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PARENTIFICATION'S EFFECT ON SELF-ESTEEM, SELF-EFFICACY, AND
ATTACHMENT TENDENCIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This research project analyzed the relationships between parentification, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and insecure attachment tendencies. This study included 228 participants ranging from 18-26 years old. Participants completed measures via the SONA system. Within the existing research around parentification, there exists a gap in literature examining the effects of parentification in college-aged adults; this developmental stage of life is significant in that the individual leaves the setting where parentification occurs and enters adulthood. We hypothesized that individuals who experienced parentification would have high self-efficacy and low self-esteem, as well as being more anxious or avoidant in relationships compared to those with low levels of parentification. The results of this study aligned with the hypotheses. The findings of this study may lead to implications around discussions and interventions on how to assist family systems that utilize parentification as a means of survival.

Introduction

Parenting can be stressful and may lead a caregiver to engage in parenting behaviors that are harsh, inconsistent, and insensitive (Murry, & Lippold, 2018). Parentification is a challenge that often remains unacknowledged in discussions around parenting styles and outcomes. Parentification allows parents to place responsibilities on their children that they would otherwise not do to relieve some sort of stress. Many family systems engage in this type of parenting due to the number of stressors they face and for the family's survival. The responsibilities placed on a child can include caring for siblings, being a translator, taking on a parent's emotional turmoil, and even working to pay the bills. With this additional responsibility, these children can garner mixed emotions about themselves and their purpose in the world. Parentified children often grow up lacking identity formation because they are accustomed to viewing themselves in relation to caring for and helping others (Byng-Hall, 2002). This can be beneficial in providing a sense of independence and improving self-efficacy, yet having to care for others at a young age at the expense of oneself can be detrimental to one's self-esteem, belief in oneself, and identity formation (Byng-Hall, 2002).

Parentification can be considered a rather negative experience and involves a parent-child relationship that is transactional, someone who experiences parentification can likely develop an insecure attachment style to their caregiver. Bowlby (2008) stated that children who face adverse childhood experiences, such as living through the struggles of a single-family household, may have a disrupted attachment style. Griffin (2021) hypothesized that the reason that these children develop anxious attachment styles is because they learned that they will not be able to rely on a parent to meet their needs due to the parents' inability to respond consistently to the child. Insecure attachment comes with an assortment of negative outcomes, some of which include

difficulties with emotion regulation, challenges in school, and battles with negative feelings of self-esteem (Ainsworth, 1979).

With the knowledge that parentification can affect identity development, self-esteem, and self-efficacy of a child, as well as knowing that attachment dimensions are independently associated with specific patterns of relational interaction (Goodall, 2015), the current study aims to explore how the combination of these experiences affect parentified children. Specifically, we will examine how insecure attachment tendencies, parentification, self-esteem, and self-efficacy interact.

Literature Review

Parentification

Parentification refers to an inverted parent/child relationship where the child takes on the responsibilities of the adult (Saha, 2016). When factoring in everything a parent must consider such as financial stability, caretaking of the home and children, as well as job security, adding the stress of being a single parent, going through a separation, having a mental or physical disability, or being an immigrant can cause the responsibility of parenting to become overbearing. One way to reduce the overload of responsibility caused by dealing with various stressors that come along with parenting is to delegate some tasks to the children of the household. While children who experience typical childhood experiences like the excitement one gets from unwrapping a lunch packed by a parent or being able to go home and engage in one's hobbies, parentified children are prioritizing the needs of their family over their own, causing them to miss out on developmentally appropriate experiences that they require for positive development and differentiation of self (Hooper, 2008). From the parent's point of view, parentification has the benefits of free labor, less stress, and a responsible child. This functional

and/or emotional role reversal requires the child to sacrifice their needs for attention, comfort, and guidance to accommodate and care for the needs of their family and to ensure that the relationship with their parent is positive. In turn, this allows the adult to adopt the dependent position in the parent-child relationship (Hooper, 2008).

Parentification is most commonly found within atypical family systems such as single-parent or multigenerational households, households with a mentally or physically disabled parent, or immigrant households (Hooper, 2008). This is because of the need for additional assistance in establishing a functioning household. Two types of parentification have been identified. Instrumental parentification refers to the assignment of functional responsibilities such as meal preparation, money management, shopping, and household maintenance. This mostly occurs because a parent is unavailable or unable to undertake these responsibilities (Aldridge, 2006). The other identified type of parentification is known as emotional parentification. This type occurs when a parent places their emotional and/or psychological needs onto their child. Examples of such can include mediation and conflict de-escalation. This type appears more when a parent suffers from mental illness or attachment issues (Aldridge, 2006). Of the two, the latter is deemed more detrimental, but it is possible to experience both types of parentification. Children do not have the developmental capability to understand and process complex emotions. This type of relationship is parasitic in that the parent does not reciprocate the emotional assistance that is offered by the child during their type of need, nor do they model how to handle emotional complications well. While instrumental parentification can provide a sense of competence in the child, emotional parentification does the exact opposite (Hooper 2008).

Brooks-Gunn and colleagues (2011) identified five key mechanisms that influence the relationship between family structure and child well-being. They are parental resources, parental relationship quality, parental mental health, parenting quality, and father involvement. Parentification also affects each of these mechanisms. Parental resources are a clear and common issue for households that engage in parentification; an example of this is single-parent households. McLanahan and Sandefur (2009) found that economic resources account for half the developmental outcome differences in children of single-mother families compared to their two-parent counterparts. One explanation for this could be simply because there is only one source of income used to support the household. Because of how demanding having to support a family on one income is, single parents may have to work more thus causing them to be unable to invest time in their children. These stacked stressors such as financial strain, and general life stress, may be the cause for these parents' likelihood to engage in authoritarian, neglectful, or permissive parenting rather than an authoritative parenting practice which is more effective (Conger et. al, 1994). Parentification directly connects to the quality of parenting as the roles of the parent and child are reversed in many ways. Brooks-Gunn and colleagues (2011) identified that children's outcomes are better when parents are warm and nurturing. This often isn't the case in parentification as the adoption of responsibilities is more of an obligation for survival where one doesn't get rewarded for completing tasks but does involve reprimanding for not completing a task. Additionally, parental mental health issues, specifically depression and psychological problems can be a detriment to a parent's ability to be a warm, nurturing, consistent parent. Outside stressors combined with psychological problems, the parent-child attachment bonds lie at risk; if the parent is mentally or physically disabled and cannot complete tasks, the responsibility can fall onto the shoulders of the children in the home. Instead of being responded

to, the children respond to the needs of the parent, which is the exact opposite of ideal according to attachment theory. The parental relationship quality and father involvement mechanisms have an interesting relationship with parentification. Research on parentification usually involves mothers as the parent whom an individual is experiencing parentification, likely because of the many single-parent households that are run by mothers or because a mother is seen more as a head of parenting in the household. Thus, there is a lack of research on parentification initiated from the father. It would be interesting to examine, especially because children of divorce can experience parentification. Parentification in this instance can be instrumental and/or emotional. For instance, a parent leaving the household could call for a child to have to pick up work around or within the house or to get a job; or a parent enduring separation may be very emotional and use their child as a shoulder to cry on or as a scapegoat for the decline of their relationship. These responsibilities require a child to become more responsible in a way that may not meet their developmental stage. Parentification seems to correlate negatively with all 5 identified mechanisms that signify healthier households.

Attachment

The quality of the relationship between the parent and child may help to protect against the negative effects of parentification. Attachment theory, initially proposed by Bowlby (2008), states that the attachment bond between an infant and the primary caregiver has a significant effect on the child's behavioral and emotional development throughout their life. A child learns about the world from their primary caregiver, and as a parent responds to their child and interacts with their child, an internal working model develops. This working model sets the way a child understands the reliability of others and feelings of self (Bowlby, 2008). The attachment bond

sets the foundation that allows a person to determine their worthiness to themselves and others (Feeney et al, 2008). Sroufe (2002) found that attachment security was important in setting assumptions about the self and others. In 1993, Roberts and colleagues suggested that an insecure attachment leads to negative feelings about oneself; on the other hand, securely attached individuals had positive feelings toward themselves and others (Shi, 2003).

Ainsworth (1979) identified several different parent-child attachment styles using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP). Individuals with a secure attachment style view their primary caregiver in a positive light; they have a strong sense of trust and confidence that their caregiver will respond to their essential needs. The caregiver serves as a secure base for their child. As a secure base, a parent represents a sense of safety for their child by sending an implicit message to their child that they are safe to explore. These children present more positive developmental outcomes such as emotional regulation, academic competence, and are likely to have successful social relationships (Ainsworth, 1979). Children with an avoidant attachment style lack trust in their primary caregiver due to their caregivers being consistently unresponsive to their emotional needs. These infants are not confident that their needs will be met and thus ignore or push away their own needs to remain regulated (Ainsworth, 1979). When forming relationships with others, they have an intense fear of rejection and fear of getting close to others. Children with a resistant or ambivalent attachment have anger towards their primary caregiver due to their inconsistent and unpredictable responsiveness (Ainsworth, 1979). Because of the inconsistent caregiving, these children grow up to fear abandonment and have high anxiety in relationships. Lastly, those with a disorganized attachment style have no set pattern of response to their parent, these children come from unpredictable environments and thus respond in the same manner; there is no clear set of behaviors that can be described in disorganized individuals because their

experiences are unique and so are their response styles (Ainsworth, 1979). Although four types have been identified, for the study we will only be focusing on the insecure attachment tendencies of avoidant and ambivalent attachment.

Secure attachment can be formed even when parentification is present as long as the present parentification is instrumental rather than emotional. Hooper (2008) identified this by observing how parents who engaged in instrumental parentification were still able to be emotionally available to their children. However, because of the demanding and nonreciprocal nature of emotional parentification, the secure attachment relationship is disrupted. The negative feelings experienced by these children are caused by the unavailability, unreliability, and irregularity of a parent who expects their child to be emotionally available without reciprocating the action; if a parent continues to put this responsibility onto a child then the feelings of distrust in the parent can be reinforced, which in turn, can cause an insecure attachment to be more likely to form (Ainsworth, 1989).

Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

Marsh & O'Mara defined self-esteem as an overall evaluation of self-worth. This evaluation consists of feelings of worthiness and care from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Self-esteem is important during adolescence and early adulthood as it is an important time for identity development (Arnett, 2014). Self-esteem fluctuates as time goes on. When examining college students, Chung and colleagues (2014) found that during this time they exhibited more sensitivity to changes in self-esteem, instability, and negative self-evaluation. The transition to college can be difficult, so it is normal for one's views to be challenged and changed.

Roberts and Bengston (1993) identified the importance family served in relation to an adolescent's sense of self. Saha (2016) found that the self-esteem of adolescents who had been parentified depended on whether they felt competent enough to have control over the adverse situations that they came across. Additionally, they suggested that adolescents should be given roles and responsibilities that are age-appropriate and acknowledged to promote high self-esteem. Overall, Saha (2016) concluded that the nature of the outcome is likely to vary regarding the unique parentification experience of each adolescent which is dependent upon how rewarding their family makes the experience. According to Levine (2009), appropriate levels of parentification can foster internalization of responsible and accountable behavior as well as promote healthy psychological well-being. However, if the level of parentification requires the child to bear heavy responsibilities, their psychological development becomes delayed, increasing their chances of suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, social isolation, excessive guilt, and intensified levels of worry (Byng-Hall, 2002). Because being a parentified child is so difficult, and with the parent being unavailable to assist them emotionally or instrumentally, the child can be more sensitive to failing to meet the parents' expectations. Barnett and Parker (1998) deemed that this leads the child to feelings of lowered self-esteem and increased guilt. But to reiterate, Barnett and Parker (1998) concluded that in the context of parentification that is appropriate and acknowledged by family members, enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem, feelings of control over events, and an enhanced tendency to plan for one's future life can be promoted.

Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's confidence in their ability to accomplish tasks and achieve goals. An individual with high self-efficacy feels competent that they will be able to effectively deal with various situations and challenges that they come by as well as recover from

setbacks (Bandura & Wessels, 1994). According to Bandura (1994), the transition to adulthood is a time when individuals will have to assume responsibility for themselves and begin to master new skills that assist in adapting to adult society. The ease of this transition is largely dependent on the confidence that has been built up via prior mastery experiences. A parentified individual may be able to make their transition easier due to their upbringing being a cycle of completing tasks that were of a higher developmental degree than was appropriate for them; they likely had a longer track record of achieving mastery for certain adult skills such as cooking, cleaning, and budgeting. According to Bender and Ingram (2018), individuals with secure attachments have adopted attitudes that promote self-efficacy. This is likely because secure attachment has implications that affirm an individual's worthiness and feelings of self. Tavakolizadeh and colleagues (2015), found that there was a positive significant correlation between secure attachment style and self-efficacy and a negative correlation between insecure attachment style and self-efficacy. Little literature exists that examines the relationship between parentification and self-efficacy, but using what we know about parentification, self-efficacy, and attachment, we can make assumptions about how these variables may interact.

Methods

Parentification places a large amount of responsibility on the child. Unfortunately, few studies examine the effects of parentification. The current study's purpose, therefore, is to examine the research gap between parentification, attachment tendencies, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in emerging adulthood. Our research questions are stated as, how does parentification affect self-esteem and self-efficacy in emerging adulthood? and is there a relationship between parentification and insecure attachment tendencies?

Consistent with previous research found by Hooper (2008), when children experience low levels of parentification AND when the efforts of the child are recognized and rewarded by their caregivers, parentification can lead to greater interpersonal competence as well as higher levels of individuation, differentiation from family, and self-mastery and autonomy. Additionally, Hooper's (2008) findings that secure caregiver consistency and attunement to their children would allow them to be able to provide that low level of parentification and praise needed to combat low self-esteem. We hypothesize that individuals who experienced parentification will report having higher self-efficacy, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of anxiety or avoidance in relationships compared to those with low levels of parentification.

Participants

Participants were recruited through advertisement via flyers in common areas around campus as well as on the SONA site where the study is automatically shown to eligible participants. Participants in the current study include an emerging adulthood group of 228 participants from a university in the Southern United States, ages 18-26.

Procedures

All procedures were approved by the sponsoring university's institutional review board. Participants were recruited for the study and compensated with .5 SONA credits. Participants completed surveys online via Qualtrics. Identification numbers were assigned to participants to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the online survey, at this stage they were also given full right-to-withdraw, as well as the contact information of the researchers in the event they had any questions. The survey took approximately 1 hour to

complete. Before beginning the surveys, participants answered demographic questions such as their age, gender, and parents' highest completed education level.

Measures

Attachment. To assess a participant's attachment tendencies to their primary caregiver, we used the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). This measures adult attachment to primary caregivers with 9 items. Participants were asked to respond based on their relationships in general (i.e., not specific to a romantic partner). Participants used a 7-point Likert-type scale, with answer choices ranging from 1 = not at all like me to 7 = very much like me, to answer the items. The two-dimensional scoring system by Fraley and Bonanno (2004) creates two scales: attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. The avoidance scale assesses the extent to which an individual attempts to distance themselves from others, whereas the anxiety scale measures how much an individual worries about the availability of close others. An example anxiety item is, "I worry about having others not accept me." An example avoidance item is, "I prefer not to depend on others." Higher scores indicate higher levels of avoidant and anxious attachment tendencies.

Parentification. To assess a participant's level of parentification, we used the Parentification Inventory (Hooper, 2008). This scale is comprised of 22 items to assess instrumental and emotional parentification. Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from very often to never or does not apply to answer items such as "I felt appreciated by my family," "I had no time for play or schoolwork because of my family responsibilities," and "I helped my parents make important decisions." A score of 85 to 90 presents a significant degree of parentification.

Self-Esteem. To assess a participant's self-esteem, we used Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES consists of 10 items such as "I wish I could have more respect for myself," and "I feel that I have a number of good qualities," that were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A higher score on the scale indicates high self-esteem.

Self-Efficacy. Using the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), we measured the self-efficacy of our participants. The GSES is a 10-item Likert scale. Items such as "No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it." And "Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations" are rated on a four-point Likert scale from "Not true at all" to "Exactly true". The higher a participant's score, the greater their generalized sense of self-efficacy.

Results

Of the 228 participants, 87% identified as Female, 12% as Male, and 1% as Non-Binary. The majority of the participants were White/Caucasian at 65.4% followed by 17.5% Hispanic/Latinx, 6.6% Black/African American, 4.4% Asian, and the remaining 6.1% Other. Thirty-six percent of participants were First Born, 35% were the Youngest Child in their family, 18% the Middle Child, 8% Only Child, and 2% Other.

Parentification

For the analysis, only the participants who reported the highest and lowest parentification scores were used. Ten participants were chosen for analysis: the 5 highest and the 5 lowest parentification scores. This was done because the participants with the highest and lowest scores

were outliers. Many participants had average levels of parentification, so the outliers reveal extreme cases of parentification and allow us to gain insight into certain implications and understand which factors may contribute to certain outcomes.

Table 1

Parentification and Avoidant Attachment

Parentification Score	Avoidant Attachment Score
87	23
91	22
98	31
100	22
101	24

The relationship between parentification and avoidant tendencies was significant but a weak positive correlation ($r = .1933$, $p = .0034$), suggesting that those who experience higher parentification may have more insecure attachment tendencies.

Table 2

Parentification and Anxious Attachment

Parentification Score	Anxious Attachment Score
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87	16
91	15
98	21
100	14
101	11

The relationship between parentification and anxious tendencies was significant but a weak positive correlation ($r = .1699$, $p = .010$), suggesting that those who experience higher parentification may have more anxious attachment tendencies.

Table 3

Parentification and Self-Esteem

Parentification Score	Rosenburg Self-Esteem Score
87	23
91	34
98	24
100	26
101	24

The study examined the relationship between parentification and self-esteem among participants. Analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between parentification and self-esteem ($r = -.187, p = .0047$). This suggests that individuals who experienced higher levels of parentification tend to report lower levels of self-esteem.

Table 4

Parentification and Self-Efficacy

Parentification Score	Generalized Self-Efficacy Score
87	29
91	37
98	31
100	37
101	33

The study examined the relationship between parentification and self-efficacy among participants. Analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between parentification and self-efficacy ($r = .144, p = .0294$). This suggests that individuals who experienced higher levels of parentification tend to report higher levels of self-efficacy.

Discussion

There is a gap in research describing both the potential negative and positive effects of emerging adults who have experienced parentification. We hypothesized that individuals who experienced parentification would have high self-efficacy and low self-esteem, as well as be more anxious or avoidant in relationships compared to those with low levels of parentification. Exploratory evidence supports these hypotheses. As indicated by previous literature, self-esteem is negatively impacted by insecure attachment styles and parentification in combination with unpredictable environments (O'Connor & Scott, 2007). Parentification of children is also associated with negative effects such as low self-esteem, shame, excessive guilt, unrelenting worry, social isolation, and externalizing symptoms, such as conduct disorder (Byng-Hall, 2002). The findings of this study revealed something interesting. While parentification is an overall negative experience, it does seem to have a positive outcome as the individuals who reported experiencing parentification also reported having higher levels of self-efficacy. Another interesting thing about this finding is that these same participants reported having lower self-esteem. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are typically positively correlated. If an individual feels good about themselves then they are more likely to achieve their goals, and when a person achieves their goals, they tend to feel better about themselves. These same individuals reported experiencing insecure attachment tendencies. When considering how all of these variables interact together, it seems that self-esteem is negatively affected by both parentification and insecure attachment; while insecure attachment seems to result in low self-efficacy. If parentification is at play, then an individual may achieve high self-efficacy despite the insecure attachment implication.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is recruiting students from a private university population. Because we had low-income households in mind when designing this study, a blind spot existed as we did not consider those who had come from high-income families. For example, when designing the demographic selection, we did not put a high enough family income range for some participants. Additionally, when designing the household composition section of the demographics we did not include people who work for the family such as nannies, maids, and butlers. Another limitation was being more specific with birth order; because the selection only consisted of, only, youngest, middle, and oldest, some participants such as twins, triplets, and those in the middle with more than 2 siblings did not know where to consider themselves in birth order.

Another limitation of the study is only using self-reported surveys as measures. Because the participants report for themselves, they may underreport socially undesirable answers. Additionally, self-reports rely on the participant's memory; this study required participants to reflect on their past experiences. Because memory can become unreliable and is hard to verify, it is a limitation of this study. One other limitation is there were few participants who were parentified; we only used the highest five scores for data analysis. In the future, it would be wise to have a sample with higher levels of parentification or to declare a cut-off score for those who are considered parentified and those who are not.

Future Studies & Implications

We suggest that future studies consider outcomes of parentification, along with the same variables attachment tendencies, self-esteem, and self-efficacy to expand on the data and hypotheses. For example, does birth order matter in parentification, is there one rank that gets more parentified than the other? Perhaps a future study can look into whether the type of family

system one exists in increases the amount of parentification present, for example, children of single or teen parents, children of immigrants, and/or children who have disabled parents.

This research suggests that even with parentification, if a parent and child have a secure attachment it will act as a protective factor for self-efficacy. Future research should further examine this relationship as well as implement interventions that move attachment from insecure to secure classifications.

Further implications could include changes in policies and practices that educate caregivers about parentification and what is appropriate developmentally for their children, as well as how to seek the additional assistance that they may need. Providing education, support, and resources to parents may be additionally beneficial.

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