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Parentification and Diverse Family Systems

Parentification, whereby children take on responsibilities and fulfill family roles typically assigned to adults, is a ubiquitous phenomenon that occurs in families to varying degrees with both positive and negative consequences. A multiplicity of variables may impact the emergence and maintenance of parentification. Specifically, the empirical literature has long reported on individual-level factors that may foretell parentification. With regard to system-level factors, no other variable informs the development of parentification more than the *family structure.* The historical, accumulated, and nascent literature reveals that diverse family systems engender and maintain the parentification process, roles, relationships, and its related outcomes. For example, from the early writings put forward by Salvador Minuchin and colleagues, the criticality of the family structure was proffered as an active ingredient in the development of parentification. More recently, it appears that there are other family structures and cultural contexts wherein parentification may be commonly evidenced.

In this entry, there are two aims. First, a definition of *parentification* is provided. Second, a brief description of four family systems where parentification may commonly exist is outlined: (1) lower socioeconomic status (SES) families; (2) divorced families; (3) military families, which constitute a more recent development; and (4) U.S. families for whom English is a second language.

The Construct of Parentification

Parentification has been defined as a systems construct with outcomes and processes that happen when families have disturbances in structure, roles, boundaries, power, subsystems, responsibilities, relationships, and mental and physical functioning. It is not necessary to experience disturbances or changes in *all* of these previously mentioned domains for parentification to be evidenced. When parentification does emerge, the caregiving process typically involves a functional or emotional role reversal in which the child takes on adult responsibilities that are inappropriate for his or her developmental stage and age. The instrumental-focused responsibilities may include cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings, and emotional-focused responsibilities may include serving as family peacemaker, confidant, and a secure base and attachment figure. As Minuchin and colleagues have long asserted, typically the parents or caregivers in the family systems where parentification exists abdicate or redirect the power, responsibilities, roles, and instrumental and emotional functions to the child or children in the family system, resulting in a family structure where the children are often in a position of power rather than the parents. Finally, and importantly, Lisa M. Hooper reminds readers in her work that the clinical, theoretical, and empirical literature shows that other terms are also used to refer to parentification and its related process. Those terms include but are not limited to *family caregivers, invisible caregivers, adultification, spousification, role reversal, adultoids, little parent,* and *mature minor.*

Parentification and Lower Socioeconomic Status Families

Linda Burton described how SES (in particular, low SES families or economically disadvantaged families) may relate to, and predict, parentification in the family system. Similar to other family systems described in this chapter, low SES families or disadvantaged families increase the opportunity for parents to depend on their children for emotional and instrumental support. Low SES can and often does push children in these family systems to grow up more quickly than their counterparts in more affluent families. For example, children in these families may be called upon to engage in daily care for their siblings, contribute to the home finances, cook and clean for family members, and forgo engaging in child-appropriate activities. In other words, children are called upon to fill in the gap in family functions—typically performed by adults—because of the dearth of human and material resources in the underresourced family structure. Whether or not parents in these systems abdicate these roles and responsibilities by choice or are forced by necessity to do so, the process is the same: Children are parentified. In addition, it is likely that families who identify as poor or of low SES have other co-occurring stressors and challenges (e.g., lack of support, lack of accessibility and access to medical and mental health care, and high levels of community and interpersonal violence) that also impact the par-

entification process. Taken together, these conditions and experiences (low SES and other stressors) may have an additive effect, especially if they are prolonged and chronic. In order to compensate for the minimal or insufficient financial resources, parents may be forced to spend more time out of the home to generate income for the family. This effort may negatively impact their own and family members' well-being, health, and interpersonal relationships. Like the other family systems described in this entry, the process of parentification in low SES families may not always foretell negative outcomes. For example, prolonged and chronic poverty can implicate different outcomes than those evidenced when poverty is brief and temporary. Thus, the parentified child may not encounter the lifelong deleterious outcomes often documented in the clinical, theoretical, and empirical literature. Many experts agree that the parentification process can result in both benefits and burdens for children in this family system. Although parentification may be evidenced in middle- and upper-class families, a self-identified low SES and its corollaries create a family structure where parentification is significantly and routinely prevalent.

Parentification and Divorced Families

Most professionals understand that divorce changes the structure, organization, roles, and responsibilities in families. In this context, as the parent subsystem breaks down or changes, family rules, roles, and boundaries are affected, creating a context for parentification to emerge. At an individual level, the process of divorce has been shown to relate to psychological distress, depressive symptoms, and feelings of abandonment and low self-worth in family members. Another aftereffect is that children often believe they are the cause of the divorce. Consequently, children's behaviors in the divorced family system can be an attempt to overcompensate for the missing adult-specific roles, responsibilities, and relationships in the newly organized family system. Children may be directed to take on age-inappropriate roles usually reserved for the absent parent. Children may be asked to engage in adultlike responsibilities such as caring for siblings, serve in adultlike roles such as coparenting and being a part of the executive subsystem, and in some cases serve as a confidant to either parent—that is, the parent with whom they live or the parent with whom they visit. Greg Jurkovic and colleagues discussed how individuals growing up in families where divorce was experienced often engage in greater levels of emotional parentification and perceive those responsibilities to be unfair. In their work, they found children also experience greater levels of instrumental parentification but to a lesser extent than emotional parentification. In this family system, where rules, roles, responsibilities, and relationships are lost, split, or disrupted, children may be induced to fill in for the gaps in the family structure resulting in negative outcomes evidenced at individual and system levels. Some literature points to the different effects the parent's gender may have on the parentification process in divorced families. It could be that mothers may be more inclined than fathers to parentify their children. Irrespective of which parent may be involved in the parentification process, divorced families are far more likely than nondivorced families to experience parentification and deleterious outcomes. Because of the significant structural family changes, divorced family systems serve as a risk factor for parentification for many—but not all—families.

Parentification and Military Families

Some experts have suggested that military families may be the model familial and cultural system to foster parentification. Specifically, in military families, deployments require the family structure to expand and contract quickly, unexpectedly, and frequently as parents and other family members leave and return after serving in war. As a result of the deployment process, typical supports, relationships, and tasks are absent; thus, family members must clarify who will fill the roles and carry out the duties of the members who have left for war. Consequently, family members (parent and children) are called upon to redefine and reconfigure the boundaries, structure, alliances, and power in the family system each time a family member exits and enters the family. There is no doubt that the departures, prolonged absences, and expected and unexpected

returns can negatively impact the family system and individual family members. Military-impacted family systems paradoxically experience the most difficult adjustments when the parent returns from deployment. The literature suggests that the ecology in which the family system is embedded also influences coping at the individual and family levels. For example, it could be that the family resides in a community that is against war or a nonmilitary community and then creates a scenario in which the family feels isolated and disconnected from the community and related resources, forcing family members to depend only on one another for all of their needs. For children, this military-impacted system becomes an ideal context for parentification to take place. As previously mentioned, this disruption is equally problematic when the parent returns. For example, during the parent's absence, family members—including children—may develop new routines; experience increased coherence among the remaining family members; and report feelings of independence, self-efficacy, and competency as they are invited or forced to take on new roles and responsibilities in the family. Even though military families experience many of the same challenges evinced in nonmilitary families, military families face unique challenges that can result in children taking on roles, responsibilities, and relationships usually reserved for adults.

Parentification and English-as-a-Second-Language Families

As some experts have described, when English is the second language of family members, a scenario may be created wherein parents rely on their children to serve in adultlike roles such as language and cultural brokers where they translate words and customs. Specifically, Jennifer Kam describes how the strain of parents not knowing the English language and/or learning the English language at slower rates than their children can engender a power differential. Thus, the children in the family can be exposed to complex interactions with family members, and age-inappropriate interactions with people who are not family members, which may be burdensome and problematic. Specifically, children may be called upon to be involved in adultlike scenarios (translating for and attending events not appropriate for children) and consequently experience a role reversal with their parents. These mediating, negotiating, and translating roles and responsibilities that are evidenced when children are called upon to serve in the role of language broker place children in a position of power; expose children to complex situations (e.g., medical, legal, and child and family protection issues); and often, but not always, emotionally and instrumentally overwhelm children. Importantly, children may not be prepared to manage and have access to these adult difficulties, transactions, and experiences. Children who are exposed to these scenarios may feel insecure, unstable, and overly distressed. Like the other family systems described in this entry, the boundaries are often blurred when children are encouraged to serve as the translator for family members (i.e., language or cultural brokers). Although limited and recent, the accumulated literature on language brokering—a form of parentification—can have both positive and negative effects on the child's overall well-being (e.g., self-efficacy, feelings of competency, and positive intra- and interpersonal factors). There is no doubt that parent–child relationships may be impacted by language brokering. Of significance, the impact of language brokering on children and the parent–child relationship remains unclear. Research has shown (similar to parentification in other family systems) the aftereffects of language brokering can be both beneficial and burdensome. Some families have attempted to minimize the implications of language brokering and suggest it is just another "household chore" with no or minimal negative consequences. What does appear to be clear is that in a family structure when English is the second language, parentification can emerge.

Why Parentification Matters

Parentification is an important family systems construct because it often—but not always—places family members at risk for pernicious outcomes across the life span. The diverse family systems reviewed are in

some ways similar because they all represent periods where the family is often in some distress. Parental loss (i.e., parenting alone) and the delegation of roles, responsibilities, and relationships typically carried out by adult family members but abdicated to child and adolescent family members places most—if not all—family members in a vulnerable position. Family members often miss out on receiving developmentally and age-appropriate emotional, physical, and psychological support needed to function well. Researchers who investigate the complex family systems from which parentification may emerge can lead to important clinical prevention, intervention, and treatment efforts. Practitioners and educators may also benefit from understanding the historical and accumulated knowledge base about parentification. Going forward, new family configurations that promote parentification or excessive family caregiving need to be explored empirically so that cultural and ecological considerations may inform why parentification remains a seminal family systems construct and *still* matters.

In all of these diverse family systems, an adult's ability to parent effectively may be compromised, and negative outcomes may be observed. Parents may be inclined to call upon their children to fill in the gaps and offer support in decision-making and other adultlike tasks during times of stress (e.g., military deployment; economic instability; inability to communicate in English; redefining of roles, responsibilities, relationships, and boundaries; newly divorced family system). In all of these diverse family systems, the adult family members are required to determine who will fill the needed family role and consider a refinement or adjustment in parent–child relationships. Often, the child is called upon to fill the needed role irrespective of its appropriateness. A constant among many of these diverse family systems is the fact that adults are often required to parent alone (e.g., low SES families, divorced families, and military families). These family configurations or structures may result in a lack of stability in the home, with parents being unavailable, experiencing increased stressors, and in need of support themselves. Also, all of these family systems require the family to contract (and expand) at different times. Thus, this regrouping process could be problematic and dysfunctional in some families, producing long-lasting effects for children and the adults they become.

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See also Active Parenting; Diversity; Individual Family Culture; Multicultural Counseling Competence; Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.); Parenting Styles

Further Readings

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