The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification

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Attachment theory and family systems theory, taken together, are proffered as a potential framework to understand the adverse effects of parentification. Attachment theory helps clarify the process of parentification as it involves the relationship between child and parent and/or caregiver. Family systems theory gives clarity to the context (i.e., the family system) in which parentification takes place. Internal working models are discussed as the mechanism through which meaning making about the parentification process happens and thereby informs the opportunity for positive and negative outcomes in adulthood. The proposed framework allows for a potentially broader view of this ubiquitous phenomenon parentification.

Keywords: attachment theory; child maltreatment; family systems theory; parentification

PARENTIFICATION

More than 3 million children suffer from some form of maltreatment every year. Neglect is the leading type of child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Parentification—when a child takes on roles and responsibilities traditionally reserved for adults—can be, and often is, a form of child neglect. Parentification traditionally interrupts or interferes with childhood development, resulting in poor relationships, attachment issues, and poor differentiation of self from family of origin in childhood and later in adulthood (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, Morrell, & Casey, 2001; Robinson, 1999; West & Keller, 1991).

GENERAL DEFINITIONS OF *PARENTIFICATION*

Among family systems researchers, no clear agreement exists regarding the definition of *parentification* (Chase,

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1999; Jurkovic, Jesse, & Goglia, 1991). Different theoretical orientations (i.e., structural, Bowenian, or contextual) emphasize different elements of parentification (e.g., behaviors, emotions, or both). However, some universal elements have been included in most models of parentification: the assumptions of a parental role by the child, role reversal, and a disturbance in generational boundaries (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1998; Karpel, 1976; Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967). Although Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) and Minuchin (1974) have been most widely identified as the originators of the concept, Chase (1999) provided a broad definition that serves as a good starting point for better understanding this construct:

> Despite numerous descriptions of theories, concepts, and definitions, it is generally believed that parentification in the family entails a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for logistical or emotional need of the parent. (p. 5)

Minuchin et al. (1967) stated that in parentification, "the parent(s) relinquishes executive functions by delegation of instrumental roles to a parental child or by total abandonment of the family psychologically and/or physically" (p. 223). They asserted that children who experience parentification can perform a range of duties: from responding to emotional needs of parent or siblings (including issues such as *low self-esteem*) or acting as the peacemaker for the family (i.e., emotional parentification) to duties such as *preparing meals, doing household chores,* and *handling financial matters* (i.e., instrumental parentification).

Emotional Parentification

Emotional parentification, most theorists have contended, is usually not an adaptive solution to family anxiety and is almost always destructive for the child and for the

adult he or she becomes (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Chase, 1999; Karpel, 1976; Minuchin et al., 1967). The parentified child in this case attempts to fill an emotional or psychological void in the family for the parent and sometimes for the siblings—often becoming the parent's confidant and sole support. An ongoing, indefinite period of emotional parentification is usually detrimental to children's development, often resulting in their suppression of their own needs to meet the needs of their parents and siblings, at the expense of their own development, and ultimately disrupting their future functioning and ability to form adult attachment relationships. Consequently, most research has focused on negative outcomes associated with parentification (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Earley & Cushway, 2002; Garbarino, 1977; Jurkovic et al., 2001).

Instrumental Parentification

Instrumental parentification has been suggested to be the less deleterious of the two types. Family systems theorists (Bowen, 1978; Jurkovic & Casey, 2000; Minuchin et al., 1967) have maintained that in large families the parentified child often reduces family anxiety by relieving the parent of some of the parental responsibility identified in the family system. In turn, taking on a role and performing instrumental tasks engenders in the parentified child feelings of accomplishment and contribution, while lessening the stress for the parent. However, if these added tasks or duties, such as *cooking, cleaning, shopping,* and *caring for siblings*, are not recognized or go on indefinitely, negative outcomes are likely to result (Jurkovic, 1997).

The effects of childhood parentification can be long lasting, multigenerational, and deleterious, presenting during the course of a lifetime. Childhood parentification can produce negative consequences that affect not only the individual but also the family, spouses, and possibly the children of adults who were parentified (Valleau, Bergner, & Horton, 1995).

For young adults, parentification can impede "normal" development related to relationship building, personality formation (Jones & Wells, 1996), and other developmentally critical processes. Domains such as *forming relationships, separating from the family of origin, participating in age-appropriate behaviors* (Olson & Gariti, 1993), *engaging in academic pursuits* (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998), and *developing self-esteem* can all be affected. Other aftereffects may include mental illness in general, and depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders (Chase et al., 1998) in particular. The process of childhood parentification can, in the adults those children become, produce a fear of having children and/or lead to the transmission of parentification across many generations (Valleau et al., 1995).

It has yet to be established if parentification is associated with positive outcomes rather than negative outcomes, which are often examined exclusively in the research and clinical literature (see Barnett & Parker, 1998; Earley & Cushway, 2002; Garbarino, 1977; Jurkovic et al., 2001). Attachment theory may provide theorists, researchers, and clinicians with a model that allows for a broader view of outcomes associated with parentification—the focus of this review.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

This article discusses the extent to which attachment theory may allow for a process through which traditionally negative childhood experiences such as *parentification* may allow for variation in present adult functioning. Attachment theory is a model advanced by the collaborative efforts of Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1977, 1980) and Ainsworth (1989; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In their collaborative efforts, Bowlby and Ainsworth et al. have attempted to develop a theory to explicate the functional and healthy lifelong development grounded in the quality of the parental (usually maternal) attachment relationship (Bretherton, 1995).

The theoretical underpinnings of Bowlby's work were developed in his three-volume series *Attachment and Loss*, exploring attachment, separation, and loss. In this series, Bowlby clearly delineated the varied trajectories that the child may experience as a result of separation, deprivation, and loss. Although most of Bowlby's training was psychoanalytic, Bowlby argued that the underlying premise of psychoanalysis is inadequate for explaining psychopathology or the impact of adverse events (e.g., family trauma) on social and emotional development of the child. Also evident in his early writings, and of particular import for parentified children and adults, is Bowlby's early hypothesis identifying the intergenerational transmission of attachment relationships. Bowlby hypothesized that future security, well-being, and positive relationships in adulthood are often contingent on the secure mother–infant relationship (secure base and bond) and the internal working models experienced and produced during infancy and childhood. Furthermore, if maternal deprivation, loss, or separation occur, the outcome can be devastating for the child.

Ainsworth's (1989; Ainsworth et al., 1978) contributions were also significant in moving attachment theory forward. Ainsworth has been credited with providing empirical support for Bowlby's attachment theory and extending the theory. Attachment theory and its associated patterns gained empirical support after Ainsworth created an objective method (i.e., Strange Situation, Ainsworth et al., 1978) to observe and measure attachment in infants. In addition to her contribution to the methodology of attachment, as a result of her early research conducted in Baltimore, she has been credited with extending the conceptualization of attachment theory and its associated classifications: secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized (Ainsworth, 1989; Lopez, 1995).

INTERNAL WORKING MODELS

Internal working models may be the attachment theory mechanism through which parentified children can experience
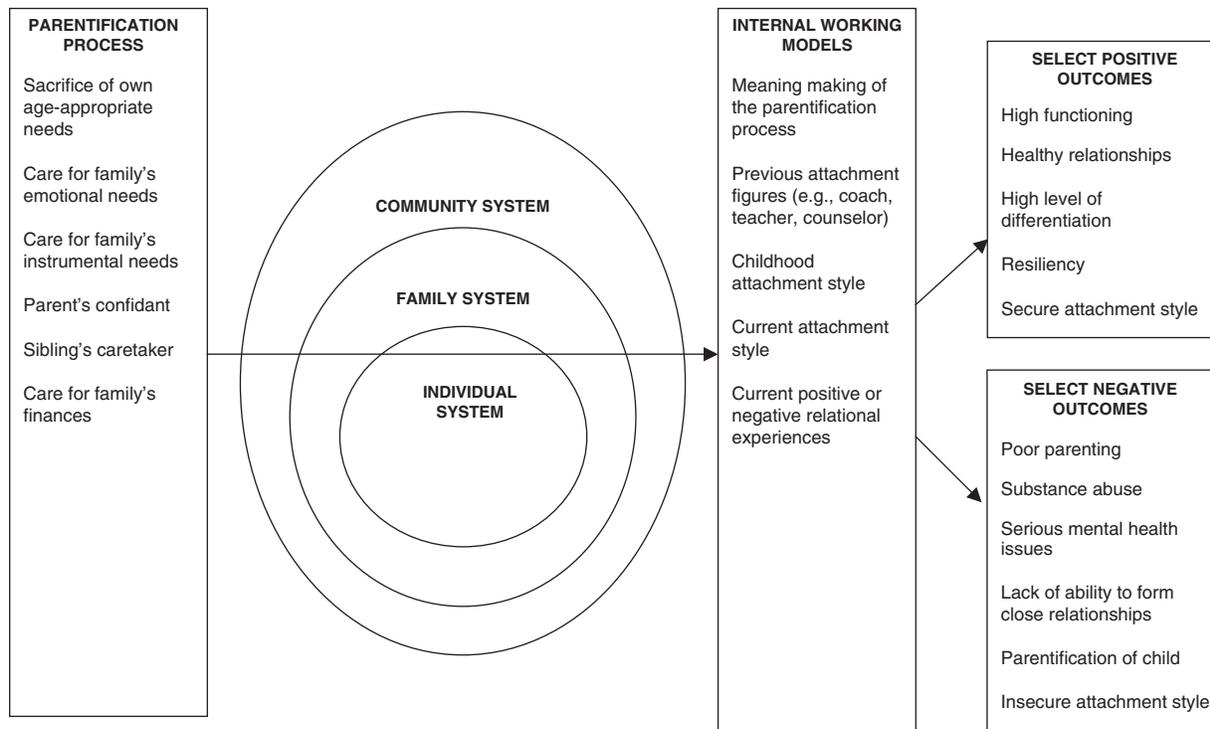
FIGURE 1:   Proposed Theoretical Framework for Examining Various Outcomes of Parentification

divergent outcomes—positive and negative—in adulthood (see Figure 1). A central component of attachment theory is the method by which the child internalizes working models of the attachment figure and self. These models establish the boundaries and rules by which individuals view themselves and others, including behaviors, feelings, and thoughts. Internal working models are formed as a result of attachments and their associated experiences in childhood, and they serve at least three purposes: (a) help one interpret the meaning of other's behavior, (b) help one make predictions about future behaviors, and (c) organize self and others' responses (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). These working models are often carried into and maintained in adulthood. However, Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, and Alhersheim (2000) have long discussed that attachment style and internal working models can be continuous and discontinuous; thus, for some persons, the style and models adopted in childhood can be consistent and less malleable, or they can change and shift as new experiences are transacted and integrated during adulthood. Stated another way, the child who grows up in a home that does not allow for experiencing a secure base—and who thus forms an insecure attachment to mother and develops an internal working model that depicts self as bad and other as bad (Waters et al., 2000)—will not necessarily keep or maintain that same attachment style and schema throughout adulthood. Waters and colleagues suggested, "Attachment internal working models remain open to revision in light of real experiences" (p. 687).

In fact, even Bowlby (1977) suggested that the adult attachment style—informed by the childhood attachment style—is able to shift and change as new experiences and relationships are integrated into the internal working models that have been formed and used in childhood. Kobak and Hazan (1991) proposed that internal working models are not simply determined by past relationships and interactions but also function in a reciprocal process with current relationships. However, research has supported the idea that childhood internal working models set up an expectation that future relationships will be similar to early emotional relationships and will ultimately result in the same predictable response patterns. So the child who experiences the insecure attachment style in childhood may grow into an adult who repeats these attachment styles with his or her partner and children.

Internal Working Models and Parentification

Attachment theory offers insight into how the phenomenon of parentification may co-occur with low and high functioning (see Figure 1). Stated another way, attachment theory may help explain how adults who were parentified as children may be high functioning in adulthood and may avoid repeating the same behaviors with their children. Furthermore, this developmental cognitive model facilitates the study of parentification across the lifespan (Byng-Hall, 2002).

As a consequence of acting as caretaker to their parents and siblings while having to raise themselves, parentified children may form skewed relationships and poor functioning

within the family and the outside world (Chase, 1999). In adulthood, this may set up a pattern that could contribute to the multigenerational transmission of parentification. Important linkages may be uncovered by considering the meaning making (i.e., development of internal working models) that the adult carries out regarding the parentification process (Byng-Hall, 2002). In support of this exploration, Jurkovic (1997) concurred that parentification can have long-term effects on development, attachment, and interaction patterns between the child and the parent that are also evidenced later in adult relationships. Thus, attachment theory offers a germane perspective on parentification.

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY OF ATTACHMENT STYLES

Attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding the impact of neglect and the potential for negative and positive outcomes (Marotta, 2002). Bowlby (1988), in his descriptions of the function of attachment behaviors, clearly articulated the criticalness of the attachment behavior to development and to current and future functioning. Bowlby contended that attachment behaviors serve to protect the young from danger. This theory proposed that the infant's relationship with the primary caregiver is the prototype for subsequent relationships. According to Bowlby (1973), attachment style that develops in the infant–caregiver relationship influences future relationships. These early experiences with a primary caregiver become psychologically internalized as a mental representation or internal working model of relationships. Furthermore, by the time the person reaches adolescence, early patterns or interaction with attachment figures become organized into generalized interactional styles that are driven by the person's internal working model.

Researchers have explored adults' current internal working models as related to childhood attachments (Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994). The findings suggest that those who experience poor parenting and are classified as insecurely attached are not fated to follow this interaction style forever. In other words, researchers have admitted readily the feasibility of an "earned secure" attachment style later in development, given the right conditions (Pearson et al., 1994). The extent of one's resilience in the face of stressful life events is determined significantly by the attachment style developed during childhood. Attachment classifications tend to be stable over time (Svanberg, 1998). However, more recently, researchers and attachment theorists using the Strange Situation test (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984) to direct their studies have recognized that internal working models may become updated and modified by new experiences.

Attachment theorists and researchers understand that current adult attachment style classifications are derived from the way the person describes and currently interprets his or her childhood experiences. Consequently, though the linkage is not deterministic per se, the linkage and continuity between child and adult attachment styles are undeniable (see Belsky, 1993; Bowlby, 1977; Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996; Karen, 1990; Lopez & Brennan, 2000; Waters et al., 2000).

In the family where maltreatment occurs, however, the parent is often unresponsive to the cues demonstrated by the child—thus, when the child is anxious, the parent often does not serve as a secure base (Bowlby, 1988). In turn, the child's feelings of anxiety and distress are increased, exacerbated, and continually experienced because of the parent's suboptimal behavior or neglect (Gold, 2001). In this case, the environment and the parent (attachment figure) serve as the force that inhibits the secure base and the attachment process (Liotti, 1999). This inhibition portends an internal working model for the child: specifically, that others are not available or cannot be trusted to respond, help, and comfort during times of distress. And in some cases of severe abuse, the internal working model becomes "I am not worthy of comfort and support" (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Ultimately, the child may adopt a defensive strategy to gain proximity to the parent in an attempt to have some attachment, albeit an insecure attachment (Marotta, 2003). Defensive strategies demonstrated by the child may be to avoid, show indifference toward, or increase his or her efforts to gain access to the parent figure. In sum, attachment theory, a lifespan perspective, informs how a person has dealt or is dealing with the past experiences that have relevance to the present.

The next section considers the context in which the parentification process takes place. A discussion regarding the utility of the convergence of attachment theory and family systems theory is considered given that attachment behavior is frequently activated and carried out in the presence of family members (Akister, 1998; Alexander, 2003; Byng-Hall, 2002; Marotta, 2003).

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Culture and idiosyncratic family configurations play a significant role in neglect, such as *parentification*; that is, most neglect occurs in the family context (see Figure 1); and because the family system is ever changing, the specific environment where neglect is evident needs to be contextualized so that it may be adequately explored. For example, some family systems may engender an inappropriate overlap in subsystems, with members participating in roles that are traditionally reserved for other members (e.g., parent in childlike roles, and children in parental roles)—a phenomenon that facilitates parentification (Minuchin, 1974). Furthermore, in these families, boundaries can often be seen as distorted, rigid, or nonexistent. Minuchin et al. (1967) labeled this family an "enmeshed family"—that is, a family in which one member becomes overly involved with or even exploitative of members of a system at different hierarchical levels.

Family systems theory also helps to inform researchers and clinicians about factors that influence child maltreatment.

For example, among parents, factors such as *parental psychopathology, alcohol and substance abuse and dependence, marital distress, psychiatric illness,* and *mental health problems* all potentially contribute to child maltreatment (Chase, 1999). These phenomena in turn play a crucial role in parents' inability to provide adequate nurturing, bonding, and care, thereby affecting attachment (West & Keller, 1991). Consequently, the parent is unable to provide a secure base for the child (Bowlby, 1988). Suboptimal parental behavior may also indirectly foster family disorganization and chaos (Marotta, 2003). The parent may have or may seek out few resources outside of or available to the family system.

From the child's perspective, factors such as *previous psychopathology, history of emotional deprivation, developmental stage at the time of the neglect, level of intelligence,* and *level of self-esteem* contribute to the poor attachment by inhibiting reciprocal behavior required to form attachments (Gold, 2001). Whether a child experiences maltreatment as a trauma may be related to how the family and significant others in social systems react when the maltreatment is disclosed (Marotta, 2003). These diverse reactions and supports, or lack thereof, are often what differentiate the magnitude of the outcomes of child maltreatment. In addition, individual-level factors (e.g., physiology, personality, internal working models, and temperament) likely contribute to how maltreatment, such as *parentification*, is perceived as well.

Family systems theory can contribute to attachment theory to create the best theoretical model to explore the attachment and relational processes pertaining to the individual's and family member's behavior transacted in the family environment where parentification is evidenced (Alexander, 2003; Byng-Hall, 2002; Marotta, 2003).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING

The effects of childhood attachments, the family environment, and family roles (such as emotional and instrumental parentification) on adult functioning cannot be overstated (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Erickson & Egeland, 1996; Minuchin et al., 1967; Morris & Gould, 1963).

In treatment from a family systems perspective, when treating families or individual family members, family therapists must differentiate constructive behaviors from destructive behaviors often evidenced in the family system where parentification takes place. Overzealousness on the part of therapists, educators, and other clinicians who work and interact with the family could lead to unintended negative consequences if roles and responsibilities are stripped from children, for example, without examining the implications related to culture and early competence (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Byng-Hall, 2002; Earley & Cushway, 2002). Likewise, destructive behaviors contributing to the inverted hierarchy among family members should be identified and in some

cases reframed so that the family system can restabilize and reestablish age-appropriate roles among family members.

Thus, an ability to understand the uniqueness of each family and the function of the behaviors, roles, and processes of each family should facilitate the best practices for each family. Finally, critical to the abatement of destructive parentification across generations, the therapist should place emphasis on—in addition to fostering a therapeutic relationship, joining, rapport building, and data gathering—an incorporation and integration of the family's strengths and weaknesses at the micro, macro, and exo-system levels (Cicchetti, Toth, & Rogosch, 2000; Marotta, 2002; Moos, 2002).

Integrating an attachment theory model into clinical practice can help clinicians to identify children and family systems that may be at risk for parentification. Finally, recent literature has suggested that an integration of family systems and attachment theories could create an effective therapeutic model (Alexander, 1992, 2003; Byng-Hall, 1995, 2002; Marotta, 2003) that might foster the best therapeutic practices when working with individuals who have been parentified.

CONCLUSIONS

A balanced conceptual framework for understanding the varying outcomes associated with parentification has been absent from the literature. Previous studies have readily identified and measured parentification and its negative outcomes; however, these same studies have also identified the great need for further exploration of parentification and its possible alternative aftereffects (Alexander, 1992; Anderson, 1999; Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997, 1998).

Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1977, 1980) attachment theory, which examines the critical importance of the parent–child dyad, helps to explain the effect that early relationships in the family of origin between the parent and the child have on current behavior. The attachment behaviors and relationship between the parent and child also help to predict future attachment behavior, evidenced in adult relational patterns, interpersonal style, and social behavior. The interaction between the child and the parent teaches the child about self and others, an understanding that he or she later incorporates into internal working models used to understand and make meaning of future relationships and ways of interacting.

This article discussed the extent to which attachment theory in conjunction with family systems theory can aid theoreticians, clinicians, and researchers' understanding of divergent outcomes evidenced among adults who experience parentification during childhood. Attachment theory posits that future relationships and functioning are grounded in the mental representations and attachment relationships formed during childhood years, usually with the mother figure. Consequently, the potential for repetition or continuation of an insecure attachment style in adulthood after experiences of insecure attachment in childhood is great. Furthermore, in cases of maltreatment and neglect, this implicit poor environment only

exacerbates the potential inimical outcomes and future risks for adult functioning. On the other hand, through the malleability of internal working models and the process of meaning making, different attachment styles and levels of functioning may emerge in adulthood. It is important to note that attachment theory informs our understanding of outcomes among victims of neglect as well as our understanding of diverse adaptations to family trauma.

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