

acquired through their personal past experiences, information from their support networks, and advice from experts. Therefore, cross-cultural comparisons are often needed to make the patterns of beliefs visible and accessible to reveal both shared and culture-specific ideas. Multiple research methods, including diary, ethnography, interview, and observation, are useful to gain understanding and knowledge of patterns of cultural beliefs on child-rearing.

For example, in research investigating ethnotheories of child care and development among American and Dutch parents, Super et al. (1996) used three methods, semi-structured parent interviews (asking about their views on child care and development), parent diaries (noting activities, locations, and presence of others), and observation by researchers (recording caretaker and child behaviors) to collect data. According to the Dutch parents, the "three R's" – *rust* (rest), *regelment* (regularity), and *reinheid* (cleanliness) – are important in child development. In other words, they believed that maintaining good sleep, a regular schedule, and a clean life are crucial. In contrast, the American parents mentioned more complex sets of ideas on sleep and rest, based on age and individual children's characteristics.

Thus, examining different aspects of child-rearing among various cultural groups can provide understanding of how parents think about their child, family, and themselves as parents, and the implicit choices they make to raise their children in a given cultural context.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Cultural Comparison; Cultural Anthropology; Ethnography

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Parentification

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Following Schmindeberg's (1948) early exploration of the reciprocal and dialectical nature of parentification – parents acting as children, and children acting as parents – Minuchin et al. (1967) and Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) expanded its discussion. Family and ecological systems theoreticians, clinicians, and researchers proposed the construct of parentification to describe systemic processes, roles, and responsibilities evidenced in families who are functioning poorly and in many cases pathologically (Minuchin et al., 1967). In the context of those early writings, and in more recent times, parentification has been defined as a type of role reversal, boundary distortion, boundary crossing, inverted hierarchy, and problematic family structure among parents and other family members in which children and adolescents are given developmentally inappropriate and excessive levels of responsibility in the family of origin (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Hooper, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997, 1998; Kerig, 2005; Minuchin et al., 1967).

Some scholars have suggested that these roles and responsibilities can and should be differentiated by considering to whom they are directed (Hooper, 2007a; Hooper, Doehler, Wallace, & Hannah, 2011; Mika, Bergner, & Baum, 1987; Minuchin et al., 1967). For example, when the child provides care for the parent, Minuchin et al. termed this role the *parentified child*, and when the child provides care for siblings, they called it the *parental child*. Some scholars have suggested that this differentiation can also be linked to variant outcomes and functions, with many showing that the role of parentified child is more deleterious than that of parental child (see Chase, 1999; Hooper, Marotta, & Lanthier, 2008). Some writers have also proposed that the type of outcome (i.e., pernicious, deleterious, or positive) is linked to the extent to which the child involved in parentification perceives it to be just or fair (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Jurkovic, 1997; Jurkovic et al., 2004) or to be beneficial (Hooper, Doehler, et al., 2011). The notion of perceived fairness or perceived benefits may have particular relevance to and be differentiated by cross-cultural groups, although this thesis has yet to be fully explored (East, 2010). For example, if the child perceives the roles and responsibilities of parentification to be fair or beneficial to the family system and culturally sanctioned by family members, the frequently-documented negative outcomes may not emerge in childhood or later in adulthood. However, purposeful and directed empirical research focused on cross-cultural factors and families has been slow to unfold (Hooper, 2011). Despite these gaps, research over the past 50 years has shown that parentification serves an important function across the globe, in families with disparate configurations, the most notable function being preservation of pathological family structures.

In addition to maintaining pathological family structures, parentification is reported to serve numerous other purposes (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997; Kerig, 2005; Minuchin et al., 1967; Winton, 2002). For example,

a frequently reported motivation for parentification is to maintain homeostasis (balance) and a consistent level of functioning in the family system. Parentified youth take on roles and responsibilities to maintain leadership, executive functioning, and balance in the family. When the parents or adults in the family system are absent or underfunctioning, the youth respond by being present and overfunctioning. Another frequent motivation for parentification is to repeat in current generations the patterns of family functioning and relationships experienced in previous generations. Consequently, parentification is a relational and generational process in which all family members participate either implicitly or explicitly to reduce the dialectical tension between adult and youth family members. Although the parentification process is precipitated and dictated by the parent, the process is one in which everyone in the family participates. Parentification is as much about the family system and its members as it is about the parentified youth; the family jointly organizes to engender, propel, support, and maintain the process, roles, and responsibilities of parentification. Therefore, a family systems approach to assessment, intervention, and treatment is likely to be most effective.

Processes, Roles, and Responsibilities

Process

Typically, parentification is precipitated by a decline in a parent's (or other adult caregiver's) emotional, psychological, or physical health. In some severe cases, the ability of parents or adult caregivers to function and care for themselves and their children may be absent or non-existent, rather than just declining over time. Some of the factors most commonly reported as leading to parentification include: (a) absent or ineffective parental skills, competencies, and executive subsystems; (b) onset of a serious medical condition or poor physical health in one or both parents; (c) diagnosis of a serious mental health disorder or psychological distress in one or both parents; (d) parents'

excessive use of and dependence on alcohol or other substances; and (e) individual and family adversity, stress, or trauma (see Hooper, Wallace, Doehler, & Dantzer, 2012).

In the process of parentification, adult members of the family abdicate their adult and parental roles and responsibilities to the youth of the family. This process associated with parentification is not limited to the abdication of the parental roles to youth in the family; the abdication process also forces youth to give up their traditional childhood roles, relationships, and activities for the good of the family. In addition to abdication, triangulation often occurs in the parentification process. For example, in a family where the father lives in the home but is absent from the parental and spousal subsystem and the associated responsibilities, youth may be pulled into (triangulated into) these adult subsystems. That is, youth in these situations may take on the parent role or serve as an executive in the family hierarchy and align with the parent who is present against the parent who is absent, thereby creating a new parental subsystem composed of parent and youth rather than of two parents. This new subsystem, engendered by triangulation, places the youth in age-inappropriate roles and positions of power and decision making for the family. In the parentification process, sometimes framed as neglect and maltreatment, the youth's needs also often go unnoticed, unrecognized, and unmet (Hooper, 2007b). This process can be short- or long-term, with empirical and clinical research suggesting that the longer the parentification process is in place, the more deleterious it is for youth and possibly other family members (e.g., parents who attempt to resume their parental role after receiving treatment for substance dependence) (Hooper, 2007b; Jurkovic, 1997, 1998).

Roles and Responsibilities

Parentified youth may take on roles such as parent, confidant, emotional healer, companion, comforter, protector, leader, language broker, and sometimes spouse (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Hooper, 2011; Jurkovic,

1997; Kerig, 2005; Minuchin et al., 1967). In the parentification phenomenon, the overarching role of the parentified youth can be described as that of caregiver – caring for others at the expense of caring for self. Thus, parentified youth typically not only parent their own parents and siblings but also have to parent themselves. The parentification process places youth in a role of power with inappropriate levels of responsibility for themselves and other family members. These roles inside the home often, if not always, rob the parentified youth of developmentally appropriate roles and activities outside of the home (e.g., relationships with peers, leadership roles at school, and involvement in extracurricular activities).

In families where parentification is present, the roles and responsibilities are likely to be complementary, reciprocal, and unevenly distributed among family members – in particular between adults and youth. These responsibilities are often distinguished by the emotional and logistical needs of the family; that is, youth participate in emotional or instrumental caregiving responsibilities directed toward parents, siblings, or both that go unrewarded and unrecognized (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Jurkovic, 1997; Minuchin et al., 1967). The *emotional parentification role* requires participation in the “socioemotional needs of family members and the family as a whole,” according to Jurkovic, Morrell, and Thirkield (1999, p. 94), who described responsibilities that include “serving as a confidant, companion, or mate-like figure, mediating family conflict, and providing nurturance and support”. The *instrumental parentification role* requires participation in the “physical maintenance and sustenance of the family” (Jurkovic et al., p. 94); Jurkovic and colleagues described responsibilities including, “grocery shopping, cooking, housecleaning, and performance of daily duties that involve caring for parents and siblings.” Additionally, researchers have found that parentified youth are often called to contribute to the family's finances and, more recently reported, to serve as language broker for family members (Chao & Otsuki-Clutter 2011; Kam, 2011).

Researchers have conjectured that the frequency and type of parentified roles and responsibilities in which youth engage may differ based on gender (Mika et al., 1987). For example, some have theorized that female youth are more likely to engage in emotionally focused roles and responsibilities than are male youth (Cree, 2003; Garber, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997). Findings from preliminary research have also suggested that gender may affect the outcomes of parentification in conjunction with culture, race, and ethnicity (Fulgini, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). However, research has been slow to support this proposition, given that a majority of the studies on parentification have, until recently, comprised primarily female and White American research participants.

Cross-Cultural Psychology and Parentification

Changes in the psychology of families, as well as changes in neighborhood, community, and societal systems, make the parentification construct more relevant in the twenty-first century than ever before (Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011). Additionally, demographic changes both in America and around the world warrant expanding understanding of parentification in a cross-cultural context. In particular, clarifying how the cultures of these systems have influenced conceptualization, study, and treatment of parentification can inform theoretical and empirical research going forward. Until recently, parentification has been seen as a phenomenon that has only lasting negative effects on youth (Hooper, 2007a, 2007b). Additionally, the generalizability of the results from older, seminal studies was overwhelmingly affected by samples lacking racial and cultural diversity, making it hard to elucidate how culture may influence, exacerbate, and buffer outcomes associated with the parentification construct. Therefore, considering the effects of culture will be critical in the context of future parentification research. Whether parentification and its documented outcomes tend to be similar in collectivistic and individualistic

cultures remains unclear. Studies that focus specifically on race, gender, age, and other cultural factors (e.g., immigrant status, language brokering) are needed (East, 2010; Hooper, DeCoster, et al., 2011; Kam, 2011; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009).

The various conceptualizations and operationalizations (processes, roles, and responsibilities) of parentification offer insight into potential factors affecting the developmental trajectory of parentified youth. Given the importance of cultural and contextual factors, it stands to reason that youth of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds may have different developmental outcomes of parentification as a result of unique, culture-specific factors (see Hooper, DeCoster, White, & Voltz, 2011). However, absent from the empirical literature until recently are the implications of culture for parentification. Cross-cultural research on this topic has been very limited, and preliminary findings have been mixed (East & Weisner, 2009; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Therefore, no real consensus on how culture may interact with parentification has emerged. As in clinical theorizing, empirical results have suggested the possibility of bimodal outcomes; that is, cultural factors and contexts may have a buffering effect as well as an exacerbating effect on outcomes associated with parentification (East, 2010; Hooper, Marotta, & DePuy, 2009; Kam, 2011; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009).

Many key scholars have suggested that parentification is not a singular phenomenon (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997; Kerig, 2005; Minuchin et al., 1967; Winton, 2002). Rather, parentification exists on a continuum, and disparate antecedents and outcomes are likely related to the cultural context and system in which it takes place. Related to this, the culture of the family, region, and society in which parentification takes place ought to be considered and should inform clinical theorizing, research, and prevention, intervention, and treatment. The idea is that although youth embedded in a collectivistic context may experience higher levels of parentification than youth from an individualistic

context, the former group may experience and evince lower levels of negative and deleterious outcomes. For example, Rudy and Halgunseth (2005) found that even though collectivistic group members in their study scored higher on psychological control (a type of parentification) than their individualistic group counterparts, the collectivistic group scored lower on psychopathology and reported fewer negative outcomes for their children. Other study variables were differentially associated based on group membership. Rudy and Halgunseth concluded that child maltreatment (such as parentification) may have different implications for families embedded in collectivistic cultures than for families in individualist cultures.

Few researchers have shed light on the implications of gender for parentification. Certainly, in addition to a purposeful consideration of the relevance of the cultural context (e.g., international communities, collectivist vs. individualist family systems) in which parentification takes place, cultural factors such as gender and race should also be considered. Critical to disentangling the antecedents and outcomes of parentification is consideration of what type of role is prescribed by the parent and how that may be differentiated, if at all, by gender (Cree, 2003; Garber, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997). As mentioned above, parentification is often differentiated and measured based on type of role: instrumental or emotional. Related to these types of roles are hypothesized gendered roles, responsibilities, and outcomes – in other words, hypotheses about how parentification happens and what it might look like based on gender (Cree, 2003; Garber, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997).

In recent years, several researchers have considered the implications of race for parentification (Burton, 2007; Gilford & Reynolds, 2011; McMahon & Watts, 2002; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2010). A recent meta-analysis confirmed the link between retrospective, self-reported parentification and psychopathology. Hooper, DeCoster, White, and Voltz (2011) found a statistically significant link between parentification (measured retrospectively) and eating, anxiety, and personality disorders, and symp-

toms. The researchers found that cultural factors such as race – but not gender – moderated the relation between parentification and psychopathology. Specifically, the strength of the relation between parentification and psychopathology increased in samples with a greater proportion of Black Americans. Empirical and clinical literature in the last decade has begun to consider the implications of racial and other cultural factors on the parentification process, roles, and responsibilities.

Directions for Future Cross-Cultural Research

In the context of the twenty-first century and global communities, the events that precipitate parentification, as well as the meaning of the process, roles, and responsibilities, all need to be considered in clinical, family, community, and cross-cultural psychology research. Recently, scholars have also studied the function of parentification when positive outcomes are evidenced and in the context of high-functioning, positive, diverse family structures (East, 2011; Kam, 2011). Cultural factors (e.g., race, gender, collectivist versus individualist family systems, and international systems) have been proffered as factors that may link parentification and positive outcomes.

A limited amount of empirical cross-cultural research has been directed toward better understanding the antecedents and consequences of parentification. The phenomenon is complex; and these neglected cross-cultural factors may explain, attenuate, or amplify the outcomes associated with parentification (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2005). Moreover, parentification may serve a different function in different cultural and ethnic families and thus have different outcomes across cultural groups.

As societies become more culturally diverse and culturally plural, researchers and clinicians must consider cultural factors as they design and implement the best evidence-based practices. Currently, assessment and treatment practices often pathologize cultural characteristics that are known to put some youth at risk

for parentification (McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson, & Stanwyck, 2004; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001). Research that purposefully includes such cultural factors may help to explain the extent to which cultural variables serve as buffers or moderators of the effects of parentification, as well as to identify those who experience these effects (Fitzgerald et al., 2008). Such research could thereby inform culturally responsive and culturally tailored assessments and treatments in general and culturally tailored family systems assessments and treatments in particular (Hooper & Wallace, 2010; Hooper et al., 2012).

SEE ALSO: Adolescence; Childhoods

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Parenting Essentials: Parental Warmth, Behavioral Control, and Discipline

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The ethnographic record shows that children in all societies of the world experience at least three essential elements of parenting from