

The Phenomenon of Parentification: Narratives from urban India

Abstract

This study problematizes the parent-child relationship in India, which is often considered sacrosanct, and has thus been left substantially unexamined in research. The idea that parents can emotionally harm their children is neither a popular notion, nor well received. Families are often perceived to be governed by laws of obedience and duty. It is therefore hard for persons from such cultural contexts to identify and accept that their emotional hurts in childhood might be caused by the very agents who are duty bound to protect them, namely, their parents. This study investigates the idea that parents can indeed hurt their children emotionally in ways that have lasting deleterious effects on the adult. One little noticed aberration of this nature occurs when parents lean too often and too heavily on their child for support, attention, protection and care. Such a reliance takes a toll on the child since it is for the benefit of the parent and sometimes by extension, even the family. This phenomenon is known in the literature as parentification. Widely understood as role-reversal between parent and child globally, research on parentification or related concepts is scant in India. This thesis opens up inquiry into the lives of Indian adults who might identify as parentified. It aims to understand, through a detailed analysis of the first-hand narratives of five female participants, how their childhood experiences led them to be the people, partners and parents they are today. The goal is to derive a contextually sensitive definition and description of parentification based on narratives from India. Multiple interviews were conducted with the participants, who are from middle class homes in urban Indian cities, who self-selected into the current research. The analysis focused on the participants' experiences over their life course and their own meaning making processes in answering the question: 'am I parentified?' The analysis yielded paired concepts of the parentified child and parentified adult which were

used to indicate the narrative trajectory of the participants. The parentified children's homes were fraught with distress and violence and they experienced helplessness, anxiety, fear and sadness. They felt guilty, burdened and invisible in being pitted against large problems. With age and experience, however, they became experts at 'fixing', gaining 'mastery' over their environments. As parentified adults, they continued to be 'good' caregivers and fixers in their personal and professional lives. Eventually, they experienced an emotional exhaustion which led to a necessary reexamination of their inherited narratives and life stories. They consequently took several steps towards recognizing and healing their past hurt and present repercussions. The experience and expression of parentification is further influenced by the changing identities of women in modern society and the newly available lexicon of psychology to talk about themselves. With progressive analysis, it became clear that the idea of role-reversal was not a sufficient concept to encapsulate their experiences. Instead, in this thesis, parentification was defined as a grave imbalance of care between the parent and child. Three necessary conditions and twelve determinants were additionally noted. The benefits of using of the language of care are discussed. The study ends by discussing directions for future research in the field of parentification.