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Parental attitudes and parentification of children in families with limited parental care competencies

Summary

Parentification describes the taking on of an adult role by a child or adolescent before they are emotionally and developmentally ready to face the tasks and challenges that come with it (Boszormenyi–Nagy & Spark, 1973). It is viewed in the literature from the perspective of the functioning of the family system in the context of development, and as a pathology of parental functioning (Schier, 2014). The consequences of parentification on the functioning of a child can be particularly seen in the emotional sphere and in the area of mental disorders (Hooper et al., 2011). The research presented in the article involves 272 families facing the limitation or termination of parental rights. Analyses focused on the sociodemographic features of the family, such as the parents' addictions and psychological problems and their psychological functioning in terms of parental attitudes which resulted in the parentification of the children. The results show that there is a connection between pathological functioning of parents, characteristics of their parental attitudes and the parentification of the first child.

Keywords

parentification, limitations of parental rights, parental attitudes

Streszczenie

Parentyfikacja opisuje podejmowanie przez dziecko (czy adolescenta) roli dorosłej osoby zanim jest emocjonalnie i rozwojowo zdolne do podłożenia zadaniom i wyzwaniom z niej wynikającym (Boszormenyi–Nagy i Spark, 1973). Zjawisko to rozpatrywane jest w literaturze przedmiotu z perspektywy funkcjonowania rodziny jako systemu w kontekście rozwojowym oraz jako patologia funkcjonowania rodzicielskiego (Schier, 2014). Konsekwencje parentyfikacji dla funkcjonowania dziecka mogą być widoczne przede wszystkim w sferze emocjonalnej oraz w sferze zaburzeń psychicznych (Hooper et al., 2011). W badaniu zaprezentowanym w artykule wzięły udział 272 rodziny uczestniczące w procedurze sądowej o pozbawienie lub ograniczenie władzy rodzicielskiej. Analizie poddano zarówno zmienne socjodemograficzne, w tym uzależnienia i choroby rodziców, jak i psychologiczne aspekty funkcjonowania rodzicielskiego, jak również postawy rodzicielskie i ich związek z parentyfikacją dziecka. Wyniki wskazują na istnienie zależności między dysfunkcjonalnością rodziny a parentyfikacją dzieci.

Słowa kluczowe

parentyfikacja, ograniczenie władzy rodzicielskiej, postawy rodzicielskiej.

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Introduction: Parentification—conceptualization of the phenomenon

The term “destructive parentification” describes a situation in which a child or an adolescent takes on an adult role before they are emotionally and developmentally ready to face the tasks and challenges that come with it (Boszormenyi–Nagy & Spark, 1973). Chase (1999) defines parentification as a role reversal, in which the child sacrifices its own needs in order to fulfill the emotional and instrumental needs of the parent. This phenomenon is viewed in the literature from the perspective of the functioning of the family system in the context of development, and as a pathology of parental functioning (Schier, 2014). Researchers studying this phenomenon usually refer to family system models and attachment theory, examining them in the context of the trauma that the child experiences because the family system makes a specific pattern of functioning necessary or even forces it (Schier, 2010). As Hooper noted (2007), using the attachment model in order to understand parentification is useful because it allows a description of a parent–child relationship, while the system models make it possible to see the phenomenon in the wider context of the functioning of an entire family as a dynamic system that conditions the development of specific behaviors and reaction styles. Family systems that foster parentification are characterized by certain properties, such as: chronic mental or physical illness in one or both parents (Stein, Riedel & Rotheram–Borus, 2004; Dur-yea, 2007; Tompkins, 2007; Wallerstein, 1985); a divorce in the family or the death of one of the parents resulting in parental care being exercised by one person (Jurkovic, Thirkield & Morrell, 2001; Peris & Emery, 2005; Liet al., 1995); a social pathology in the family, usually alcohol or narcotics abuse and the use of violence against children associated with it (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998; Wells, Glickauf–Hughes & Jones, 1999); a chronically ill sibling, growing up in foster care or immigration (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009). Parentification can also be seen as child neglect, as it prevents the child’s proper development and brings negative consequences such as lower life achievements, disrupted interpersonal functioning and emotional adaptation, and as Grzegorzewska & Cierpiałkowska (2014) indicated, the externalizing of problems. Moreover, from the point of view of self–regulatory mechanisms, it is a way of functioning that is exhausting for a child, and which—as a consequence—contributes to the deterioration of a child’s general psychosocial functioning. Research conducted all over the world shows that mothers are more likely to parentificate their children, and that girls are more susceptible to it than boys, especially the eldest girls (Schier, 2014).

Study findings also indicate the existence of so–called “healthy parentification” (adultification), when the taking up of adult tasks by a child can have a positive influence on the development of the child’s empathy, responsibility or self–efficacy, despite the fact that the adult role is taken up prematurely (Burton, 2007; Garber, 2011). Garber

(2011) indicates the need to distinguish between parentification and adultification, arguing that they are qualitatively different. According to this author, adultification is a parental behavior that puts the child in the position of a partner–peer. This situation happens most often during severe parental conflict (often a divorce), but also in families that face poverty, violence, or those that are functioning in a foreign culture (often the child is the only link to the outside world, being the person who speaks the language). According to Burnet and colleagues (2006), this role is usually taken on by the first child. Those children usually develop one of the three attitudes, which can be distinguished based on studies by Koscielska (2007): responsibility, avoidance or defiance. As noted by Jurkovic (1997), when analyzing the phenomenon of role reversal in a family, the following factors should be taken into consideration: openness in the process of delegating tasks to the child; the type of work that the child undertakes; the extent of responsibility; whether the task is appropriate for the age and developmental abilities of the child; the person who the child has to look after; the extent to which the child internalizes the needs of the caretakers; family boundaries between different systems and people, and the legitimacy of the activities assigned to the child from the socio–ethical perspective. Based on that, we can distinguish two types of parentification: emotional and instrumental (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001; Byng–Hall, 2008). When making this distinction, Jurkovic and colleagues (2001) focused on children who experienced their parents’ divorce. Their research demonstrated that instrumental parentification comes down to taking care of the household: earning money, looking after family members, cooking, etc. Emotional parentification concerns meeting the emotional and social needs of the parents or caregivers (this often occurs in foster families) and, according to Byng–Hall (2008), it is more painful and aggravating for the child than instrumental parentification. It can be said that in addition to being a burden, it also helps shape the competencies and skills of the child.

An important question asked by Schier (2014) is what happens in the mind of a parent who expects his/her child to fulfill their needs. The author indicates the existence of transgenerational transmission: the parentifying parents did not experience care and concern in their own childhood; moreover, they frequently suffer from personality disorders which are expressed through a lower ability to empathize, shallow feelings, and difficulty in building intimate relationships. Joyce (2005), in turn, lists several factors contributing to difficulties in implementing parental functions: the problems experienced by the parents in the past or present, traumas, mental illness, an ambivalent attitude towards the child and an inability to accept changes occurring in the child.

The consequences of parentification on the way a child functions can particularly be seen in the emotional sphere (emotional adjustment disorder) and in the area of men-

tal disorders (Hooper et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of 12 studies conducted by Hooper and colleagues (2011) including 2472 participants showed a significant albeit not very strong relationship between parentification in childhood and mental disorders in adulthood. The disorders most commonly reported by the participants were: mood disorders, personality disorders, and psychoactive substance abuse.

Parental care competencies

One of the important questions is the impact of parental influence on the psychological functioning of the child, analyzed within the broader context of the influence of the environment on a person and that person's development (Holden & Edwards, 1989). As part of this problem, psychologists research the parental care competencies of parents as a basis for their parental functioning and for how they shape family relations in both emotional and practical terms. These are described in the literature as parental attitudes and they are an important aspect of the assessment process during court proceedings related to the limitation or termination of parental authority. Proper competencies are expressed through an ability to maintain a proper distance in the relationship with a child (not overly concentrated, but without excessive distance). It can be thus said that this is a style where the parent is oriented towards the child and their approach is balanced and focused on the child's needs. It is characterized by the ability to maintain the internal autonomy of the parent and to accept the autonomy of the child, which—in the context of making demands on children—means consistent and systematic behavior that provides the child with support. Parental autonomy and emotional balance provide the opportunity for proper contact with the child; an emotional exchange in which the child learns to recognize and accept their own and their parents positive and also negative emotional states. Maria Ziemska (1979, 1982), the author of a method of measuring parental attitudes which is widely used in Poland, based on research conducted with her research team, indicates that appropriate parental attitudes are manifested by:

Accepting the child – accepting the child as he or she is; with their traits, their temperament, mental capacity etc.; accepting parents like their child and they do not hide this from him/her; contact with the child is a pleasure for them and gives them satisfaction.

Cooperation with the child – parents' interest in the child's work and play, involving the child in household matters appropriate to the child's developmental abilities; the parents are active in making the contact, they are alert and sensitive.

Giving freedom, appropriate to the child's age – as the child grows, the parents' trust grows, increasing the extent of the child's freedom; parents take care of the health and safety of the child, but they retain their objectivity when evaluating his/her current abilities and they adapt their behavior accordingly.

Recognition of the child's rights – without over or underestimating the child's role. The parents' attitude towards the child's activities is relaxed; they are not meddlesome or too formal. They show respect for their child's individuality and allow him/her to suffer the consequences of his/her actions. They explain and clarify, and the child knows what the parents' expectations are.

Among negative attitudes, Ziemska distinguishes (1982):

- 1. An attitude of rejection** –the child is perceived as a burden. The parents do not like their child; they express the feelings of disappointment, displeasure and resentment. They consider taking care of the child as an unpleasant chore, they do not show positive feelings towards the child, they demonstrate negative feelings, they show disapproval, they criticize the child, they do not try to uncover the motives for the child's behavior, they use severe punishment or intimidation and sometimes they are even openly violent.
- 2. An attitude of avoidance** – a poor emotional relationship between the parents and the child; spending time with the child does not bring the parents any pleasure; the contact with the child is loose or seemingly good, hidden behind gifts, excessive freedom or supposed parental liberalism. The parents ignore the child, they are passive, they disregard potential threats, neglect the child, they are reckless, and do not react to the child's attempts at initiating contact.
- 3. An excessively protective attitude** – the parents are uncritical of the child, they consider him/her as a model of excellence, they treat the child like a little baby, they are overly indulgent, fix all of the problems for the child and carry out tasks that the child can manage by him/herself; they do not accept the child's independence, they are nosy, they limit the child's mobility ("he'll get sweaty"), they restrict the child's freedom to interact with and to contact others.
- 4. An excessively demanding attitude** – the child is bent to an imaginary ideal without taking into consideration his/her individual traits and abilities. The parents assume that the child will adjust to their expectations and will be a high achiever; they impose their authority, try to manage the child, limit the child's decisions and freedom. Parents' statements are often judgmental; they express anger and disapproval when the child does not meet their high expectations.

The results of the empirical studies carried out worldwide indicate a significant relationship between parental attitudes (their parental care competencies) and the emotional, social and even cognitive functioning of the child. An analysis of parental attitudes carried out by the authors (Blażek et al., 2010) on 62 families that were undergoing psychological and judicial evaluation because of having difficulties in carrying out their parental responsibilities showed that the parents in this group were characterized by a severe/an extreme attitude of helplessness arising from an excessive distance and avoidance of contact with their child in the process of bringing the child up.

Deprivation and limitation of parental authority—legal aspects in Poland

Nearly all legal acts that regulate children's legal situation, both international and domestic, consider the right to be brought up in a family—preferably one's own, natural family—as one of the most basic and obvious children's rights. Preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child considers it an axiom that "for full and harmonious personality development a child should be brought up in the family environment, in the atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding" (Journal of Laws from 1991 nr 120 section 526, later amended).

In the amended Polish regulation from June 10th 2010 (Journal of Laws nr 125, section 842) which took effect on August 1st 2010 there is a regulation on the extent of influence over a child. The legislator prohibited individuals executing parental authority or taking care of underage children from using corporal punishment against a child. This regulation is closely related to another law, which took effect due to the perceived necessity to protect minors from potential abuse by their caregivers. This is the regulation from June 10th 2010 on the amendment to the law on counteracting violence in the family and a few other legal regulations (Journal of Laws nr 125 section 842). Its main goal, as intended by the legislator, was to ensure that every family member, and minors in particular, is provided with a safe environment for physical and mental development and—in the event that a separation from the family is necessary—to provide a safe place and protection from further harm, to prevent those who inflict violence from using the same place of living and to prohibit them from contacting and approaching the sufferer. By introducing a law against using corporal punishment to The Family and Guardianship Code, the legislator limited the extent of parental interference in order to protect the rights of underage children. From the perspective of this study, the most important legal regulations are included in articles 109–13 of The Family and Guardianship Code (Pietrzykowski & Beck, 2012).

The Republic of Poland executes its obligations towards the child and the family by referring to the authority of the family courts. Their primary concern is to accurately assess a child's situation and—if necessary—to change the extent of parental authority and to establish a means of communication between the child and their closest family. However, it needs to be taken into consideration in the process of psychological assessment for judicial purposes that the extent to which helping a child is possible depends on the engagement of the parents and other aiding institutions. The extent of the court's interference in family life and parental authority is gradable. Therefore, when limiting parental authority as stated in article 109 § 2, the family court can obligate parents of minors to fulfil certain requirements, refer them to family therapy or to other specific institutions in order to obtain advice and help; or the court can list the activities that parents cannot take up without the court's permission. However, the court always indicates a way to monitor the execution of its ruling. In line with the regulation introduced through the amendment on December 21st, 2000 that took effect on January 1st, 2001, the court can assign the execution of parental authority to a court guardian. This solution is often used by guardianship courts in order to ensure the constant control of the court over the execution of parental authority through obtaining regular reports from the court guardian. Sections 4 and 5 § 2 of this article also indicate the possibility of placing a child either partially or completely outside the family environment by sending the child to an institution that provides partial care, to a foster family or to another institution that provides care. Taking into account that it is the child's undisputable right to be raised in their own family, measures such as placement in foster care or an institution should only be implemented when other measures fail (to succeed) or when the threat to the child's best interests is so severe that cannot be prevented in any other way than through separating the child from its parents.

The highest level of interference from the family court is to deprive the parents of their parental authority. This solution is an extreme measure, used when parents abuse their power or glaringly neglect their obligations or when there is a situation that prevents the parent from exercising their authority e.g., severe illness (of the parent). However, as mentioned earlier, courts—as a rule—grade the extent of their intervention and depriving parents of their control is the last resort. In the judicature, this measure is considered drastic enough that keeping the child in their own family should be the priority and separation from the family is considered the last resort. Staying in an institution that provides care completely changes the circumstances for the child and due to its isolating character the consequences of applying this measure are close to depriving parents of their authority (Czech, 2006).

Materials and Methods

Participants

In the current study the participants were 272 families that were involved in legal proceedings that potentially could involve the court's interference with parental authority i.e., limiting or depriving the parents of their authority. The sample included 130 families facing a motion to limit parental authority and 142 facing the motion to deprive the parents of their authority. It needs to be noted that starting the procedure does not automatically mean that a decision to apply any measure will be made, however on each occasion the court makes its decision after analyzing all the material that has been gathered and consulting experts specialized in judicial psychological assessment. Eligibility criteria for families participating in the study included: the presence of both parents during the judicial psychological assessment, and having younger siblings and parents' consent to process the data for scientific purposes. The sample included 544 parents (272 mothers and 272 fathers) and 272 first born children in the family (mean age $M = 14.3$, $SD = 3.1$). The mean age of the mothers was 36.1 years old ($SD = 8.00$) and the mean age of the fathers was 39.7 years old ($SD = 8.90$). The level of the parents' education was as follows: primary education (11%), vocational education (49.3%), secondary education (30.2%), higher education (9.5%). Among the mothers 97 were unemployed (35.7%) and among the fathers 69 were unemployed (25.4%).

Various pathologies were identified in the families included in the study (169 families, 59.9%). These were (listed in descending order of occurrence): alcoholism ($N = 139$ families, 51.1%), psychological violence ($N = 114$, 41.9%), physical violence ($N = 111$, 40.8%), abuse of narcotics by parents ($N = 23$, 8.5%) and sexual violence ($N = 15$, 5.5%). Neglect of parental care which led to motions to limit or deprive of parental authority through legal proceedings was identified in all families.

Measures

The Parental Attitude Questionnaire developed by Ziemska (1983) was used to assess parental attitudes. It is based on the author's concept of parental attitudes, according to which there are four main dysfunctional parental attitudes: rejecting, avoiding, excessively demanding and excessively protecting. They were distinguished based on the main types of disorders in parents—child contact (excessive distance—excessive concentration) and on related personality traits (domination—excessive compliance). The scale is designed to be filled out by parents (separately by each of them) who assess on a 4-point scale (S—definitely correct, s—rather correct, b—rather incorrect, B—definitely incorrect) the extent to which they agree with the items presented. The basis of the formal analysis is a calculation sheet with a key to score the items that are assigned to each of the factors (scales): domination, helplessness, concentration, distance. The results are then calculated into stens: individuals who obtained low sten scores (1–4)

demonstrate attitudes that are desirable and beneficial for childcare, results in the 5–6 range indicate a moderate extent of undesirable attitudes to childcare and high sten scores (7–8) show that individuals demonstrate undesirable attitudes to childcare.

The set of parentification statements, including instrumental and emotional parentification, was used to assess the extent to which the child is involved in adult activities that go beyond his/her adaptation capabilities. The child was asked to answer using a 5 - point scale ranging from: 1–never, 2–rarely, 3–occasionally, 4–often, 5–almost always. These statements comprised a general measure of the level of parentification and were based on the Parentification Model by Hooper (2011):

1. I feel understood by my family members.
2. I find it hard to trust my parents.
3. I feel inferior in my family.
4. My parents burden me with their problems.
5. I am the only person to whom my parents turn with their problems.
6. I make decisions regarding my family.
7. I look after my siblings or other people in my family.
8. My parents expect me to help them raise my siblings.
9. I often do housework such as cooking, laundry or ironing.
10. I take on jobs to support my family financially.
11. I feel tired because of the problems in my family.
12. My siblings turn to me and not to my parents with their problems.

Hooper's (2009, 2011) conceptualization of parentification is based on the family system theory. This perspective seems very promising because the study presented here was conducted during psychological family assessment concerning parental rights and it involved all the family members. In order to measure the phenomenon and yet not to put too much pressure on the children involved in the study, the number of items was reduced (as compared to the original 22-items method created by Hooper) and rated by three independent psychologists with at least 10 years of clinical experience. As a result of the statistical analyses, 12 items were included in the research, with W- Kendall ranging from 0,80 to 0,93. It must be emphasized that item 1 is reversely scored (the bigger the number chosen, the lower the level of parentification).

Results

Analysis with R-language (2015) were used to assess:

1. The coexistence of pathology and the child's parentification.
2. The relationship between parental attitudes and the child's parentification.

The results of the analyses indicated that there is a relationship between pathology in the family and a child's parentification. The following results were obtained for the coexistence of each form of pathology with parentification: physical violence (OR=0.533, RR=1.28, $p < .025$), psychological violence (OR=0.533, RR=1.28, $p < .025$), sexual violence (OR = 0.37; RR = 1.32; $p < .01$), alcoholism (OR=0.546, RR=1.35, $p < .028$), abuse of narcotics (OR=0.085, RR=1.12, $p < .002$).

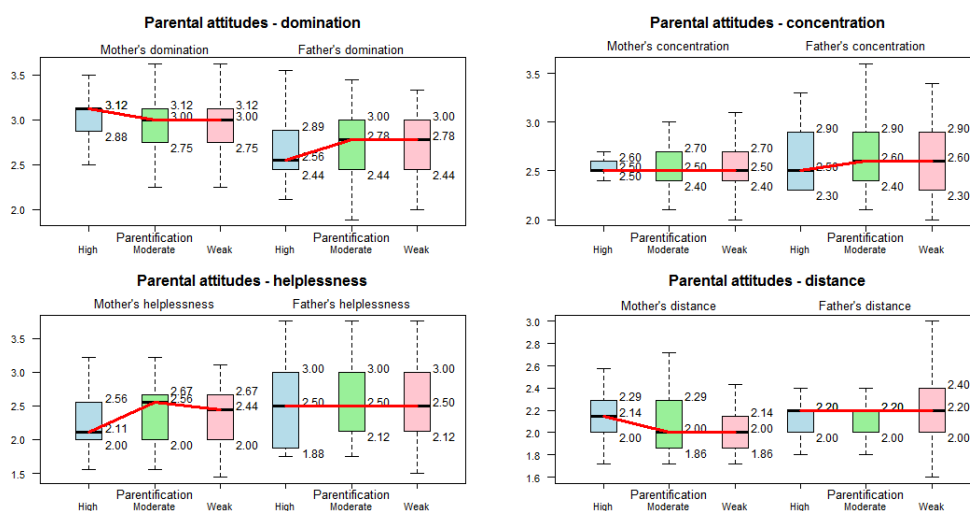


Fig.1. Parental attitudes (mothers' and fathers') and the level of children's parentification.

The results of the analyses carried out in R language (2015) presented in Figure 1 suggest the coexistence of fathers' low level of domination and concentration, and mothers' low level of helplessness and a high level of distance with high parentification of children. These results suggest that, in the case of mothers and fathers, different characteristics of parental attitude facilitate the occurrence of parentification in families facing severe problems with parental rights who are subjected to psychological assessment.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate the coexistence of pathological parentification with various forms of pathologies in the family. Parental violent behaviors and their abusing of psychoactive substances worsen children's emotional states and endanger them, often

forcing them to provide care not only for themselves but also for siblings and often the parents themselves, something which their age and stage of development has not yet equipped them for. Working as a forensic psychologist, I often encounter cases of children who, by functioning in codependency, are actively involved in eradicating the consequences of the abuse of alcohol or other psychoactive substances. They secure the family's needs, employing numerous methods and techniques aimed at preventing violence against themselves, a parent or their siblings. At the same time, similarly to the study by Fitzgerald et al. (2008), children who underwent parentification manifest fewer issues connected with upbringing that would indicate their maladjustment. In the school environment they are perceived as calm, serious, responsible and slightly withdrawn. This perception of a parentified child does not mean that there are no negative consequences on their development related to their premature taking up of adult roles. These children often report somatic problems, periodical difficulties with emotional regulation (e.g., anger or crying attacks), mood swings, and inhibition in activity. These stem from overburdening the child with the emotional consequences of assuming the role of an adult as well as from physically overburdening them with obligations related to the existence of entire family, (Schier, 2014). The results of this study on various forms of pathological family functioning and the parentification of the child supports findings obtained by Tracy and Martin (2007), who discovered that mothers undergoing substance abuse treatment rely on their children not only emotionally (sharing thoughts, difficulties and emotions), but also instrumentally (help with chores). Concrete support was especially reported by children living with their mothers. As the authors indicate, emotional care provided by children can be referred to as parentification.

In the group that was studied, the parentification of children was facilitated by the fathers' attitude of emotional distance and by the mothers' attitude of helplessness. Those attitudes lead to negative parenting which, according to Gunty and Bury (2008), predicts a higher presence of maladaptive schemas which in the long term can influence children's functioning with regard to the regulation of emotions, relationships and achievement. The authors distinguished between mothers and fathers, highlighting that when a father supports his child's autonomy and offers adequate care and a mother does not overwhelmingly control, the child has an opportunity to develop appropriate schemas of dealing with tasks and social life. It can be hypothesized that the emotional distance discovered in fathers in the current study would worsen a child's overall performance, and a mother's low ability to provide a proper upbringing would push it to role reversal.

It can be said that this result confirms a body of findings from studies indicating the particular destabilization of children functioning in families where parents do not support their children and do not provide them with a sense of security. The results obtained in this

study confirm other research findings which indicate that parentification often concerns children from families that experience intensive stress related to a dysfunctional family system such as a parent's illness, divorce, and severe marital conflicts (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Earley & Cushway, 2002; Mayseless, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2004).

There are however several limitations of this study which must be taken into consideration. First of all, the data was gathered during clinical assessments of families facing difficulties in their lives, and who were aware that this assessment could lead to the limitation or termination of their parental rights. These factors could have influenced the self-presentation of all the family members. Secondly, only the first child was taken into consideration and it would be interesting to analyze other children in the family in order to describe the differences in the pattern of behavior due to birth order and the age of children. There is some data (Schier, 2014; Byng-Hall, 2008), which leads to the conclusion that older children and girls tend to be parentified more than younger children and boys. There are some doubts expressed by Schier (2014) that boys may have difficulties expressing their actual involvement in taking care of the adult members of the family. Further analyses should then focus on the differences between the sexes and the nature of the roles played by girls and boys in families. The other factor mentioned above, namely the age of the child, could also be investigated more thoroughly.

The research presented in the article offers a new look at parentification by using the measure of parental attitudes. It must be pointed out that in case of mothers' and fathers' parental attitudes, different features are important in the process of creating an environment which forces the child to function above its emotional and cognitive capacities. In future, following Hooper's (2007) findings and suggestions to include family dynamics for a deeper understanding of the parentification phenomenon, the attachment styles in such families should be analyzed.

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