fulfilled by living up to their own expectations from themselves. The parentified adolescent sub-consciously steps into the role of a parent to fill the void, be it to handle the situation or adopt the role of the parent who transferred his/her responsibility towards the family onto the child. As the child grows up with years of this feeling and experience, by default the child feels that he/she is in charge of everything.

In addition, the Indian family system is a close knit system that creates an expectation to fulfil certain duties as being a member of the family. Some may view this as a sense of obligation whereas others view it as a way to live up to certain familial and societal

expectations. Many of the adolescents perceive the parentification process as something that the Indian culture and their family's value system upholds. Nonetheless, adoption of these caretaking responsibilities is a part of who they are, without which they would feel 'incomplete'.

Furthermore, in the Indian society being a girl meant that assumption of certain roles and responsibilities would go unsaid. Even though the sample was predominantly females, the findings of the present study confirm some of the views on gender and parentification. Nevertheless, the intricacy of gender and culture viewed from the lens of parentification needs greater clarity.

The families need to understand that the adolescent should be given roles and responsibilities that are age-appropriate, brief and acknowledged. These findings are in line with the literature review of parentification; however certain variations are due to cultural differences.

4.1. Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of the study involves the lack of an in-depth understanding of the cultural implications of parentification. The present study did not address to the various aspects of the Indian culture at a deeper level with regard to this phenomenon. Moreover, the final sample of male participants was lesser than female participants, which could've influenced the findings across certain domains.

4.2. Implications of the Study

The study will help in understanding and developing interventions and coping strategies as relevant to parentified adolescents. The importance of understanding the familial context will help in formulating family therapy addressing these issues that are often overlooked. Addressing the phenomenon of parentification in times of difficult situations can play an important role in helping the family in adverse conditions. If the process of parentification is culturally expected and is considered a valued phenomenon, the lens from which it's viewed needs to be altered. In such situations, it then becomes important to educate the family to make them understand the appropriateness of assuming certain responsibilities that would help the adolescent grow, learn, and prosper.

4.3. Suggestions and Future Directions for Further Research

The scope of further research in the area of parentification is vast. There is a dearth of qualitative work in this field, and to explore the experiential aspect of parentification qualitatively would further bridge the gap in empirical literature. Moreover, since differences in cultures exist, it would be beneficial to understand the interplay of culture and parentification even in healthy families. Furthermore, the experience of parentification across younger siblings or second born is likely to vary and could be explored.

Parenting style is culture bound, and is likely to influence the parentification process. If the parent had been a parental child, the expectation of the same from their children is likely to exist. The difference in the experience of children belonging to joint families and children belonging to nuclear families are also influencing factors in the process of parentification. Therefore, the parental perspective and the influence of family structure on role reversal is a trans-generational process that further research could help in understanding at a greater depth.

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