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Parentification in the Experience of Polish Adolescents. The Role of Socio-demographic Factors and Emotional Consequences for Parentified Youth

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Abstract

Parentification happens when children take on parental duties, which leads to role reversal between children and their parents. Parentification has multiple causes and can have a short- and long-term negative impact on parentified children. This study examined prevalence and correlates of parentification in Polish adolescents. The study included 557 16-year-old students in four types of Polish high schools. Results indicate that parentification is present to a considerable degree and may negatively affect students' school functioning and affective well-being.

Keywords: parentification, role reversal, child psychopathology, adolescent mental health

Introduction

Parentification is mostly described as a reversal of the parental role between the parents and the child. It occurs when a parent partially or entirely abdicates his/her parental tasks and duties. The parent's abdication usually sets in motion the process of parentification, in which a child feels obliged to take on the role of the parent in various spheres of family life (Early & Cushway, 2002; Kerig, 2005).

Recent parentification definitions differentiate between two types of parentification: instrumental and emotional. Instrumental parentification may involve carrying out various home chores or undertaking care of siblings or other family members by the child (Early & Cushway, 2002; Schier, 2014). Emotional parentification may mean the child's involvement in parental conflict, in which she/he may play the role of a mediator, peacemaker, referee, or buffer (Byng-Hall, 2002, 2008; Schier, 2014). The parentified child may also be used as a confidant, assistant, or a therapist, when parents are not coping with life's hardships (Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings & Emery, 2008).

Parentification is often also associated with the perception of unfairness by the parentified children. According to Jurkovic (Jurkovic, Jessee, & Goglia, 1991; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001), perceived fairness determines the impact of parentification. Children who are appreciated for their effort and who experience reciprocity in their family relationships may not suffer the negative outcomes of parentification. However, lack of parental support and appreciation coupled with long-term developmentally inappropriate tasks disturb children's functioning and decrease their perception of fairness.

Parentification can affect the development of the child's personality and identity, interpersonal relations and adaptability as well as romantic relations and relationships with their own children (Early & Cushway, 2002). Those parentified in childhood often suffer from depression, may display suicidal tendencies, have a sense of guilt and shame and various health problems (Byng-Hall, 2002; Jurkovic, 1997; Schier, 2014). Some studies indicate the association of parentification with decreased academic achievement in parentified children (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998; East, 2010) possibly due to children being burdened with reversed parental roles at home and having fewer resources to achieve at school (Macfie, Brumariu, & Lyons-Ruth, 2015).

The review of international literature, mostly American, shows that parentification is often associated with some form of neglect of the child by the parents and with an increased risk of family pathology (Hooper, 2007; Chee, Goh, & Kuczynski, 2014). The most common reasons are: poor family functioning, long-term parental conflict, addictions, parents' personality disorders, mental and physical illness, incompleteness of the family or its recurrent reconstruction, and the child's female gender or being an only child (Byng-Hall, 2002, 2008; Jurkovic, et al., 1991). Parentification is also linked to the low socio-economic status of the family. Poorly educated parents often face a difficult financial situation with accompanying tensions and frustration, which generates a risk of role reversal in the family (Żarczyńska-Hyla, Zdaniuk, Borusowska, Karcz, & Kromolicka, 2016).

In Poland, parentification is poorly researched even though a previous retrospective study by the authors (Żarczyńska-Hyla, et al., 2016) indicated that it is quite prevalent and determined by many factors. The few published studies of parentification in Polish population examined adults (Pasternak & Schier, 2012). There is no study we know of that examined current parentification as experienced by children. This study aims at shedding light on the sociodemographic determinants of parentification of Polish adolescents and the potential association of parentification with their important school choices and their emotional well-being.

Research Methodology

This is a survey-based self-report study using a convenience sample, conducted with adolescent high school students who answered questions about their current experiences and perceptions.

Participants

Participants were 557 first grade high school students (approximately 16 years old, 56% female and 44% male) recruited in two Polish cities from four different types of high school – (1) basic vocational school (*szkoła zawodowa*), which teaches mostly blue collar skills in a variety of vocations and generally prepares students to enter the workforce upon completion (no opportunity to take a matriculation exam, which is mandatory to attend college or university) (15% of participants); (2) secondary vocational school (*liceum zawodowe*), which teaches higher level technical and non-technical skills in addition to general education and offers the opportunity to take a matriculation exam, (6%); (3) technical institute (*technikum*), which teaches higher level specialized technical skills with some general education and offers a matriculation exam, (44%); and (4) general education high school (*liceum ogólnokształcące*), which teaches general education subjects, is strongly focused on preparing students for a matriculation exam and for colleges and universities (35%). In the current Polish education system, students choose one of four types of post-primary education after finishing the 8th grade. The project was approved by the first author's higher education institution as well as the high school administrations. All the participating students also signed an informed consent.

Measures

The participants filled out a questionnaire that included questions about their demographics (reported above) and family background, parentification scales, and questions addressing the frequency of feeling negative and positive emotions.

Family background. The participants reported their family status (divorced, step, one parent, etc.), their parents' education level, presence of disability or chronic illness, parental tobacco and alcohol addiction, financial situation, unemployment, and amount of conflict. Most questions had a 'yes/no' format (e.g., parental divorce or presence of a step-parent) or ordinal answer scales (e.g., amount of conflict in the family or financial wellbeing).

Parentification. The amount and type of parentification experienced by the students was measured with the use of the *Filial Responsibility Scale for Youth (FRS-Y)*; Jurkovic, Kuperminc, & Casey, 2000; Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Casey, 2009). The FRS-Y is a self-report instrument including 34 items, which comprise three scales: Instrumental Caregiving (9 aspects such as doing laundry), Emotional Caregiving (10 aspects such as trying to keep peace in the family), and Unfairness (13 aspects such as not being noticed when trying to help). Scores for each item range from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true). Higher mean scores on each scale indicate higher instrumental and emotional parentification and higher sense of unfairness. The scale was used successfully in research on American, Latino, and Bosnian youth and was found to be valid and internally reliable (Jurkovic, Kuperminc, & Casey, 2000; Jurkovic, Kuperminc, Sarac, & Weisshaar, 2005; Kuperminc, Wilkins, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2013). All the items were translated into Polish using the back-translation method. In our study, the three scales showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha equal to .69, .74, and .88 for Instrumental, Emotional and Unfairness, respectively). A medium strength correlation was found between Instrumental and Emotional Caregiving ($r=0.46$; $p < .01$) and between Unfairness and Emotional Caregiving ($r=0.49$; $p < .01$), and a smaller one between Instrumental Caregiving and Unfairness ($r=0.29$; $p < .01$), indicating that the three scales measure somewhat independent dimensions of parentification.

Mood. Anger, depressed mood, and positive mood were measured by questions asking the students to rate the level of experiencing a particular mood on a scale from 0=*I do not experience the feeling* to 4=*I experience the feeling very strongly*. The level of the participants experiencing anger was evaluated with the use of one question asking the students to rate to what degree they felt rage. A higher score indicated more anger, more depressive affect, and more positive affect.

Data Analysis

All the variables were initially compared across the two data collection sites and after establishing that there were no site differences, final analyses were conducted on combined data. Either parametric or nonparametric analytical methods were used depending on the type of variables being analyzed.

Research Results

In terms of the prevalence of parentification experiences among the studied youth, 46% of the students experienced at least three out of nine aspects of Instrumental Caregiving (the students chose the ‘somewhat true’ or ‘very true’ answer) and 16% listed experiencing 5 or more aspects. In terms of Emotional Caregiving, 47% of the students experienced at least three out of ten aspects of this type of parentification (the students chose the ‘somewhat true’ or ‘very true’ answer) and 15% listed experiencing 5 or more aspects. Feeling of unfairness was experienced with similar prevalence: 39% of the students experienced at least three out of thirteen aspects of this type of parentification and 23% listed experiencing 5 or more aspects.

Sociodemographic and other family characteristics related to role reversal

Table 1 presents correlations between the student’s sociodemographic and family characteristics and the three dimensions of parentification.

Table 1. Correlations between sociodemographic characteristics and parentification

Sociodemographic characteristics	Parentification		
	Instrumental	Emotional	Unfairness
Birth order (higher number=younger in order)	-.12**	-.04	.07
Number of siblings	.19**	.03	.17**
Place of residence (0=urban; 1=rural)	.05	-.03	-.04
Mother’s education	-.02	-.01	-.07
Father’s education	-.03	.00	-.06
Unemployment of either parent ¹	.16**	.25**	.28**

Sociodemographic characteristics	Parentification		
	Instrumental	Emotional	Unfairness
Financial wellbeing	.03	-.14**	-.19**
Living standard	.09*	-.15**	-.20**
Parent's chronic illness/disability ¹	.02	.16**	.10*
Sibling's chronic illness/disability ¹	.10*	.07	.12**
Parent's death ¹	.00	-.02	.01

* p < .05 ** p < .01 ¹ 0=no; 1=yes

Higher Instrumental Caregiving is related to a participant being female, older in terms of birth order, having a greater number of siblings, having parents who experienced unemployment, and having a chronically ill/disabled sibling. All these correlations are small in size (Cohen, 1988).

Higher Emotional Caregiving is related to a participant being female, having parents with unemployment experience, lower financial wellbeing, and lower living standard as well as having a chronically ill/disabled parent whereas a higher sense of unfairness is related to a greater number of siblings, parents' unemployment, lower financial situation and lower living standard as well as having a chronically ill/disabled parent or sibling. Most of these correlations are small in size except for the medium strength link between the emotional and unfairness dimensions and parents' experience with unemployment.

Table 2. Correlations between parentification dimensions and family structure, conflict, and addictions

	Parentification		
	Instrumental	Emotional	Unfairness
Divorce ¹	.03	.15**	.08
Single parent ¹	-.01	.10*	.08
Step parent ¹	.07	.07	.16*
Parent widowed ¹	.01	.00	.02
Parent's temporary absence ¹	.01	.07	.05
Conflict in family	.08	.31**	.46**
Parent's tobacco addiction ¹	.05	.19**	.17**
Parent's alcohol addiction ¹	.11*	.27**	.31**

* p < .05 ** p < .01 ¹ 0=no; 1=yes

Table 2 presents correlations between parentification and family structure, conflict, and addictions. Increased Instrumental Caregiving is only weakly related to a parent's alcohol addiction. Elevated Emotional Caregiving is associated with the majority of factors (small correlations with divorce, single parent, and parent's tobacco addiction and medium correlations with conflict in family and parent's alcohol addiction). Unfairness is related to a small degree to having a step-parent and parent's tobacco addiction, to a medium degree with having a parent with alcohol addiction, and to a strong degree with a higher level of family conflict.

Association between parentification and choice of high school type

Potential links between the student's choice of high school and experienced parentification were analyzed with the use of one-way ANOVA, in which the students in four types of high school were compared on the parentification scales. Table 3 presents the means.

Table 3. Comparing high school types on parentification measures

Parentification	High school type			
	General education	Secondary vocational	Technical institute	Basic vocational
Instrumental Caregiving	1.90	2.00	1.94	1.93
Emotional Caregiving	1.89	1.96	1.87	1.92
Unfairness	1.65	1.91	1.71	1.87

The ANOVA analysis revealed no differences among the school types on instrumental and emotional parentification ($F(3, 529) = .39, p > .05$ and $F(3, 537) = .40, p > .05$, respectively). Significant differences were found, however, for the sense of unfairness ($F(3, 538) = 4.03, p < .05$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed that the students attending basic vocational schools reported a higher level of unfairness than the students from general education high schools ($t(1) = 2.90, p < .05$) and those attending technical institutes ($t(1) = 2.20, p < .05$). Similarly, the students attending secondary vocational schools reported a higher level of unfairness than the students from general education high schools ($t(1) = 2.40, p < .05$) and marginally higher than those attending technical institutes ($t(1) = 1.88, p < .10$).

Association between experience of parentification and students' mood

Table 4 presents correlations between parentification and the students' negative and positive moods. Increased instrumental and emotional parentification is associated with increased experience of anger and depressed mood but has no link to positive mood levels. However, an increased sense of unfairness is related to increased levels of anger and depressed mood as well as to a decreased level of positive mood. Correlation coefficients range from small to medium.

Table 4. Correlations between parentification dimensions and the degree of experiencing anger, depressed mood and positive mood

Mood	Parentification		
	Instrumental	Emotional	Unfairness
Anger	.13**	.24**	.35**
Depressed mood	.21**	.35**	.43**
Positive mood	.03	.01	-.22**

** $p < .01$

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge the non-random and self-selected nature of our sample, which limits generalization of the following conclusions to the population of Polish adolescents. Despite such limitations, we believe our study to be one of the first ones examining adolescents' current experiences of parental role reversal at home, providing an important initial insight into the phenomenon of parentification. It indicates that parentification is quite prevalent, experienced at least to some degree by 70% of the participating teenagers with a worryingly high number of children experiencing medium to severe parentification. What is most troubling is the high prevalence of emotional parentification and associated with it feelings of unfairness, which are likely to be maladaptive for the youth. Our finding of strong links between feelings of unfairness and potentially detrimental outcomes is a new contribution to the literature. Despite theoretical speculations that perception of unfairness may exacerbate negative outcomes of parentification (Jurkovic et al., 2004), most studies have focused on the impact of instrumental and emotional parentification (e.g., Peris, et al., 2008; Shifren & Kachorek, 2003) and the sense of unfairness has seldom been examined.

Our results indicate that parentification is linked to a number of adolescents' and family sociodemographic characteristics. Girls and older siblings are more likely to experience it and a worse financial situation, parent unemployment and multiple siblings are associated with increased role reversal. In families experiencing such challenges some children are likely to be required to help to the degree that leads to feelings of unfairness. Such findings mirror the results reported in the North American literature regarding instrumental and emotional parentification (Byng-Hall, 2002, 2008) and contributes to the scarce information of the perception of unfairness (cf., the retrospective study of Polish young adults by the authors, Żarczyńska-Hyla, et al., 2016).

We also examined the relationship between some well-established family risk factors and role reversal. The strongest correlates of parentification in our study are parental conflict (linked to emotional parentification and unfairness) and parental alcoholism (linked to all the three dimensions) as well as divorce, single-parent household and presence of a step-parent. These results mirror previous findings in terms of emotional parentification (Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson, & Stanwyck, 2004; Byng-Hall, 2008) while adding new information on links to unfairness.

Our results also indicate that perception of unfairness is associated with our respondents' choice of high school. These findings contribute new and important information on links between parentification and children's educational experiences. He adolescents who chose basic and secondary vocational schools reported elevated unfairness feelings when compared to those attending technical institutes and general education high schools. Both the basic and secondary vocational schools are usually the last educational step before entering the workforce and it is possible that some students end up in those schools because they do not receive sufficient support and encouragement from their parents to pursue further education leading to their feelings of being treated unfairly in their family. Alternatively, the family dysfunction that leads to perceptions of unfairness is also motivating the youth to join the workforce to either better support the family or to become independent and move out. Thus, such choices could be suboptimal in relation to the student's talents and intellectual potential, often limiting their options for higher education. The link between high school choice and the unfairness aspect of parentification seems important and requires further research.

Our results also point to a connection between parentification and adolescents' emotional well-being. In our sample, higher instrumental and emotional parentification is associated with elevated depressed affect and anger but not with decreased positive affect. These findings replicate the results reported in

the North American literature (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Stein, Riedel, & Rotheram-Borus, 1999). A novel finding of this study shows that increased feelings of unfairness are associated with elevated negative affect and decreased frequency of positive emotions. Thus, in addition to being quite prevalent among our young respondents, parentification has a disconcerting connection to negative emotions (with unfairness also related to decreased positive emotions), which, in turn, can adversely affect adolescents' functioning in cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal areas (Jaycox et al., 2009).

In our opinion, the problems which the parentified youth struggles with can go unnoticed or incorrectly diagnosed by teachers or school counsellors. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the knowledge regarding parentification becomes widely disseminated not only among parents but also among education professionals so that proper strategies can be developed to effectively help students burdened by such a family dysfunction. However, it is important to bear in mind that our conclusions are limited by the correlational nature of our study. We can only talk about associations between parentification and other variables and may only speculate on potential causal links. Further research is needed to allow for approximation towards cause-and-effect relationships between the family context, parentification, and potential outcomes for parentified children in Poland.

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