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The Complex Dynamics of Childhood Parentification.
An Overview of Theory and Research

1. Introduction

Parentification is a phenomenon or construct, to which the community of experts is paying increasingly more attention. When reviewing recent scientific literature, we encounter a wide range of different definitions of parentification, only to find out that the boundaries of the definition of this phenomenon are not yet quite clear. Apart from the term 'parentification', other related terms are often used in the literature as well, for example

- adultification[1],
- spousification[2],

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[1]   L. Burton, *Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model*, »Family Relations« 56 (2007), p. 329–345.

[2]   D. Jacobvitz, S. Riggs, E. Johnson, *Cross – Sex and Same – Sex Family Alliances*, in: N. D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 34–55.

- role reversal[3],
- boundary dissolution[4],
- covert incest[5],
- emotional incest[6],
- little parents[7], and
- young carers[8].

Parentification can basically be defined as a phenomenon or process in which a child takes care of the emotional and/or logistic needs of his parents or the whole family, and is forced to give up his own needs. The results of empirical research support the distinction between instrumental and emotional parentification. In instrumental parentification, the child assumes the responsibility for specific functional chores necessary for the physical survival of the family, such as: care for younger siblings, grocery shopping, cooking, nursing a parent who is ill or handicapped, and contributing to family budget. Emotional parentification refers to satisfying the emotional and social needs of the parents or of the entire family system by the child. In this context, the child can act as a trustee, a substitute spouse, or a mediator between quarrelling parents. In literature, the experience of emotional parentification is considered much more damaging than that of instrumental parentification: some authors even compare it with emotional neglect and point out that the experience of emotional parentification in childhood should be considered as a traumatic experience that has far-reaching consequences with which the parentified individual is faced in adulthood.[9] Among the many negative consequences of parentification, the

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[3]   J. Macfie, N.L. McElwain, R.M. Houts, M.J. Cox, *Intergenerational transmission of role reversal between parent and child: Dyadic and family systems internal working models*, »Attachment & Human Development« 7 (2005) 1, p. 51–65.

[4]   P.K. Kerig, *Revisiting the Construct of Boundary Dissolution: A Multidimensional Perspective*, »Journal of Emotional Abuse« 5 (2005), p. 5–42.

[5]   K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan.

[6]   P. Love, J. Robinson, 1990. *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland 1990, Bantam Books.

[7]   J. Byng-Hall, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 30 (2008), p. 147–162.

[8]   J. Aldridge, S. Becker, *Children who care: Inside the world of young carers*, Loughborough 1993, Department of Social Science, Loughborough University.

[9]   L.M. Hooper, *Defining and understanding Parentification*, »The Alabama Counseling Association Journal« 34 (2008) 1, p. 34–43.

literature also mentions problems and fears of intimate relationships with other people.[10]

In this paper, we wish to present the existing theories and results of empirical research in the field of parentification and its consequences on the individual's life. First of all, we focus on different definitions of parentification, to continue with a comprehensive overview of accessible professional literature and the results of empirical research. In this regard, we pay special attention to the risk factors and causes of the parentification phenomenon and its consequences, with particular interest in the consequences of parentification for adult intimate relationships.

2. Defining and understanding parentification

In their work "Families of the Slums", Minuchin et al.[11] presented the term "parental child" for the first time. A group of experts came to the conclusion that in families of lower economic status, in the absence of parents, parental responsibilities and tasks are often taken over by the eldest child. According to Minuchin, the transfer of parental power or authority to the child is a natural adaptation process, characteristic of large families, single-parent families and families where both parents are often absent due to their jobs. According to his interpretation, such a family system can function quite efficiently, with the parental child taking care of younger siblings, making him more responsible, more competent and autonomous than his peers.[12] For Minuchin, role reversal between parents and children is not questionable insofar as tasks and responsibilities are fairly distributed among all children according to their abilities. It is very important for children to have all the necessary support from their parents and receive recognition for their

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[10]   T. Dayton, *Trauma and Addiction: Ending the Cycle of Pain through Emotional Literacy*, Derfield Beach 2000, Health Communicationc Inc.; P. Love, J. Robinson, 1990. *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*, New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland 1990, Bantam Books.

[11]   S. Minuchin, B. Montalvo, B.G. Guerney, B. Rosman, F. Schumer, *Families of the slums: An exploration of their structure and treatment*, New York 1976, Basic Books.

[12]   S. Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1974, Harvard University Press, p. 97–98.

contribution to the family.[13] According to the concept of parentification by Minuchin et al.,[14] we can speak of parentification when one or both parents give up their executive role within the family. They can do this by transferring their parental responsibilities to the parental child or by leaving the family completely, physically or psychologically.[15] The concept of child parentification by Minuchin et al.[16] emphasizes, in particular, the child's functional tasks aimed at ensuring the survival and well-being of the family (care for younger siblings, preparation of meals, housework, contributing to family income, etc.). The parental child is understood in this concept as a rearrangement of the structure of family subsystems, in which certain duties and, consequently, the authority are transferred from the parental subsystem to the child subsystem.[17]

A step forward in the research and understanding of the phenomenon of parentification was made by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark[18], who were first to introduce the term "parentification". They defined parentification as an individual's distorted perception of a relationship in which he attributes the role of a parent to his spouse or child. In their understanding, parentification is a very important aspect in most human relationships.[19] While the concept by Minuchin et al. focuses solely on the functional rearrangement of subsystems within a family, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, with their model of parentification, add new "covert", i.e. subconscious, aspects of interpersonal relationships dynamics. They see parentification not only as functional

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[13]   N.D. Chase, 1999 *Parentification: An Overview of Theory, Research and Societal Issues*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 8.

[14]   S. Minuchin, B. Montalvo, B.G. Guerney, B. Rosman, F. Schumer, *Families of the slums: An exploration of their structure and treatment*, New York 1976, Basic Books.

[15]   L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 217.

[16]   S. Minuchin, B. Montalvo, B.G. Guerney, B. Rosman, F. Schumer, *Families of the slums: An exploration of their structure and treatment*, New York 1976, Basic Books.

[17]   N.D. Chase, 1999 *Parentification: An Overview of Theory, Research and Societal Issues*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 9.

[18]   I. Boszormenyi-Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity In Intergenerational Family Therapy*. London, New York 1973, Routledge.

[19]   I. Boszormenyi-Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity In Intergenerational Family Therapy*. London, New York 1973, Routledge, p. 151.

role reversal, but also within the context of an individual's internalized expectations and models of entering interpersonal relationships.[20]

The authors point out that the equilibrium of intergenerational boundaries within a family system is an important factor of its health. In a healthy family system, parents are aware of the child's dependency and need for care, protection and guidance. They are the child's source of guidance and support. Simultaneously, in these authors' opinion, it is entirely natural that parents, in their need for trust, understanding and support, occasionally turn to the child who gladly responds to their needs because he is thankful for all their care and support. In this process, which they name "occasional parentification", they see a positive contribution to the child's development and the feeling of responsibility. Without that, the child cannot internalize positive parental roles and identify with them in adulthood. Occasional parentification differs from "pathological parentification" which occurs when role reversal becomes a rule, not only occasional practice. In a family with pathological parentification, the child is bereaved of the right "to be a child."[21] The child is permanently at the disposition of the emotionally absent parent, which in some children leads to the state of chronic stress and anxiety.[22]

If we only focus on the parent-child relationship, the concept of parentification by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark can be understood as processes in families in which children take on roles or responsibilities that are not suitable for their developmental stages.[23] In this process, parents, explicitly or implicitly, create an environment which encourages behaviours in their children by means of which these children help maintain the equilibrium of one or both parents or the family system as a whole. Obligations accepted

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[20]   I. Boszormenyi-Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity In Intergenerational Family Therapy*. London, New York 1973, Routledge, p. 154.

[21]   I. Boszormenyi-Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity In Intergenerational Family Therapy*. London, New York 1973, Routledge, p. 151.

[22]   L.M. Hooper, *Expanding the Discussion Regarding Parentification and Its Varied Outcomes: Implications for Mental Health Research and Practice*, »Journal of Mental Health Counseling« 29 (2007) 4, p. 324.

[23]   H. Van Parys, A. Bonnewyn, A. Hooghe, J. De Mol, P. Rober, *Toward understanding the child's experience in the Process of Paretnification: Young adult's reflections on growing up with a depressed parent*, »Journal of Marital and Family Therapy« 41 (2015) 4, p. 523.

by parental children usually include behaviours that give the parent the emotional support he or she did not get as a child.[24]

According to Baker-Miller and Stiver, parentification is expressed in the lack of reciprocity between parent and child, whereby the parent is unable to respond to the child's needs. In this case, the child is forced to take on roles which, in one way or another, respond to the needs of the parents, but in return, he does not receive any recognition. In his desire that parents will also take care of him, the child renounces his own needs, focusing on his parents. It is important to know that parental children do not take care of their parents and/or siblings out of sheer love, but primarily because they fear their parents' anger or because they desperately try to normalize the family atmosphere.[25]

Jurkovic notes that it is difficult to draw clear demarcation lines and precisely define parentification.[26]His concept of parentificationis based on nine parameters:[27]

- the obvious presence of protective, caretaking and responsible behaviour in the child
- the content of the child's obligations within his parentified role in the family
- the extent and duration of the child's obligations within his parentified role in the family
- the object of the child's care
- the child's age
- the degree to which the child's caretaking role is internalized and becomes part of his personality (internalization)

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[24]   L.M. Hooper, *Expanding the Discussion Regarding Parentification and Its Varied Outcomes: Implications for Mental Health Research and Practice*, »Journal of Mental Health Counseling« 29 (2007) 4, p. 324.

[25]   J. Baker-Miller, I.P. Stiver, *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life*, Boston 1997, Beacon Press; T. Dayton, *Trauma and Addiction: Ending the Cycle of Pain through Emotional Literacy*, Derfield Beach 2000, Health Communicationc Inc., p. 63.

[26]   G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge.

[27]   G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge p. 7–11; G.J. Jurkovic, R. Morrell, A. Thirkield, *Assessing Childhood Parentification: Guidelines for Researchers and Clinicians*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 93–96.

- family boundaries
- the legitimacy of parentification in the social environment
- the ethics and fairness of the relationship between the child and his caregivers.

Based on these nine parameters, Jurkovic defines four types of parentification. The first type, "destructive parentification," refers to children or adolescents with apparent excessive and developmentally inappropriate emotional and/or functional caretaking obligations. Their obligations obviously go beyond family boundaries, are not either culturally conditioned, fairly shared or supervised by parents, and become the primary source of the child's identification.[28]

The second type, "adaptive parentification", also refers to children or adolescents with obviously excessive and developmentally inadequate emotional and/or functional caretaking obligations, but they receive fair treatment and support from their family and the social environment, and their parentified role does not fatally shape their personality. For this type of parentification, the length of time is usually limited: this is a transient phenomenon, which is present only during the time of instability in the family.[29]

The third type of parentification, "healthy non-parentification," refers to children and adolescents with moderate emotional and / or functional caretaking responsibilities that are in accordance with their developmental abilities. With these tasks they receive help, recognition and positive evaluation from their parents. There is a reciprocity and a sense of justice in the family. Family boundaries are not crossed.[30]

The fourth type of parentification, "infantilization," indicates children or adolescents who are minimally or not at all involved in any emotional and / or functional caretaking activities. In this family, parents are excessively focused on meeting the needs of the child and neglecting his obligations,

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[28]   G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child, London*, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 12.

[29]   G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 12; G.J. Jurkovic, R. Morrell, A. Thirkield, *Assessing Childhood Parentification: Guidelines for Researchers and Clinicians*, in: N. D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 96.

[30]   G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 12.

thus robbing the child of opportunities for development. Similarly to their "destructively parentified" peers, these children also experience the crossing of family boundaries and are unfairly placed in the role of a "dependent object". While "destructively parentified" children in their adult relationships appear as excessively caring individuals, "infantilized" children take on the role of a "dependent" family member, i.e. the underfunctioning role.[31]

Chase understands parentification as a functional and / or emotional role reversal in a family where a child who takes care of the emotional or logistical needs of a parent renounces his own needs for attention, safety and guidance.[32] Van Parys et al. define parentification as a family process in which children feel the vulnerabilities and needs of their parents, and then try to actively work towards meeting these needs. Parentification is understood as a two-way process in the family, which includes experiential and behavioural aspects in both children and their parents.[33]

Hooper notes that, despite the conceptual differences, it is possible to highlight some of the universal elements of parentification, which are included in most definitions: the taking of parental role by the child, role reversal and intergenerational boundary dissolution.[34] In the process of parentification, children and adolescents take on obligations and responsibilities that exceed their developmental abilities, leaving them without help and recognition by their parents, since their obligations are taken for granted. A child or adolescent is thus forced to take care of his parents' needs and, at the same time, to give up his own needs.[35]

To summarize, we can say that parentification is a natural process that also occurs in families with healthy boundaries and does not necessarily

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[31] G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child, London*, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 12; G.J. Jurkovic, R. Morrell, A. Thirkield, *Assessing Childhood Parentification: Guidelines for Researchers and Clinicians*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 96–97.

[32] N.D. Chase, 1999 *Parentification: An Overview of Theory, Research and Societal Issues*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 5.

[33] H. Van Parys, A. Bonnewyn, A. Hooghe, J. De Mol, P. Rober, *Toward understanding the child's experience in the Process of Paretnification: Young adult's reflections on growing up with a depressed parent*, »Journal of Marital and Family Therapy« 41 (2015) 4, p. 523.

[34] L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 217.

[35] http://guru.louisville.edu/parentification/what-is-parentification.html (05.11.2018).

have negative consequences for children or adolescents. On the contrary, insofar as the children's roles and obligations are in accordance with their abilities, suitable for their age and level of development, they can stimulate the development of compassion, concern for others and the sense of responsibility in the child. In this context, it is very important that parents positively evaluate the child's efforts and offer him all necessary support. In this way, hierarchy in the family is not shattered, because parents still take the responsibility. The problem arises when children or adolescents are forced to perform tasks that seriously exceed their abilities and they are left to themselves;parents take their efforts for granted and ignore their needs. Parents thus renounce their role and transfer their parental responsibility to the child. In this case, the family hierarchy is totally ruined.

If role reversal between the child and the parent turns into a lengthy process, parentification becomes detrimental to child development, since the child is emotionally, physically and psychologically robbed of parental attention, care, protection and opportunities for developing secure attachment.[36] The parental role can become part of the child's identity. If a child within the family begins to perceive himself as a "little parent", such identification may persist for a very long time, even in adulthood, when a person identifies himself as someone who "takes care of others". According to Byng-Hall, we can say that the child is parentified when he permanently crosses the boundary of the parental subsystem.[37]

2.1. Emotional and instrumental parentification

Authors often divide of parentification into two types: emotional and instrumental.[38] Emotional parentification refers to the child's activity

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[36]   L.M. Hooper, *Expanding the Discussion Regarding Parentification and Its Varied Outcomes: Implications for Mental Health Research and Practice*, »Journal of Mental Health Counseling« 29 (2007) 4, p. 324.

[37]   J. Byng-Hall, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 30 (2008), p. 148.

[38]   L.M. Hooper, *Defining and understanding Parentification*, »The Alabama Counseling Association Journal« 34 (2008) 1, p. 34–43; G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge; G.J. Jurkovic, R. Morrell, A. Thirkield, *Assessing Childhood Parentification: Guidelines for Researchers and Clinicians*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 92–113; P.K. Kerig, *Revisiting the Construct of Boundary Dissolution: A Multidimensional Perspective*, »Journal of Emotional Abuse« 5 (2005),

that is aimed at meeting the emotional and social needs of parents or the entire family system. The child can act as a trustee, substitute partner or friend, and conflict mediator. A parentified child is a source of attention, tenderness and support in the family.[39] Through his parental role, he helps parents or siblings fill the emotional or psychological emptiness in the family, while cutting off his own legitimate childhood needs. Long-term exposure to emotional parentification often has negative consequences for the child's development and his ability to maintain intimate relationships in the future.[40] By the definition of Peris et al., emotional parentification is driven by the child's perception that he is expected to take care of the emotional needs of his parents. Parentification can, according to Peris et al., originate both in parents and in the child himself. In parents, it is about their inappropriate attempts to seek support and understanding in the child, as well as attempts to elevate the child to their peer. In the case of the child, it is a desire and an attempt to satisfy these parents' needs, or to generally assume responsibility for their well-being.[41]

Emotional parentification largely overlaps with the concept of emotional incest, or, according to K. M. Adams, "covert incest". According to Adams, covert incest occurs "when the child becomes the object of a parent's affection, love, passion, and preoccupation. Because of loneliness and emptiness resulting from a long-standing difficult marriage or intimate couple relationship, the parent turns the child into a substitute partner." Such a relationship exists to meet the needs of the parent rather than those

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p. 5–42; H. Van Parys, A. Bonnewyn, A. Hooghe, J. De Mol, P. Rober, *Toward understanding the child's experience in the Process of Paretnification: Young adult's reflections on growing up with a depressed parent*, »Journal of Marital and Family Therapy« 41 (2015) 4, p. 522–536.

[39]   G.J. Jurkovic, R. Morrell, A. Thirkield, *Assessing Childhood Parentification: Guidelines for Researchers and Clinicians*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 94; P.K. Kerig, *Revisiting the Construct of Boundary Dissolution: A Multidimensional Perspective*, »Journal of Emotional Abuse« 5 (2005), p. 14; N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 106.

[40]   L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 218.

[41]   T.S. Peris, M.C. Goeke-Morey, M.E. Cummings, R.E. Emery, *Marital Conflict and Support Seeking by Parents in Adolscence: Empirical Support for the Parentification Construct*, »Journal of Family Psychology« 22 (2008) 3, p. 643.

of the child. "The child becomes the object of manipulation and abuse, so that parents can avoid the pain and reality of their difficult marriage."[42]

In the case of covert incest, the child feels trapped and used, which is quite similar to the feelings experienced by overt incest victims. Whenever he tries to regain autonomy, to play or to make friends with peers, he feels guilty and lonely, and always has bad conscience about his needs. Thus, over time, he prefers to renounce his needs, which are related to the intense experience of guilt, and completely devotes himself to the needs of his parents, being protective and caring towards them. The result of these dynamics is the "psychological marriage" between the parent and the child, and the latter turns into a substitute spouse. Their relationship becomes sexually electrified and abusive (even if there is no direct sexual touch or intercourse). The parent-child relationship begins to resemble being in love rather than caring parental love.[43]

Emotional incest is also dealt with by Patricia Love, who, in this context, introduces the term "chosen child", the child who was "chosen" to serve as the parent's primary source of emotional support. According to the author's findings, the child-parent relationship can be dysfunctional in particular in two ways: 1. the child and the parent are alienated, which means that there is too much distance between them; 2. there are no real boundaries between the two (enmeshment), which means that they are too close. As the author points out, the second form of distorted child-parent relationship, i.e. the absence of boundaries, is very common in our society. In the case of a high level of child-parent enmeshment, we speak of emotional incest.[44]

Instrumental parentification refers to Minuchin's concept of the parental child that we presented at the beginning.[45] In this type of parentification, the child assumes responsibility for specific functional chores necessary for the physical survival of the family, such as: care for younger siblings, grocery shopping, cooking, nursing the parent who is ill or handicapped,

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[42] K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 21.

[43] K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 21–22.

[44] P. Love, J. Robinson, 1990. *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland 1990, Bantam Books, p. 8–9.

[45] S. Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1974, Harvard University Press.

and contributing to the family budget.[46] In professional circles, instrumental parentification is considered less harmful than emotional.[47]

3. Parentification and the family dynamics

Parentification is most commonly found in dysfunctional family systems, in which the parental child helps restore balance so that the family can function normally. These families are characterized by a shattered hierarchy and a lack of appropriately delineated roles and behaviour between parents and children. In such a family, one or both parents are unable to perform their parental role for physical, psychological, social or economic reasons and leave the care and responsibility for meeting their own needs and the needs of the whole family to the child.[48] In other words, parentification occurs in families where, due to various reasons, one or both parents are physically or emotionally absent, and thus cannot meet the basic needs of their children and the family as a whole.

In literature we can find the following parental risk factors that assist a child to voluntarily or involuntarily take on the role of a parent and try to fill the gaps that result from parental absence:[49]

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[46]   N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 106; G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 8.

[47]   J. Byng-Hall, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 30 (2008), p. 149. L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 218.

[48]   J.A. Engelhardt, *The Developmental Implications of Parentification: Effects on Childhood Attachment*, »Graduate Student Journal of Psychology« 14 (2012), p. 46; L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 220; L.M. Hooper, S.A. Marotta, R.P. Lanthier, *Predictors of Growth and Distress Following Childhood Parentification: A Retrospective Exploratory Study*, »J Child Fam Stud« 17 (2008), p. 693–705.

[49]   K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 24; B. Barnett, G. Parker, *The Parentified Child: Early Competence or Childhood Deprivation?*, »Child Psychology & Psychiatry Review« 3 (1998) 4, p. 146–149; J. Byng – Hall, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 30 (2008), p. 148–149; N.D. Chase, *Parentification: An Over-*

- Traumatic experience of childhood deprivation, exploitation or crossed boundaries, such as sexual abuse, neglect, pathological types of parentification or hyperprotectivity.
- Physical or mental illness and personality disorders (in particular schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, narcissistic personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder).
- Alcohol and substance abuse and other addictions.
- Dysfunctional intimate couple relationship (unhealthy bonds, conflicts, violence, disappointment, unsatisfied need for closeness, etc.) and divorce or separation.
- Intrusive parenting styles.
- Insecure attachment.
- Low socio-economic status.
- Family size (parentification is more frequent in single-parent and large families).
- Socio-cultural context (in certain cultural environments, certain types of parentification are normal and expected).

In the following sections, we will elaborate in detailon the causes of parentification in families, which are most researched and highlighted in scientific literature.

3.1. Physical and mental health of parents

According to research findings, physical and mental health of parents (especially the mental health of themother) play a key role in the phenomenon where children or adolescents are forced to take on a parental role within their family system. Parents affected by mental illness are often

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view of *Theory, Research and Societal Issues*, In: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 15; L. Earley, D. Cushway, *The Parentified Child*, »Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry« 7 (2002) 2, p. 166–167; J.A. Engelhardt, *The Developmental Implications of Parentification: Effects on Childhood Attachment*, »Graduate Student Journal of Psychology« 14 (2012), p. 46; M.M. Fitzgerald, R.A. Schneider, S. Salstrom, H.M. Zinzow, J. Jackson, R.V. Fossel, *Child Sexual Abuse, Early Family Risk, and Childhood Parentification: Pathways toCurrent Psychosocial Adjustment*, »Journal of Family Psychology« 22 (2008) 2, p. 320; G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 18–34; J. Macfie, N.L. McElwain, R.M. Houts, M.J. Cox, *Intergenerational transmission of role reversal between parent and child: Dyadic and family systems internal working models*, »Attachment & Human Development« 7 (2005) 1, p. 53–55.

partly, or totally, incapable of performing their parental roles and their responsibilities in the family system. The resulting gaps are therefore quickly filled by children, since the family system would not otherwise survive.[50]

Out of a sample of 72 mothers (with and without history of depression) and their teenagers, Champion et al. studied how maternal current or past problems with depressive disorder are related to the instrumental or emotional parentification of their children. In teenagers whose mothers were currently, or had been, suffering from depressive disorder, they found that it was positively correlated with emotional parentification and an increased presence of anxiety and depression symptoms.[51]

Numerous studies have also been seeking correlation between physical illness in parents and the parentification of their children. Parental illness (Alzheimer's disease, cancer, dementia, AIDS) has been found to often force children or adolescents in parental roles within their family systems.[52]

Although the literature generally suggests that a variety of mental and chronic parental illnesses create opportunities for different forms of parentification of their children, it is worth noting the findings of a study by Aldridge[53] that brings a slightly different view of this issue. She found out that many parents who suffer from mental illness, despite losing the ability to physically care for the child, still retain the status of a parent, which means that the hierarchy within the family system is maintained. On this basis, Aldridge concluded that mental illness of parents does not necessarily imply an unavoidable risk of parentification, neglect or developmental setback in their children, but can positively contribute to strengthening a healthy relationship between them. In doing so, it is absolutely necessary that

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[50]   L.M. Hooper, K. Doehler, P.J. Jankowski, S.E. Tomek, *Patterns of Self-Reported Alcohol Use, Depressive Symptoms, and Body Mass Index in a Family Sample: The Buffering Effects of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 20 (2012) 2, p. 166.

[51]   J.E. Champion, S.S. Jaser, K.L. Reeslund, L. Simmons, J.E. Potts, A.R. Shears, B.E. Compas, *Caretaking behaviors by adolescent children of mothers with and without a history of depression: The role of caretaking in children of mothers with a history of depression*, »Journal of Family Psychology« 23 (2009), p. 156–166.

[52]   L.M. Hooper, K. Doehler, P.J. Jankowski, S.E. Tomek, *Patterns of Self-Reported Alcohol Use, Depressive Symptoms, and Body Mass Index in a Family Sample: The Buffering Effects of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 20 (2012) 2, p. 166–167.

[53]   J. Aldridge, *The Experiences of Children Living with and Caring for Parents with Mental Illness*, »Child Abuse Review« 15 (2006), p. 79–88.

children have all the necessary support from adults at the time of caring for the parent, and, above all, recognition for their contribution to the family.[54]

3.2. Alcohol and substance abuse

Researchers have paid considerable attention to the discovery of correlation between alcoholism and substance abuse in parents and the experience of parentification in teenagers and young adults. Results have often shown a positive correlation between parental alcohol and substance abuse and the parentification of their children, which means that higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse are associated with higher rates of parentification.[55] In adults who grew up in families with alcohol addiction, Goglia et al. found significantly higher values of parentification.[56] Similar findings have been made by Bekir et al. who have studied families with alcohol or substance abuse over three generations. In these families, at least one of the children assumed the role of the adult and compensated for the parent (usually the father), who was absent and incapable due to addiction. They found that parental children often fail to deal with problems in raising their own children and are prone to substance abuse during periods of increased exposure to stress. They also discovered the tendency to excessive responsibility in childhood and later in adulthood.[57]

Chase, Deming and Wells divided a group of 360 young adults who recognized the indices of parentification in their childhood according to the level of alcohol consumption of their parents. The researchers sought to determine if and how the level of parentification would differ between groups. They found that the children of alcoholics showed higher values of parentification than the children of non-alcoholics and those whose parents

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54   J. Aldridge, *The Experiences of Children Living with and Caring for Parents with Mental Illness*, »Child Abuse Review« 15 (2006), p. 83–85.

55   L.M. Hooper, K. Doehler, P.J. Jankowski, S.E. Tomek, *Patterns of Self-Reported Alcohol Use, Depressive Symptoms, and Body Mass Index in a Family Sample: The Buffering Effects of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 20 (2012) 2, p. 165.

56   L.R. Goglia, G. J. Jurkovic, A. M. Burt, K.G. Burge-Callaway, *Generational boundary distortions by adult children of alcoholics: Child-asparent and child-as-mate*, »The American Journal of Family Therapy« 20 (1992) 4, p. 291–299.

57   P. Bekir, T. McLellan, A.R. Childress, P. Gariti, *Role reversals in families of substance abusers: A transgenerational phenomenon*, »International Journal of the Addictions« 28 (1993), p. 613–630.

were problem drinkers.[58] Similar results were found in a recent study by Godsall et al., who found higher levels of parentification in teenagers from alcoholic families.[59] An interesting study by Burnett et al. reports that the children of alcoholics are most affected by "family unpredictability", which is defined as parental inconsistency in childcare and child-rearing, a lack of stable family rituals (e.g. eating) and the impermanence of family income. The authors find that children in unpredictable families often feel lonely and emotionally overwhelmed. By taking care of their dependent parent, they get a false sense of control over an otherwise uncontrollable situation, and thus dispel the powerful feelings of fear and helplessness.[60]

3.3. Dysfunctional relationship between parents and divorce

Parentification of children, i.e. violation of interpersonal borders between parents and children, often develops in the context of a dysfunctional relationship between parents where there is a strong need to establish equilibrium in the family system.[61] Jacobvitz, Riggs and Johnson state that child parentification appears as an integral part of various family patterns characterized by an emotionally distant or conflicting relationship between parents, or the physical or psychological absence of one or both parents. In such circumstances, alliances usually develop between family members who help maintain a balance in the family system.[62] In our case, we will focus on cross-generational alliances, i.e. those between a parent and a child. Through their exploration of boundary distortions within cross-generational alliances, Jacobvitz, Riggs and Johnson encountered two types of cross-generational alliances: alliances between a child and a parent of the

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[58] N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 105–114.

[59] R.E. Godsall, G.J. Jurkovic, J. Emshoff, L. Anderson, D. Stanwyck, *Why Some Kids Do Well in Bad Situations: Relation of Parental Alcohol Misuse and Parentification to Children's Self-Concept*, »Substance Use & Misuse« 39 (2004) 5, p. 789–809.

[60] G. Burnett, R.A. Jones, N.G. Bliwise, L. Thomson Ross, *Family Unpredictability, Parental Alcoholism, and the Development of Parentification*, »The American Journal of Family Therapy« 34 (2006), p. 181–189.

[61] J.A. Engelhardt, *The Developmental Implications of Parentification: Effects on Childhood Attachment*, »Graduate Student Journal of Psychology« 14 (2012), p. 46.

[62] D. Jacobvitz, S. Riggs, E. Johnson, *Cross – Sex and Same – Sex Family Alliances*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 41.

same sex, and alliances between the child and the parent of the opposite sex. They found that these types of cross-generational alliances are associated with two patterns of interaction between parents. According to their findings, an openly conflicting relationship between parents can be linked to the emergence of an alliance between the child and the parent of the same sex, with friction and distance occurring between the child and the parent of the opposite sex. On the other hand, the emotionally distant relationship between parents is associated with the emergence of an alliance between the child and the parent of the opposite sex. In such an atmosphere, the spouse who suffers most from lack of closeness, may emotionally withdraw from the intimate relationship and find an intimate closeness in the alliance with the child. The authors understand the described dynamics as a special form of parentification, termed "spousification", which, according to the characteristics described above, can be understood as emotional parentification.[63] Similar findings were made by Peris et al., who found, in their research, the links between emotional parentification of adolescents and the conflicting relationship between their parents, an increased feeling of endangerment in adolescents, and an increased tendency of adolescents to intervene in a conflict between their parents. They also found that mothers within conflicting marriages were more inclined to seek emotional support in adolescents than fathers, and greater vulnerability to emotional parentification was found in girls.[64]

Similar dynamics can be traced in the concept of a dysfunctional or interdependent family, described in the book *Silently Seduced* by Adams. According to Adams, such families are characterized by unwritten rules that direct relationships between family members and make it difficult to establish closeness between them. Members do not talk about problems and cannot openly express their feelings. Communication usually takes place indirectly, with one person often acting as a messenger between two others, and in particular conflicts should be avoided. There are unrealistic expectations of perfection, and there is no space for playfulness and relaxation. These

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[63]   D. Jacobvitz, S. Riggs, E. Johnson, 1999 *Cross – Sex and Same – Sex Family Alliances*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 42–43.

[64]   T.S. Peris, M.C. Goeke-Morey, M.E. Cummings, R.E. Emery, *Marital Conflict and Support Seeking by Parents in Adolscence: Empirical Support for the Parentification Construct*, »Journal of Family Psychology« 22 (2008) 3, p. 633–643.

rules create "chronic tension" which cannot be released because of the silence, as the discussion of problems and emotions would ruin the mask of the family's perfection. As long as family members adhere to these rules, emotional connection between them is impossible. According to Adams, every dysfunctional family is based on a dysfunctional marriage or intimate couple relationship between parents, where healthy closeness and healthy sexuality cannot develop between them. Consequently, one or both of them are dissatisfied. The spouse who feels more trapped in the system of dysfunctional rules of communicating and feeling can lean on a child to meet their needs. As the author points out, the child helps the parent reduce the sense of loneliness and deny the breakup of marriage bonds. When the parent redirects his passion and energy to the child, the latter may feel like a substitute intimate partner.[65]

In addition to the dynamics of the dysfunctional relationship between parents, we will speak of separation which, according to literature, also creates favourable conditions for the occurrence of parentification in the family. Divorce or parental separation results in a turmoil of the family system that needs a certain amount of time to regain equilibrium. In the meantime, there is very often a change in the distribution of roles within the family, where one of the children may assume the role of a parent who has left the family, but he also often compensates for the other parent who, due to loss and mourning, is unable to care for the family. If the role reversal and hierarchy reversal described above are only temporary, and remain until the parent recovers, we usually speak of adaptive parentification. When, however, this arrangement persists and becomes rigid, it becomes increasingly harmful to children.[66] Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morell studied a group of adolescents and young adults, divided according to the marital status of their parents (separated, married), and compared the results of parentification measurement. It turned out that the children of separated parents were more susceptible to instrumental and emotional parentification and experienced more unfairness than their peers from the control group.[67]

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[65]   K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan. p. 32–33.

[66]   D. Jacobvitz, S. Riggs, E. Johnson, *Cross – Sex and Same – Sex Family Alliances*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 36.

[67]   G.J. Jurkovic, A. Thirkield, R. Morrel, *Parentification of Adult Children of Divorce: A Multidimensional Analysis*, »Journal of Youth and Adolescence« 30 (2001) 2, p. 245–257.

3.4. Attachment

Attachment is a fundamental emotional mechanism through which the child, in his relationship with his parents, forms the ability to grow and establish relationships with himself and others. The attachment is about the organic draft of the child's perception of himself and the world, which is then reinforced throughout his life. For decades, the mechanism has been explored by the theory of attachment, developed by American psychoanalyst John Bowlby.[68] His ideas were empirically explored and further developed by Mary Ainsworth, who, on the basis of observation of interactions between mothers and children, developed a division into secure attachment and various insecure attachment styles.[69]

Bowlby and Ainsworth defined attachment as a coherent behavioural pattern that provides the child with the closeness of an adult (one of the parents) and always brings him in close contact with him.[70] Bowlby found that children, when growing up, internalize their early attachment experience with their parents, so that their relationships with their loved ones are assessed and planned through the prism of these internalized experiences. He named the internalized schemes of early relationships with others "internal work models."[71] These internal work models are transferred and maintained in an individual's adulthood; however, they can change based on new experiences.[72]

When reviewing recent professional literature and research of the correlation between parentification and various types of attachment in children and adults, we encounter fairly contradictory results. While some surveys practically deny the correlation between parentification and insecure types of attachment, most of expert literature nevertheless supports the

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[68] K.L. Kompan Erzar, *Skrita moč družine*, Ljubljana 2003, Brat Frančišek in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut. p. 60–61.

[69] J.A. Engelhardt, *The Developmental Implications of Parentification: Effects on Childhood Attachment*, »Graduate Student Journal of Psychology« 14 (2012), p. 47.

[70] K.L. Kompan Erzar, *Skrita moč družine*, Ljubljana 2003, Brat Frančišek in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, p. 61.

[71] T. Erzar, K. Kompan Erzar, *Teorija navezanosti*, Celje 2011, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, p. 101–102.

[72] J. Byng-Hall, *Relieving Parentified Children's Burdens in Families with Insecure Attachment Patterns*, »Family Process« 41 (2002) 3, p. 377; L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 219.

idea that parentification leads to significant problems in child attachment.[73] Numerous studies[74] have shown that interactions between children and their caregivers, which contain patterns of child parentification, are mostly characterized by various types of insecure attachment, where the type of attachment that develops in a child is quite dependent on the type of parentification. As we have already mentioned, instrumental parentification is considered in the literature as a less harmful form of parentification, provided that the parent is emotionally accessible and offers the child all the necessary emotional support and recognition of the child's contribution to the family. Experts assume that instrumental parentification does enable the development of secure attachment. On the other hand, in emotional parentification, the process of developing secure attachment is seriously affected, since the child establishes contact with the caregiver only in order to care for the caregiver's emotional needs, while the caregiver does not respond to the child's needs.[75]

Byng-Hall notes that parentification most often occurs with two styles of insecure attachment – ambivalent and disorganized. Ambivalent attachment develops with a caregiver who is heavily burdened with unresolved emotional contents from his own past, and consequently, only occasionally responds appropriately to the child's emotional needs. The child soon learns how to attract the caregiver's attention through various behaviours, and heavily clings to him because he is too afraid to remain alone. The child's vulnerability can activate the caregiver's own attachment system with his parent. In that case, the child's closeness becomes a possible source of attachment for the caregiver who tries to satisfy the child's needs which,

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[73]   J.A. Engelhardt, *The Developmental Implications of Parentification: Effects on Childhood Attachment*, »Graduate Student Journal of Psychology« 14 (2012), p. 48.

[74]   J. Byng-Hall, *Relieving Parentified Children's Burdens in Families with Insecure Attachment Patterns*, »Family Process« 41 (2002) 3, p. 375–388; L. Earley, D. Cushway, *The Parentified Child*, »Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry« 7 (2002) 2, p. 163–178; L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 217–223; L.M. Hooper, *Expanding the Discussion Regarding Parentification and Its Varied Outcomes: Implications for Mental Health Research and Practice*, »Journal of Mental Health Counseling« 29 (2007) 4, p. 322–337; J. Macfie, N.L. McElwain, R.M. Houts, M. J. Cox, *Intergenerational transmission of role reversal between parent and child: Dyadic and family systems internal working models*, »Attachment & Human Development« 7 (2005) 1, p. 51–65.

[75]   J.A. Engelhardt, *The Developmental Implications of Parentification: Effects on Childhood Attachment*, »Graduate Student Journal of Psychology« 14 (2012), p. 48.

however, stem from his own attachment system. When a child becomes a source of attachment to a parent, it gives him a sense of connection with the parent who is often emotionally inaccessible.[76]

The disorganized attachment style develops in children of neglecting, abusive and violent parents who put their children in the paradoxical situation of approaching and avoiding. Suchparent is a source of attachment to the child, in whom the child seeks support and protection, and at the same time he is a source of fear and pain, which should be better avoided. Such children can develop a specific survival strategy, namely controlling behaviour, which allows them to take control of unpredictable situations and stay close to the caretaker. This behaviour can develop in two directions. The child can learn how to pacify his parent so that the parent becomes less dangerous. Or he can try to control the caregiver by means of punitive and dismissive behaviour. In both cases, the child tries to control the otherwise uncontrollable situation in some way and to make the caregiver provide, at least, for the most urgent child's needs.[77]

As we have already mentioned, the childhood attachment system or internal work models are transmitted into adulthood and affect the formation of intimate relationships. We will highlight an example of an intimate couple relationship conflict that creates favourable conditions for parentification in children. We speak of a conflict that often arises between partners with ambivalent and avoidance attachment styles. The ambivalently attached partner wants and seeks more emotional closeness, which awakens the need for withdrawal in the other partner, who feels suffocated by emotional closeness. Soon, both get caught in a vicious circle of approaching and avoidance, as the withdrawal of one partner only deepens the need for closeness in the other. If such dynamics are not resolved, it is very likely that the relationship will dissolve. There is a considerable likelihood that the ambivalently attached partner will emotionally focus on a child who is very likely ambivalently attached, too, and thus more susceptible to parentification. The ambivalently attached parent will satisfy his unmet yearnings much more easily through the child, since such relationship does not require reciprocity.[78]

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[76]   J. Byng-Hall, *Relieving Parentified Children's Burdens in Families with Insecure Attachment Patterns*, »Family Process« 41 (2002) 3, p. 376–379.

[77]   J. Byng-Hall, *Relieving Parentified Children's Burdens in Families with Insecure Attachment Patterns*, »Family Process« 41 (2002) 3, p. 379–380.

[78]   J. Byng - Hall, *Relieving Parentified Children's Burdens in Families with Insecure Attachment Patterns*, »Family Process« 41 (2002) 3, p. 380.

3.5. Cross-generational transmission

We can also shed light on parentification from the perspective of the cross-generational transmission of crossed boundaries between family subsystems. In the parentification concept, as established by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark[79], an adult experiences his partner as a parent and seeks to satisfy his unmet childhood needs with him. In other words, he expects his partner to offer him everything he did not get from his parents. Consequently, these two cannot develop a healthy intimate couple relationship based on mutual giving and receiving, since one partner assumes the role of a child whom the other should take care of. The other partner cannot meet his needs and expectations, which is followed by disappointment and conflict. Soon they distance from each other emotionally. The dissatisfied partner then turns to the child and places him in the role of a parent who is supposed to satisfy his childhood needs. When a parentified child grows up, he is often inclined to repeating these patterns and expects from his partner or children to take care of him, as he himself had to take care of his own parent.[80]

4. Positive and negative outcomes

4.1. Empirical studies

The existing research on parentification and its consequences suggests that parentification can cause both negative and positive consequences in individuals.[81] It should be emphasized that the majority of research is mainly focused on finding links between parentification and subsequent psychopathology. We have a considerable selection of empirical research

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[79]   I. Boszormenyi – Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity In Intergenerational Family Therapy*, London, New York 1973, Routledge.

[80]   L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 219; D. Jacobvitz, S. Riggs, E. Johnson, *Cross – Sex and Same – Sex Family Alliances*, in: N.D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, Sage Publications, p. 38.

[81]   P.J. Jankowski, L.M. Hooper, S.J. Sandage, N.J. Hannah, *Parentification and mental health symptoms: mediator effects of perceived unfairness and differentiation of self*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 35 (2013), p. 43–65.

that suggests that parentification often has destructive, traumatic and negative consequences, such as:

- Depressive symptoms, anxiety, somatic symptoms (headaches, abdominal pain) and negative self-image.[82]
- Aggressive and disturbing behaviour in children.[83]
- Chronic tension as a result of suppressed anger and the lack of effective strategies for the regulation of difficult affects.[84]
- Substance abuse, self-injury, and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders (ADD and ADHD).[85]

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[82]   L. Earley, D. Cushway, *The Parentified Child*, »Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry« 7 (2002) 2, p. 163–178; M.E. Hetherington, *Should we stay together for the sake of the children?*, in: M.E. Hteherington (ed.), *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective*, Mahwah, NJ 1999, Erlbaum, p. 93–116; L.M. Hooper, S.A. Wallace, *Evaluating the parentification questionnaire: psychometric properties and psychopathology correlates*, »Contemporary Family Therapy« 32 (2010), p. 52–68; L.M. Hooper, J. DeCoster, N. White, M.L. Voltz, *Characterizing the magnitude of the relation between self-reported childhood parentification and adult psychopathology: A metaanalysis*, »Journal of Clinical Psychology« 67 (2011) 10, p. 1028–1043; D.B. Jacobvitz, N.F. Bush, *Reconstructions of family relationships: Parent – child alliances, personal distress, and self-esteem*, »Developmental Psychology« 32 (1996) 4, p. 732–743; B.M. Mechling, *The experiences of youth serving as caregivers for mentally ill parents: A background review of the literature*, »Journal of Psychosocial Nursing« 49 (2011) 3, p. 28–33; K. Schier, M. Herke, R. Nickel, U.T. Egle, J. Hardt, *Long-Term Sequelae of Emotional Parentification: A Cross – Validation Study Using Sequences of Regressions*, »Journal of Child & Family Studies« 24 (2015), p. 1307–1321.

[83]   J. Macfie, R.M. Houts, N.L. McElwain, M.J. Cox, *The effect of father-toddler and mother-toddler role reversal on the development of behavior problems in kindergarten*, »Social Development« 14 (2005), p. 514–531.

[84]   M. Wells , R. Jones, *Childhood parentification and shame proneness: A preliminary study*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 28 (2000), p. 19–27.

[85]   J.J. Caroll, B.E. Robinson, *Depression and parentification among adults as related to parental workaholism and alcoholism*, »Family Journal« 8 (2000) 4, p. 360–367; N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 105–114; R.E. Godsall, G.J. Jurkovic, J. Emshoff, L. Anderson, D. Stanwyck, *Why Some Kids Do Well in Bad Situations: Relation of Parental Alcohol Misuse and Parentification to Children's Self-Concept*, »Substance use & misuse« 39 (2004) 5, p. 789–809; D. Jacobvitz, N. Hazen, M. Curran, K. Hitchens, *Observations of early triadic family interactions: Boundary disturbances in the family predict symptoms of depression, anxiety, and attentiondeficit/ hyperactivity disorder in middle childhood*, »Development and Psychopathology« 16 (2004), p. 577–592; B.M. Mechling, *The experiences of youth serving as caregivers for mentally ill parents: A background review of the literature*, »Journal of Psychosocial Nursing« 49 (2011) 3, p. 28–33; J.A. Stein, M. Riedel, M.J. Roterham-Borus, *Parentification and its impact on adolescent children of parents with AIDS*, »Family Process« 28 (1999), p. 193–208.

- Suicidal tendencies.[86]
- Mood disorders.[87]
- Lower interpersonal competence.[88]
- Endangered identity development.[89]
- Problems in the academic field (lower grades, absenteeism, difficulties in adapting to changes in school environment).[90]
- Excessive caretaking behaviour in adult interpersonal relationships.[91]
- Shame proneness.[92]
- Eating disorders.[93]
- Borderline personality disorder and dissociative disorders.[94]

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[86]   S.J. Sandage, *Intergenerational suicide and family dynamics: A hermeneutic phenomenological case study*, »Contemporary Family Therapy« 32 (2010), p. 209–227.

[87]   K. Shifren, L.V. Kachorek, *Does early caregiving matter? The effects on young caregiver's adult mental health*, »International Journal of Behavioral Development« 27 (2003) 4, p. 338–346.

[88]   L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 217–223; J. Macfie, R.M. Houts, N.L. McElwain, M.J. Cox, *The effect of father-toddler and mother-toddler role reversal on the development of behavior problems in kindergarten*, »Social Development« 14 (2005), p. 514–531.

[89]   N. Fullwinder-Bush, D.B. Jacobvitz, *The transition to young adulthood: Generational boundary dissolution and female identity development*, »Family Process« 32 (1993) 1, p. 87–103.

[90]   N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 105–114; B.M. Mechling, *The experiences of youth serving as caregivers for mentally ill parents: A background review of the literature*, »Journal of Psychosocial Nursing« 49 (2011) 3, p. 28–33.

[91]   M.P. Valleau, R.M. Bergner, C.B. Horton, *Parentification and caretaker syndrome: An empirical investigation*, »Family Therapy« 22 (1995) 3, p. 157–164.

[92]   M. Wells, R. Jones, *Childhood parentification and shame proneness: A preliminary study*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 28 (2000), p. 19–27.

[93]   L.M. Hooper, J. DeCoster, N. White, M.L. Voltz, *Characterizing the magnitude of the relation between self-reported childhood parentification and adult psychopathology: A metaanalysis*, »Journal of Clinical Psychology« 67 (2011) 10, p. 1028–1043; K. Rowa, P.K. Kerig, J. Geller, *The family and anorexia: Examining parent- child boundary problems*, »European Eating Disorders Review« 9 (2001), p. 97–114.

[94]   D. Cicchetti, *An odyssey of discovery: Lessons learned through three decades of research on child maltreatment*, »American Psychologist« 59 (2004) 8, p. 741–743; M. Wells, R. Jones, *Childhood parentification and shame proneness: A preliminary study*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 28 (2000), p. 19–27.

- Self-destructive and narcissistic personality traits.[95]
- Sense of personal inauthenticity.[96]
- Hindered development of a healthy and authentic sense of self in adult interpersonal relationships.[97]
- Affected processes of separation, individualization and differentiation in children.[98]

Research findings support distinguishing between instrumental and emotional parentification, since the effects of these types in parentified individuals differ.[99] Studies suggest that instrumental parentification does not leave such profound mark and even has certain positive attributes, such as the feelings of accomplishment.[100] On the other hand, emotional parentification is associated with much more harmful consequences, including psychopathology.[101] Martin compared the children of separated parents and those from intact families. In the case of the daughters of separated parents, a higher level of emotional parentification was detected, although there were no significant differences between the groups in the incidence of instrumental parentification. In addition, he discovered an important correlation between emotional parentification and anxiety, depression and problems in interpersonal relationships.[102] Similarly, the Hetherington

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[95]   R.A. Jones, M. Wells, *An empirical study of parentification and personality*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 24 (1996), p. 145–152.

[96]   D.M. Castro, R.A. Jones, H. Mirsalimi, *Parentification and the imposter phenomenon: An empirical investigation*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 32 (2004) 3, p. 205–216.

[97]   N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 105–114.

[98]   N.D. Chase, M.P. Deming, M.C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 26 (1998), p. 105–114; M. Olson, P. Gariti, *Symbolic loss in horizontal relating: Defining the role of parentification in addictive/destructive relationships*, »Contemporary Family Therapy« 15 (1993) 3, p. 197–208.

[99]   P.K. Kerig, *Revisiting the Construct of Boundary Dissolution: A Multidimensional Perspective*, »Journal of Emotional Abuse« 5 (2005), p. 14.

[100]   L.M. Hooper, *The Application of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory to the Phenomena of Parentification*, »The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families« 15 (2007) 3, p. 218.

[101]   L.M. Hooper, J. DeCoster, N. White, M.L. Voltz, *Characterizing the magnitude of the relation between self-reported childhood parentification and adult psychopathology: A meta-analysis*, »Journal of Clinical Psychology« 67 (2011) 10, p. 1028–1043.

[102]   M. Martin, *Parentification in divorced families*, Doctoral dissertation 1995, University of Virginia.

study showed a more pronounced incidence of emotional parentification between separated mothers and their daughters and a correlation between emotional parentification and the symptoms of anxiety and depression.[103]

Hooper notes that in the last thirty years, research has focused primarily on detecting the destructive consequences of parentification, and in her opinion there is a serious lack of research on potential positive effects.[104] One of the few studies in this field, carried out by Jurkovic and Casey, drew attention to the correlation between emotional parentification and interpersonal competence. A higher level of emotional parentification is associated with higher interpersonal competence, according to the results of this research. On the other hand, in individuals who were less intensely emotionally parentified during childhood and experienced the process of parentification as unfair, they found lower interpersonal competence. They concluded that emotional parentification has certain positive potential for the development of interpersonal competence; however, this potential can only be realized when the child does not perceive this process as unjust. It is also very important that parents notice and positively evaluate the child's efforts, and that his parental obligations span over a limited time.[105] Similarly, Thirkield's study showed a positive correlation between instrumental parentification in childhood and interpersonal competence in adulthood.[106] Worth mentioning is the study by Walsh et al., who examineda group of adolescents on the extent to which parentification can be associated with positive factors or effects. In adolescents, who rated their duties as fair and suitable to their age, positive effects were found, such as: a higher level of individualization and differentiation, and a sense of competence.[107] In their study, Hooper, Marotta and Lanthier found that the parentification process,

[103] M.E. Hetherington, *Should we stay together for the sake of the children?*, in: M.E. Hteherington (ed.), *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective*, Mahwah, NJ 1999, Erlbaum, p. 93–116.

[104] L.M. Hooper, *Defining and understanding Parentification*, »The Alabama Counseling Association Journal« 34 (2008) 1, p. 36.

[105] G.J. Jurkovic, S. Casey, 2000 *Parentification in immigrant Latino adolescents*, in: The Society for Applied Anthropology, *Proyecto Juventud: A Multidisciplinary Study of Immigrant Latino Adolescents*, symposium, San Francisco 2000.

[106] A. Thirkield, *The role of fairness in emotional and social outcomes of childhood filial responsibility*, Doctoral dissertation, Atlanta 2002, Georgia State University.

[107] S. Walsh, S. Shulman, Z. Bar-On, A. Tsur, *The Role of Parentification and Family Climate in Adaptation Among Immigrant Adolescents in Israel*, »Journal of Research on Adolescence« 16 (2006) 2, p. 321.

which otherwise presents a serious risk of multiple negative consequences for parentified individuals, also has a certain protective function, since it predicts mild post-traumatic growth.[108]

Based on existing research, we can conclude that the parentification process can have both negative and positive effects. Much less is known about the factors which decide whether these effects will be negative, or whether the parentified individuals will, from their experience, draw certain benefits that will enrich their lives. In the literature, various authors suggest the following factors:

- The child's age when he assumes the duties and responsibilities arising from his parentified role, and the appropriateness of the responsibilities according to the child's developmental abilities.[109]
- The child's gender. Research has shown that girls are more prone to parentification than boys.[110]
- The child's temperament, his ability to take care of others, and his attachment style.[111]
- Reciprocity, recognition, positive evaluation of the child's efforts by his parents and family who needs to provide all necessary help and support with his tasks.[112]

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[108] L.M. Hooper, S.A. Marotta, R.P. Lanthier, *Predictors of Growth and Distress Following Childhood Parentification: A Retrospective Exploratory Study*, »J Child Fam Stud« 17 (2008), p. 701.

[109] J. Aldridge, S. Becker, *Children who care: Inside the world of young carers*. Loughborough 1993, Department of Social Science, Loughborough University; G.J. Jurkovic, E.H. Jesse, L.R. Goglia, *Treatment of parental children and their families: Conceptual and technical issues*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 19 (1991) 4, p. 302–314.

[110] J. Aldridge, *The Experiences of Children Living with and Caring for Parents with Mental Illness*, »Child Abuse Review« 15 (2006), p. 79–88; G. Burnett, R.A. Jones, N.G. Bliwise, L. Thomson Ross, *Family Unpredictability, Parental Alcoholism, and the Development of Parentification*, »The American Journal of Family Therapy« 34 (2006), p. 181–189; C. Dearden, S. Becker, *Young carers in the UK: The 2004 report*. London 2004, Carers UK.

[111] G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge.

[112] J. Byng-Hall, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 30 (2008), p. 147–162; G.J. Jurkovic, E.H. Jesse, L.R. Goglia, *Treatment of parental children and their families: Conceptual and technical issues*, »American Journal of Family Therapy« 19 (1991) 4, p. 302–314; G.J. Jurkovic, A. Thirkield, R. Morrel, *Parentification of Adult Children of Divorce: A Multidimensional Analysis*, »Journal of Youth and Adolescence« 30 (2001) 2, p. 245–257.

- The socio-cultural context.[113]
- Perceived unfairness.[114]

4.2. Effects of parentification in adult intimate relationships

So far, we have shed some light on the wide spectrum of consequences of child involvement in parentification processes. According to research, emotional parentification, which according to literature can also be evaluated as emotional incest, proved to be much more problematic. We have already mentioned earlier that emotional parentification is related to problems in adult intimate relationships, but one should bear in mind that this field has not yet been sufficiently empirically studied. Much more material is currently offered by clinical practice, with the work of Kenneth Adams and Patricia Love in particular.[115]

Love and Robinson highlight the following consequences of emotional parentification for adult intimate relationships:[116]

- Fear of commitment. In case of emotionally parentified individuals, problems in love relationships are a rule rather than an exception. One of the most common issues is the fear of intimacy and commitment. A person who was emotionally parentified in childhood can experience any close relationship as exceptionally invasive.
- Lack of romantic attraction. The bond between the child and the parent is very profound and very intense. When enmeshment occurs, this bond can begin to resemble romantic infatuation. Often, parental

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[113]   G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge.

[114]   L.M. Hooper, S.A. Wallace, *Evaluating the parentification questionnaire: psychometric properties and psychopathology correlates*, »Contemporary Family Therapy« 32 (2010), p. 52–68; P.J. Jankowski, L.M. Hooper, S.J. Sandage, N.J. Hannah, *Parentification and mental health symptoms: mediator effects of perceived unfairness and differentiation of self*, »Journal of Family Therapy« 35 (2013), p. 43–65; G.J. Jurkovic, S. Casey, *Parentification in immigrant Latino adolescents*, in: The Society for Applied Anthropology, *Proyecto Juventud: A Multidisciplinary Study of Immigrant Latino Adolescents*, symposium, San Francisco 2000.

[115]   K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan; P. Love, J. Robinson, *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*, New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland 1990, Bantam Books.

[116]   P. Love, J. Robinson, *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*, New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland 1990, Bantam Books, p. 51–55.

children try to relive this intense emotional bond in adulthood, by entering passionate romantic relationships. When romantic love fades, however, they are faced with intense feelings of boredom, stagnation, frustration and anger.

- Parent-partner conflicts. If the parental child keeps the bond with the parent even after he marries, in his marriage triangulation is established, where his possessive parent and his spouse fight for domination.
- Emotionally parentified individuals are often attracted to egocentric intimate partners. A parental child often chooses a spouse or intimate partner who does not take in consideration his needs. This is a subconscious re-creation of the child-parent dynamics.

Adams concludes that emotional parentification, where children play the role of substitute partners, poisons their adult love and sexual life and leaves a whole range of problems related to intimacy.[117]

We have mentioned earlier that the parentified child is a frequent phenomenon in families where the relationship between parents is dysfunctional for various reasons. One of the parents, most often the father, is emotionally or physically absent, while the other parent, usually the mother, seeks the satisfaction of her deep emotional needs in the child, which leads to triangulation. While one of the parents ties the child to herself, the relationship between the parentified child and the other parent usually deteriorates or even becomes hostile. Divorce or separation is quite common.

Sons who are emotional partners to their mothers often suffer from rejection and abandonment by their fathers, due to which part of their masculinity is hurt. They are confronted with the feelings of anger, grief and loss resulting from the father's abandonment. In order to process these intense affects, they urgently need emotional support by their mother, who, however, is not capable of supporting this son because she needs him for herself. As Adams points out, the greatest damage is caused by the mother who makes the son believe that she is satisfying his needs, although she really only takes care of herself. Thus, the child develops a distorted perception of mother's love as something special, a privilege, salvation. He is convinced

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[117] K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 75.

that his mother loved him in a special way.[118] The truth is that his needs remain unmet and leave in him deep pain and emptiness, which is hidden behind the illusion of "mother's special love."

According to Adams' findings, another problem arises in covert incestuous relationships between mothers and sons, namely, sexual electricity or the flow of sexual energy that is traumatic for the child. Sexual tension is confusing for the child and awakens the feelings of guilt and shame related to his own sexuality. In the smothering role of a substitute partner, he feels increasingly furious and trapped. Because he feels too much guilt to care for himself and leave his mother, he buries all his painful and angry feelings under denial.[119]

The issue of sexual energy flow is also noted by Love, who has identified sexual problems in many clients, victims of emotional incest. According to the author, in the relationship between a child and a parent who share their deepest thoughts and feelings, even though there is no overt incest, sexual energy awakens. This sexual tension needs a release, and Love mentions two ways of releasing it: expression and repression. Sexual energy is most often expressed in children as excessive masturbation or promiscuity when they quickly enter into sexual relations with relatively unknown persons. In many children, this sexual energy is repressed. When this repression is supported by strict family rules related to sexuality, it can lead to sexual restriction, which emerge in adult relationships. In men, it can appear as impotence or the lack of interest in sex, and in women it is particularly evident as an inability to orgasm.[120]

Adult male victims of emotional incest often have problems with closeness and intimacy. In serious intimate relationships, the repressed rage and painful affects resulting from the relationship with the mother begin to awaken. Suppressed anger towards the mother often turns into general contempt for women. These individuals often deny their pain through compulsive sexual behaviour (compulsive masturbation, addiction to sexuality) and other forms of addiction. For them, it is very difficult to

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[118] K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 53.

[119] K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 38.

[120] P. Love, J. Robinson, *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*, New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland 1990, Bantam Books, p. 54–55.

create satisfying intimate relationships, since a committed relationship feels smothering, similarly to the relationship with their mother. They are prone to seducing women, have numerous sexual adventures and extramarital affairs.[121]In women, the situation is similar to that of men, but some special features can be traced here. When a woman is in a substitute intimate relationship with her mother, there is usually no sexual tension between them, so these daughters typically develop compulsive behaviours related to food, rather than sexuality, as is typical of men. A substitute relationship with the father contains sexual tension and often turns into an overt incestuous relationship, i.e. child sexual abuse. A special feature with women is a dual substitute intimate relationship, where the daughter is a substitute partner to her father (as a father's princess or a true mistress) and to her mother (as her partner, comforter, and counsellor). This double entrapment has devastating consequences, leading to the loss of one's own identity. In this role, the daughter feels utterly torn, because by taking care of one parent, she feels that she has betrayed the other. This gives rise to strong feelings of guilt and worthlessness that crush her own needs and leave a deep emptiness of the soul and insatiable longing for love. In adulthood she has difficulty in experiencing her femininity, and in relationships with men she is full of guilt and conflicting emotions. Women who are victims of covert incest desperately seek love in adulthood, feeling truly connected with a man only in moments of strong passion. They indulge in intense romantic fantasies and sexual relationships that protect them from anger and suppressed pain stemming from their parentified childhood. Instead of falling in love with a man, they fall in love with their romantic illusion, which inevitably leads to disappointment, pain and emptiness in which they resort to new illusions and passionate relationships. Over time, they develop a pattern that Adams calls addiction to sexuality and love, or co-dependence. As a consequence of a sexually coloured relationship with the father, women can also develop a narcissistic personality disorder and eating disorders.[122]

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[121]   K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 35–55; G.J. Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods, The Plight of the Parentified Child*, London, New York 1997, Routledge, p. 59–60.

[122]   K.M. Adams, *Po tihem zapeljani: Ko si starši naredijo otroke za partnerje*, Ljubljana 2013, Modrijan, p. 57–75.

5. Conclusion

We have found that parentification is a very complex phenomenon, which is difficult to define and defies clear demarcation lines. Basically, it is a phenomenon or process in which the child takes care of the emotional and/or logistic needs of his parents or the whole family, and is forced to give up his own needs. In the literature, the division of parentification into emotional and instrumental parentification predominates, whereby emotional parentification, which carries elements of emotional abuse, has more troublesome effects. In cases where the child's responsibilities exceed his developmental abilities and parents do not provide the child with assistance, support and proper evaluation of his efforts, parentification can have far-reaching consequences which the parentified individual has to deal with, even in adulthood.

The majority of research is focused in particular on finding links between parentification and later, psychopathology. There is a considerable selection of empirical research showing that parentification often has destructive, traumatic and negative consequences for the child. However, we should not ignore the findings of studies, albeit only a few, which point to the potential positive effects of parentification, in particular: increased interpersonal competence and adult relationships[123], a higher level of individualization and differentiation, and a sense of competence in adolescents[124], as well as mild post-traumatic growth.[125]

Existing research, therefore, confirms that parentification has both negative and positive consequences for the individual's life in adulthood. In this context, an important question arises: What are the factors that determine whether the consequences of parentification are either negative

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[123]   G.J. Jurkovic, S. Casey, *Parentification in immigrant Latino adolescents*, in: The Society for Applied Anthropology, *Proyecto Juventud: A Multidisciplinary Study of Immigrant Latino Adolescents*, symposium, San Francisco 2000; A. Thirkield, *The role of fairness in emotional and social outcomes of childhood filial responsibility*, Doctoral dissertation, Atlanta 2002, Georgia State University.

[124]   S. Walsh, S. Shulman, Z. Bar-On, A. Tsur, *The Role of Parentification and Family Climate in Adaptation Among Immigrant Adolescents in Israel*, »Journal of Research on Adolescence« 16 (2006) 2, p. 321–350.

[125]   L.M. Hooper, S.A. Marotta, R.P. Lanthier, *Predictors of Growth and Distress Following Childhood Parentification: A Retrospective Exploratory Study*, »J Child Fam Stud« 17 (2008), p. 693–705.

or even pathological, or whether the parentified individuals will draw certain benefits from their experience that will enrich their lives? This issue remains quite unexplained in expert literature and will certainly need further scientific attention.

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