

FAMILY, RELIGION, PEDAGOGY AND EVERYDAY EDUCATION PRACTICE

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PARENTIFICATION AS A PROCESS OF ROLE REVERSAL IN THE FAMILY¹

ABSTRACT:

The study presents the issue of parentification, i.e. the child undertaking tasks belonging to adults. As a result of role reversal in the family, a child sacrifices their own needs for the sake of the instrumental and/or emotional needs of the parent. Parentified children have to cope not only with duties exceeding their normal abilities, but also in adult life they experience the effects of the role reversal in the family. More often than not, parentification is transgenerational and the mechanism of its emergence involves at least three successive generations, with a particular focus on role reversal with one's own parents. The aim of this study is to disseminate knowledge about the causes, conditions and prevention of parentification. Parentification of children in the family results from an intergenerational message and promotes the development of personality disorders.

KEYWORDS:

parentification, child, family, parental role, psychotherapy

It would not be an exaggeration to point out at the beginning of this study that each author of a scientific text should explain not only to

¹ Originally published: Wiktor Żłobicki, "Parentyfikacja jako proces odwrócenia ról w rodzinie", *Wychowanie w Rodzinie* 2018, vol. XIX, no. 3, p. 341-353.

himself, but also to the readers, why she/he takes up the topic presented in the title. Therefore, I would like to emphasize that the decision to address the problem of parentification in this study has its source, first of all, in my scientific interest in pedagogy of the family and my experiences in psychotherapeutic practice and certainly has nothing to do with manifestations of publication absurdity and obsession with earning 'points' that interfere with free scientific expression. It should be added that the issue of parentification – so strongly rooted in the family – is addressed by psychologists in many studies, but seems to be hardly present in the field of pedagogical reflection. In the further part of the study I will try to justify in more detail the need for increasing the interest of educators in the causes, conditions and consequences of parentification.

If we consider the ponderings presented here as the subject of interdisciplinary scientific reflection on the borderline of psychology, psychotherapy and pedagogy, I hope that it will mean the invitation to move in the area of broadly understood humanities. Without it, as it seems to me, it is impossible to understand the complexity of the surrounding reality. I will refer here to the work of one of the most outstanding humanists of the 20th century, Erich Fromm, whose views do not lose their topicality and are very inspiring also in the 21st century. Erich Fromm represents *normative humanism*, which means that “there are right and wrong, satisfactory and unsatisfactory solutions to the problem of human existence. Mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity according to the characteristics and laws of human nature”².

Many clients³ who seek psychotherapeutic support reveal biographical experiences that clearly indicate disturbances in their families of origin, consisting in taking over the roles belonging to parents in childhood, with simultaneous atrophy of important childhood developmental needs. Parentification can be considered a developmental disorder originating in the family environment, as emphasized by Katarzyna

² E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, London, New York 2002, p. 14.

³ In this study I will be using the word *client* for two reasons: firstly, linguistically it refers both to male and female gender; secondly – it refers to a human being who is perceived not as a patient but rather as a *person* remaining in psycho-therapeutic relationship, in Rogers's approach.

Schier in her study on psychological role reversal⁴ in the family, representing the view that “Parentification in the family involves an action-related and/or emotional role swapping in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs, such as attention, safety, and receiving developmental support, in order to align with and care for the instrumental or emotional needs of the parent”⁵. Thus, if a parent modifies pursuing their own role in order to have some their needs satisfied by the child, in consequence the parent forces the child to neglect his or her own needs.

It seems important to distinguish two types of role swapping in the family: the first is referred to as *instrumental parentification*, while the second as *emotional parentification*. Instrumental parentification means, among other things, that the child takes care of such aspects of the family’s existence as earning money, caring for siblings or an ill parent, cleaning, shopping, cooking meals. It can be assumed that this kind of parentification is fostered by many contemporary social phenomena, such as single parenthood, economic emigration or the arrival of a large group of families from across the eastern border. In such families, a number of tensions may arise as a result of the lone parent delegating his or her excessive responsibilities to the child, or, in the case of immigrant families, the child assuming the role of a culture guide, translator, or person jointly responsible for the economic well-being.

On the other hand, a child experiencing emotional parentification may be cast in a variety of roles: a caregiver for a parent suffering from depression or mental illness, a confidant or comforter for one of the parents, a mediator or referee in marital conflicts, and a partner (also sexual)⁶. An example of the mechanism of the child’s emotional parentification was vividly presented by the well-known psychotherapist Wojciech Eichelberger in his book under the significant title *Zdradzony przez ojca (Betrayed by his Father)*:

⁴ The literature on parentification uses the terms *role reversal* and *role swapping* interchangeably.

⁵ N. D. Chase, *Burdened Children. Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, London, New Delhi 1999, p. 5, after: K. Schier, *Dorośle dzieci. Psychologiczna problematyka odwrócenia ról w rodzinie*, Warszawa 2018, p. 22.

⁶ See M. Kościelska, *Odpowiedzialni rodzice. Z doświadczeń psychologa*, Kraków 2011, p. 17-20; and also G. J. Jurkovic, A. Thierkield, R. Morrell, “Parentification of Adultchildren of Divorce. A Multidimensional Analysis”, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 2001, vol. 30, p. 245-257.

Sometimes it happens that the father does not feel connected to the mother. Then, by assigning us the role of 'mommy's son', he simultaneously delegates us to take care of our mother, in a way replacing him. This can be followed by a sense of guilt towards her. As if he were saying: 'You know, I'm not particularly interested in you, my dear, but I'm giving you a son, he'll certainly love you'. And then we are tossed to the mother. Whether we want it or not, we become a support for our mother. It is a difficult situation. It fosters the development of an illusory image in our mind of our relationship with our mother. We may think that we are more important for our mother than our father [...]⁷.

It is important to know that such role swapping can go on for years in even more subtle and disguised forms.

It is worth noting that an important element in diagnosing the intensity of the phenomenon of parentification in the family depends on the proportion between the child's involvement in adult roles and the clear and overt appreciation of the activities performed by the child. The excessive effort of the child, if it is noticed and appreciated, may not have such a destructive influence on his or her psyche and rather lead to the development of a sense of responsibility and psychological maturity⁸. More often, however, a role reversal is destructive in nature, facilitated by the co-occurrence of disruptions both in the satisfaction of important developmental needs of children and in the fulfilment of parental roles. For example, research has shown that those experiencing parentification are more often only children, children of both genders born first, or the eldest daughters⁹. Other studies have also noted gender differences in the tasks children are burdened with, with girls more likely to be involved in the household and caring for family members, while boys are more likely expected to earn money and be cast in the role

⁷ W. Eichelberger, *Zdradzony przez ojca*, Warszawa 1998, p. 28.

⁸ See K. Schier, *Dorosłe dzieci*, op. cit., p. 280-281.

⁹ See J. Byng-Hall, "The Significance of Children Fulfilling Parental Role. Implication for Family Therapy", *Journal of Family Therapy* 2008, vol. 30, p. 147-162; L. M. Hooper, J. De-Coster, N. White, M. L. Voltz, "Characterizing the Magnitude of the Relations Between Self-Reported Childhood Parentification and Adult Psychology. A Meta-Analysis", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 2011, vol. 67 (10), p. 1028-1043, after: K. Schier, *Dorosłe dzieci*, op. cit., p. 25.

of maternal confidants¹⁰. In studies of adult children from families with alcohol problems, they were found to display significantly higher levels of parentification than adults whose parents were not alcohol dependent¹¹. Subsequent researchers have also shown that daughters, rather than sons, were more likely to take on the tasks of alcoholic parents¹². It is also worth mentioning that parentification in the family is not always experienced by all children, because often the most sensitive and responsive child is chosen for this role¹³. The study also confirmed high probability of parentification of a child in the situation of conflict between parents. When one parent withdrew from the marital relationship, the other parent, who was abandoned, sought attention and solace from the child¹⁴. It is also assumed that parentification is intergenerational and its mechanism should be considered in relation to at least three successive generations, and certainly to the role reversal with one's own parents¹⁵.

Researchers emphasize the relationship between relational trauma resulting from parentification and the nature of professional work related to helping. It is assumed that people who choose the profession of, for example, a psychotherapist, a psychologist, a teacher, a doctor or a nurse, have often experienced parentification in the family.

¹⁰ See L. Burton, "Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families. A Conceptual Model", *Family Relation* 2007, vol. 56, p. 329-345, after: K. Schier, *Dorosłe dzieci*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹¹ See N. D. Chase, M. P. Deming, M. C. Wells, "Parentification, Parental Alcoholism and Academic Status Among Young Adults", *American Journal of Family Therapy* 1998, vol. 26(2), p. 105-114, after: K. Gąsior, *Funkcjonowanie psychospołeczne i problemy psychiczne dorosłych dzieci alkoholików*, Warszawa 2012, p. 87.

¹² See M. L. Kelley et al., "Parentification and Family Responsibility in the Family of Origin of Adult Children of Alcoholics", *Addictive behaviours* 2007, vol. 32(4), p. 675-685, after: K. Gąsior, *Funkcjonowanie psychospołeczne i problemy psychiczne dorosłych dzieci alkoholików*, op. cit., p. 80.

¹³ See J. M. Ohntrup, E. Pollak, A. Plass, P. Wiegand-Grefe, "Parentifizierung – Elternbefragung zur destruktiven Parentifizierung von Kinder psychisch erkrankter Eltern", [in:] *Kinder mit psychisch kranken Eltern. Klinik und Forschung*, ed. P. Wiegand-Grefe, F. Matejat, A. Lenz, Göttingen 2010, p. 375-398, after: K. Schier, *Dorosłe dzieci*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁴ See J. Macfie, R. M. Houts, A. P. Pressal, M. J. Cox, "Pathways from Infant Exposure to Marital Conflict to Parent-Toddler Role Reversal", *Infant Mental Health Journal* 2008, vol. 29(4), p. 297-319; after: A. Łączyńska, "Zaburzenia procesu mentalizacji jako mechanizm wyjaśniający związek między tendencją do somatyzacji a odwróceniem ról w rodzinie pochodzenia", [in:] *Zapisane w ciele: związek ciało-psychika u dzieci i rodziców*, ed. K. Schier, Warszawa 2009, p. 42.

¹⁵ See K. Schier, *Dorosłe dzieci*, op. cit., p. 280.

If this has been the case, the best solution is entering psychotherapy, through which one can try to prevent the multiplication of role reversal both in one's own parenting and in the professional space, especially in interpersonal relationships. However, among the above-mentioned professions, no procedures have yet been developed to facilitate the recognition of the manifestations and consequences of parentification, except for psychotherapists who, in the course of their professional training, have an ethical obligation to undertake their own psychotherapy and supervise their work¹⁶.

It is important to observe the relationship between parentification and the nature of the early childhood bond that forms between a young child and parents, especially the mother. This bond is clearly described by Donald W. Winnicott:

The child can keep the idea of the mother or father or baby-sitter alive for so many minutes, but if the mother at that stage is away for two hours, then the *image* of the mother that the child has inside him wilts and begins to die. When the mother returns, she is another person. It is difficult to bring alive the *image* inside himself. For two years or so, the child does react very badly to separation from the mother¹⁷.

The thesis that the nature of the bond between a child and his or her parents, especially the mother, has a significant impact on the child's functioning later in life was developed by John Bowlby, and his bond theory has inspired an international body of researchers¹⁸. At this point, it is worth referring to the conclusions of an experimental study that involved observing infants' reactions to their mothers' absence for a short period of several minutes. On the basis of this research, four types of attachment were distinguished, manifested by characteristic reactions of children¹⁹:

¹⁶ See *ibidem*, p. 268-274.

¹⁷ D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From. Essays by a Psychoanalyst*, New York 1986, p. 146-147.

¹⁸ See among others: *Koncepcja przywiązania. Od teorii do praktyki klinicznej*, ed. B. Józefik, G. Ilniewicz, Kraków 2008; K. Gąsior, *Funkcjonowanie psychospołeczne i problemy psychiczne dorosłych dzieci alkoholików*, *op. cit.*, p. 81-86.

¹⁹ The description of attachment patterns was developed during the study conducted by the research team supervised by Mary P. Ainsworth as well as the research con-

- *secure attachment* – a child calms down when the mother returns;
- *anxious-avoidant attachment* – while the mother is away, the child shows subtle signs of distress, but does not seek renewed closeness after her return;
- *fearful-ambivalent attachment* – separation from the mother causes severe anxiety in the child, who does not calm down upon her return;
- *disorganized attachment/with disorientation* – the child seeks closeness in a chaotic and inadequate way.

It is assumed that the cognitive patterns shaped in childhood described above are also active in adulthood, although they may undergo some changes. This is important for understanding the mechanisms of psychological disorders. An example of useful in psychotherapeutic practice results of bond research is the AAI (Adult Attachment Interview) procedure, which allows to determine one of four types of attachment: F – secure (autonomous), Ds – avoidant (idealizing), E – overly preoccupied (with anger or passivity), and U – unsettled (with unresolved trauma or loss)²⁰.

Another example confirming that attachment theory can be helpful in understanding and predicting adult's behaviour in relationship with other people is demonstrated by the researchers' identification of three attachment styles²¹:

- *secure attachment style* – when the need for closeness and security was satisfied in childhood in the relationship with parents, then in adult life contacts with other people are accompanied by trust, openness, a sense of effectiveness and efficiency of one's actions, without fear of rejection;

ducted by Main and Judith Salomon – see M. D. P. Ainsworth, M. C. Behar, E. Waters, P. Wall, *Patterns of Attachment. A Psychological Study Strange Situation*, Hillsdale 1978; C. George, N. Kaplan, M. Main, *The Attachment Interview for Adults*, Berkeley 1984, after: C. Żechowski, I. Namysłowska, "Teoria przywiązania a rozwój zaburzeń psychicznych", [in:] *Koncepcja przywiązania*, op. cit., p. 60–61.

²⁰ See C. Żechowski, I. Namysłowska, "Teoria przywiązania a rozwój zaburzeń psychicznych", op. cit., p. 61.

²¹ C. Hazan, P.R. Shaver, "Attachment as an Organizational Framework for Research on Close Relationships", *Psychological Inquiry* 1994, no. 5, p. 1-22, after: R. Cieślak, E. Elias, "Wsparcie społeczne a osobowość", [in:] *Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie*, ed. H. Sęk, R. Cieślak, Warszawa 2004, p. 72-73.

- *anxious-avoidant attachment style* – when parents in childhood showed detachment instead of closeness, the need for closeness is also suppressed in adult life;
- *anxious-ambivalent attachment style* – when childhood was dominated by inconsistent, inadequate satisfaction of the child's need for security, then the adult desires close relationships and at the same time is very much afraid of them.

It is worth noting here that the contemporary narrative of the role reversal in the family clearly includes Erich Fromm's thinking about constructive maternal love:

Motherly love begins with oneness, and leads to separateness. If the need for fusion were realized in motherly love, it would mean destruction of the child as an independent being, since the child needs to emerge from his mother, rather than to remain tied to her²².

The thesis of Erich Fromm is developed by Fritz Riemann. Pointing out the circumstances and conditions and the destructive effects of emotional parentification in the relationship between the mother and child, he writes:

The curse of maternal love is to keep the child dependent, to demand love and gratitude from him or her, instead of allowing him to develop. If the mother burdens and needs the child's love excessively for herself – because her life is not fulfilled, she is disappointed in the partnership relationship or because, quite simply, she has been left alone with the child – the child experiences guilt in taking developmental steps that require increasingly freeing him or herself from intimacy with the mother²³.

The author's claim is confirmed by the following brief clinical case report. Ms. T., a thirty-year-old woman, entered psychotherapy reporting recurrent anxiety and long-term depressed mood, as well as sexual problems in her relationship with her partner. The client was orphaned at the age of six by her father, whose tragic death caused her mother's

²² E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, op. cit., p. 32-33.

²³ F. Riemann, *Die Fähigkeit zu lieben*, Berlin 1999, p. 24, after: K. Schier, *Dorosłe dzieci*, op. cit., p. 198.

long-lasting depression, and resulted in the client's behaviour adjusting to the needs of the surviving parent, among others – after her father's death she slept in one bed with her mother for many years, and during adolescence she grew up in the climate created by her mother of an unpredictable, hostile world, full of problems, and unfriendly men.

In the context of the biographical details indicating parentification described here, a question arises about searching for ways to support the client in reaching her/his personal resources so that she/he can recognize the burden of the family past, bear the burden of memories once again, and experience a change in the perspective of seeing oneself. If, in the context of the discussed clinical case, once again we invoke the views of Erich Fromm, we will find a suggestion of a humanistically oriented psychotherapeutic intervention, which seems to be adequate – also in the case of people who have experienced parentification: “The first step necessary to permit this tendency for health to operate is the *awareness* of the suffering and of that which is shut out and disassociated from our conscious personality”. Such action is taken when, for example, “irrational passions [...] feelings of loneliness and futility and longings for love and productivity” have been repressed [...]”²⁴. It seems extremely important that in psychotherapy of parentified persons the therapist takes into account the client's past experiences but cannot ignore the increasingly complex reality experienced by the contemporary man. Thus, reporting the successive stages of Ms. T.'s psychotherapy, it turned out that after completing a questionnaire for the initial recognition of depressive symptoms developed by Aaron T. Beck²⁵, the client followed the therapist's suggestion to contact a psychiatrist. Ms. T. began pharmacotherapy with good results. Continuing the meetings with the psychotherapist in the climate of the therapeutic alliance, the biographical aspects of the relationship with her mother – indicative of parentification – were crucial for the psychotherapy process. Thanks to opening in the process of psychotherapy to deep reflection on emotional aspects of the relationship with the mother, the client incorporated in her everyday life conscious separation and experienced it, setting boundaries, and mature reactions in the relationship with her mother.

²⁴ E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, op. cit., p. 267.

²⁵ See <https://www.forumprzeciwdpresji.pl/test-becka/>, access: 1.04.2018.

She began to appreciate her femininity, opened to greater sexual closeness with her partner, decided to get married and has real plans for parenthood.

At this point we should refer to the view of Katarzyna Schier who believes that therapeutic work with people experiencing the effects of parentification in adulthood will have a corrective character if²⁶:

- in the relationship with the therapist there is a space for the client to reveal and name his/her own experience of the role reversal in the family;
- the client recognizes his/her own individual needs and distinguishes them from the desires of the parent, which should facilitate work on a realistic sense of self-esteem and the separation of the inner image of self from the image of the parent;
- the experience of parentification is clearly placed in the past so that it will not constitute part of the present, and the client opens up to experiencing grief for the loss of childhood;
- in a relationship with the therapist based on trust, respect, and exchange, the client achieves emotional balance, is able to experience more positive emotions, pays more attention to his/her states of mind, and is ready to explore the intentions of his/her own and other people's behaviour;
- work with the body is also considered when the experience of parentification is reflected in the client's physicality.

Therefore, it is important that in a safe, trusting and respectful climate of the therapeutic alliance, there is a sufficiently deep reconstruction of family histories by the client, with attention to the broader intergenerational perspective of parents whose childhoods must also have been marked by neglect and emotional orphaning.

Emphasizing the importance of the above strategy of psychotherapeutic support for adults who have experienced parentification in their family of origin, we cannot ignore the suggestion of prevention directed at both parents and children. Schier emphasizes that these actions should be directed not only to people from risk groups, but also to the general public²⁷. An important role can be played by psycho-

²⁶ K. Schier, *Dorośle dzieci*, op. cit., p. 247-249.

²⁷ See *ibidem*, p. 277-279.

logists, educators, teachers and tutors in public and non-public educational institutions, both in the area of recognition and diagnosis of the phenomenon of parentification. It also seems necessary to develop professionally conducted psycho-education with the use of workshop methods, mentalization, drama, computer programs, educational films, special publications. It is worth emphasizing the need to intensify such activities because contemporary social and cultural reality favours, and often promotes, the reversal of roles in the family.

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