

The Effects of Economic Crisis on the Phenomenon of Parentification

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Abstract “Parentification” is the reversion of the roles between parents and children. Children undertake roles either emotionally or practically that are not appropriate for their age but for an adult [1,2]. Thus, children become parentified. The aim of this study is to examine: a) the impact of the economic crisis on adults who have experienced the phenomenon of “parentificaton” and b) if experiencing a traumatic event such as economic crisis, the person who had been called to take the role of a parent during their childhood and now has to undertake the same role as an adult, will be able to endure this weight again without being subject to psychological disorders. Three men and three women from Cyprus and Greece, between 23 and 26 years of age participated in a qualitative research with semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed by the method of thematic analysis. The results suggest the impact of economic crisis on parentified adults within specific themes. The identified themes were: Lost Identity, Conflict, Escapism and Depression. Even though the number of participants is small to allow generalization, the results suggest that this research be used as an incentive to encourage mental health professionals to evaluate the impact of the economic crisis on adult clients, with regard to the phenomenon of “parentification”.

Keywords Economic Crisis, Parentification, Psychological Disorders, Divorce, Depression

1. Introduction

The concept of parentification suggests the idea that children undertake the roles of their parents. Trying to fulfill their children’s needs, parents pressure their own children practically and emotionally in order to recover from their own traumatic experiences. Thus, children become parentified [1,2].

Parentification has been divided into two categories, instrumental and emotional. “Instrumental parentification” is when the child covers the practical needs of the family such

as cooking, cleaning and washing. To some extent, it is valuable for a child to take on some responsibilities as the child may feel that it belongs in the family dynamic and feels useful, but when this is unappreciated and long-lasting, then the child’s health is highly likely to be negatively affected [1,3].

“Emotional parentification” concerns the emotional needs of the family which the child is requested to cover. For example, children may think that they have to be the “comforter”, “rescuer” and “peacemaker” of the family. Emotional parentification has been considered to be more dangerous for a child’s well-being [1,3]. This typically occurs in divorced families, especially those in which parents treat their children as judges who are responsible for deciding who is to blame for the failure of marriage [4].

1.1. Effects of Parentification

Even though parentification can encourage a child to develop a more responsible behavior [4,5], research papers have mentioned the negative consequences of childhood parentification, such as internalized emotional distress, externalizing behavior problems and interpersonal difficulties [6]. Parentified children feel as if they are invisible as they have been taught by their parents that their parents’ needs are more important than theirs [1].

The negative effects of childhood parentification can be long-lasting; especially in young adults, parentification can affect personality development, relationship building and other important aspects of development [7]. Studies have reported that parentified children have developed more caretaker characteristics as adults because of their traumatic experiences in contrast to non parentified children [8].

Research has repeatedly found that emotional parentification causes more long-term interpersonal problems for parentified children than instrumental parentification. Emotional parentification develops a family system where the child undertakes an emotional role far beyond their developmental level to the point where the child feels guilty of failures in family [3].

According to Jurkovic et al.[9], parentification is

associated with the perception that the home environment is unfair to parentified people, a term called “perceptions of fairness” [9]. This phenomenon has been identified across cultures [10,11] with both negative and positive effects on adulthood [2,9,12-14]. For instance, adults who experienced parentification during childhood have an increased likelihood of developing abusive relationships [7], but also it is possible that they display flexibility for fear of facing negative events [2].

1.2. Attachment Theory and Parentification

In the process of parentification, traditional attachment theory [15] presents a possible explanation for the modeling of care giving behaviors continuing in late adolescence and early adulthood [16].

Attachment styles (secure, anxious or insecure, and avoidant) have been found to be predictive of later difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Allen et al.[17] found that children identified as avoidant or insecure in childhood experience difficulties with relationships in adolescence. Secure attached children were found to perform better at interpersonal relationships in relation to insecure attached children.

Attachment styles have some implications for the divorce process. Since attachment is a developmental process, where caregivers have a key role in the child’s development of these styles, inconsistent parental attention, either in the form of discipline, rewards, or availability, has been shown to be related to the development of attachment difficulties. Consequently, divorce is a time of tremendous confusion in families especially when the child’s attachment style is not fully developed. Divorce remains a main reason why secure attachment is reduced whose effects can be long lasting [18].

Both types of parentification (instrumental/emotional) typically occur in situations when a parent has external stressors. For instance, parents that are divorced, drug-dependent, depressed (especially mothers), and families of a low socio-economic status are some frequent examples of external stressors. In each of these examples, the parent has to deal with a major external stressor which prevents the parent from fulfilling their role to the child and therefore the parents don’t develop the appropriate/ healthy attachments with their children. The child either chooses or is forced to take on the responsibilities of a parent. The family is stressed, and the child is forced to deal with the external stressor instead of the parent, feeling responsible for the parents [6].

Another powerful way in which parentification in childhood could affect future behavior depends on the way emotionally parentified children are forced to assume the role of caregiver for their parents [6]. The need to care for parent-figures has been shown to make parentified children expect that those they care for need them to act in this caregiving role [19]. In this way, parentified children, who have not developed healthy attachment styles, create unhealthy attached behaviors towards friends, partners, etc.

in late adolescence since they believe that they are expected to undertake the same caretaker role they took on in childhood.

1.3. Parentification and Psychological Distress

A number of short-term and long-term negative psychosocial consequences have been linked to childhood parentification for children, adolescents, and adults. Some of these are: low self-esteem, reduced academic, social and personality functioning, and increased internalized symptomatology, such as depression, anxiety and physical complaints. [20-24].

Childhood parentification has also been linked to increased personal distress in late adolescence and adulthood. Jacobvitz and Bush[25] examined symptoms of anxiety and depression among women who recalled growing up in families characterized by role-reversal with caregivers. They found that caregivers focused on their own emotional needs instead of meeting their children’s needs. It was concluded that caregivers rely on their children for emotional support and intimacy [25].

Johnston et al.[26] studied the negative impact of parentification on divorced families from low social and economic backgrounds. Findings indicated that the reversal of roles increased the possibility of behavioral problems and depression in children [26]. Johnston[27] studied post-divorce families and found that role reversal, parental boundary problems and lack of a parental alliance was associated with interpersonal difficulties, behavioral problems, and physical complaints in young children. Role reversal and parental boundary problems were also associated with emotional limitation, and physical symptoms [27].

In conclusion, the aim of the current study is to research specifically the effects of economic crisis in relation to parentification since there has not been conducted any research covering this theme. Therefore, this study will attempt to examine a) the impact of the economic crisis on adults who have experienced the phenomenon of “parentification” and b) if experiencing a traumatic event such as economic crisis, the person who had been called to take the role of a parent in their childhood and is now called to undertake the same role as an adult, will be able to bear this weight again without being subject to psychological disorders.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Study Design

A qualitative methodology was chosen to investigate the parentified people’s stories in depth and pay attention to their experiences during this difficult period of economic crisis in Greece and Cyprus.

Three men and three women from Greece and Cyprus,

aged between 23 and 26 years old agreed to participate in the current study. Two female and one male participant come from divorced families and live together with one parent, whereas all the other participants live with all family members together.

Within the framework of practicing in a public mental health center in Patras, Greece and a private counseling practice in Nicosia, Cyprus the participants were chosen after being studied for the signs of parentification.

A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to the participants, including four questions of the Parentification Inventory [28] to verify if the participants were parentified or not, namely “Were you expected to comfort family members when they were sad or had emotional difficulties?”, “Did you often help solve problems between family members?”, “Did you serve as a referee for the family?” and “I often helped solve problems between my parent(s) (or adult caregivers in my family”. Additionally, two self-constructed questions were used to study parentification and the effects of economic crisis which are “How does economic crisis influence the relationship with your family?” and “How has economic crisis influenced you?”.

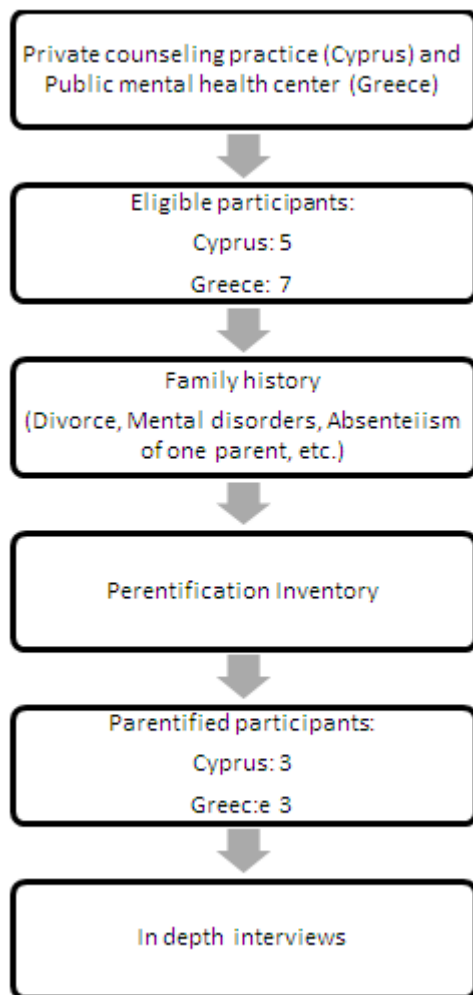


Figure 1. Recruitment of eligible participants

2.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants took part voluntarily in two separate interviews in their native language which is Greek. The first interview investigating the presence of parentification lasted forty-five minutes and the second interview, investigating the impact of the economic crisis on parentified adults, lasted approximately one hour at the participants’ houses.

Data analysis took place through thematic analysis. The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and the responses were analyzed in terms of themes. According to Manen[29] “thematic analysis is the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meaning and imagery of the work”. As Thatchenkery and Merzker[30] suggest “in thematic analysis, a theme can be defined as a statement of meaning that runs through most of the data or that occurs for a minority of the participants but carries heavy emotional or factual impact”. We chose this type of analysis since it is based on recurring statements or feelings but most of all it gives a voice to participants.

The current project could cause distress to the participants who took part such as stress, negative mood, stirring painful memories etc. Having this in mind (that we are going to ask for sensitive information/questions) we request the participants to contact us if they experience any negative emotions after the interview.

3. Results

Using the thematic analysis, four themes arose: Lost Identity, Conflict, Escapism and Depression.

3.1. Lost Identity

Philip (23 years old) lives in Greece, has studied Primary Education and works actually at a mobile phone company. As far as he can remember, he has always been the “equilibrant” of his family, a role that in the last few years has made him feel alienated from himself. Philip had been hiding his feelings for a long time until he reached the point of being dissociate with his inner self. The economic crisis and the everyday pressures in his life and the life of his family members shook him to the point that during the interview he recognized that he needs to pull himself together and remember who he is: “I don’t know, I am tired of being the one who has all the responsibilities and the “equilibrant” of the whole family. I did it when I was a child, it is not something that is not familiar to me but now ... (Silence, the participant is thoughtful). Maybe I need to find Philip. As I am speaking I realize how many miles away I am from myself...”.

Maria (24 years old) lives in Cyprus and is currently unemployed. Maria’s parents have been divorced for the past two years; however, since she was a little girl, she has been covering her family’s needs. Maria mentioned feeling

overwhelmed by the situation of economic crisis as it affected herself and her family. She felt she has lost her identity. Trying to figure out who she is, it is as if she can't seem to figure it out. Is she just playing the role that she used to play that everything is going to be okay? She is wondering about her multiple roles in her family: "I feel like I have lost myself. The situation with the crisis has made me ask more intensely! Who am I? Maria? The daughter? The mother? The sister? or the breakwater of all? Until when do I have to protect and carry what others are not able to? ...".

3.2. Conflict

Dimitris (25 years old) is from Cyprus, has studied Management and works in the family company. He feels as if he is the isolated member of the family as frequently he is the one who fights between his parents to calm down the situation: *"I cannot anymore...I cannot stand it! Quarrels again and again. It's not so much the content –which in the past few years has been monetary due to the crisis - as the fact that this is very stressful. They expect from me to conciliate and calm down the situation, tell them what to do.I think that when I was younger I was convinced that it was my job to ensure the stability of the family. But I'm tired! I work, study and maintain the house. Again I must face all this daily madness. There is no space for personal life, I have gotten tired of all the fights and arguing. Really, what else can I do to help them?..."*

Georgia is a twenty- five-year old young woman from Greece. She works part-time as a kindergarten teacher. Georgia constantly argues that she feels stressed due to the quarrels among her family members and especially her father's behavior, who has been showing signs of violence and abuse towards the other family members mainly in the last three years. Thus, Maria feels responsible for the other family members and is worried about the safety of all. This role has absorbed Georgia from her own personal life: "Pressure dominates all the time at home. His behavior troubles me endlessly. Nerves, voices and comments on anything and especially in the past few years with the crisis it has increased! I would like my father to behave a little better to my mother, not having to hurtle myself with him. He starts to shout at my brothers and you can see that the rage he has inside him will not take long to burst like eruption of the volcano and at that moment I go in the middle and he breaks out on me instead of the others... this way it is better....so I can protect them....and when I am absent my worst fear is that something will happen to them... (She is crying) ...".

3.3. Escapism

Escape to fantasy is a theme referred to by both Katerina and Peter. It is referred as a mechanism of avoiding facing reality and continuing with everyday life.

"Some days especially towards the end of the month the situation becomes unbearable, it reaches a dead end and there are several times that I want to leave, to disappear. To exist

only for me, to find peace in hell..." (Katerina, 26 years old from Cyprus, unemployed).

"There is not one moment that my mind is not escaping, looking for ways to disconnect from the present, thinking about how to find a few moments of silence. I imagine new places. A salvation, ...As if I am naked and weak here. I suffer all the stress of picking my siblings up from school, taking care of them, and at the same time being anxious of losing my job as otherwise neither my mother nor my sisters and brothers would survive. It makes me want to run away, to escape from all these responsibilities, ... I am the partner, the father, the brother, I am everything, ... There is no support from anywhere, ... I feel like I need oxygen, ... and my dream is to find myself elsewhere in another country.... far away....alone... stranger among strangers,... that will mark a new beginning to discover myself,... Thus, the illusion of escaping makes me feel free..." (Peter, 24 years old from Greece).

3.4. Depression

Both Katerine from Cyprus and Peter from Greece referred to 'a breakdown in their confidence' due to their family relationship and the current economic crisis in their countries. They reported that their experiences have brought them to the point of feeling helpless, stressed and lonely.

"There are moments when I feel insecure. Sometimes I wait for everyone to leave the house, so I can cry in peace. Is this reasonable? At the age of 26 I should be feeling happy trying to find my way but I keep crying instead due to the stress that flushed my soul since I can no longer support my mother and my brothers. I think that for many years I had repressed my own needs and the moment the 'bird flew out of the nest' and things started to change for me, the economic crisis began and I turned back to zero. I got a slap in the face, a blackness that squashed my guts. I feel like I am 50 years old"(Katerina, 26 years old from Cyprus).

"The crisis has thrown me back... far behind. I was the protector of my mother. My parents are divorced so I undertook many obligations that were not suitable for my age, ... I slowly started to make steps forward but unfortunately the crisis came and made me go several steps behind again, ... (Silence). Things have gone from bad to worse. Necessarily due to the financial difficulties I had to return home and stay with my mother and siblings to help the situation. Every day that passes I see me as a child again, with all the responsibilities I took on for the family. Psychological support for everyone and especially for my mother! As she keeps saying that I'm the man of the house, with everything that this entails, ... I thought it was over but I despair and fear that nothing is going to change..."(Peter, 24 years old from Greece).

4. Discussion

The effects of economic crisis in Greece and Cyprus,

which emerge from the experience of young parentified adults in this study, highlight themes as: Lost Identity, Conflict, Escapism and Depression. These themes reflect several of the existing findings about parentification in other studies and in addition, provide an insight into the feelings and perceptions of the parentified young adults when faced with involvement in the economic crisis.

The findings of this investigation uncover that parentified adults realized that the economic crisis affects their lives again, since being parentified in the past they feel unable to undertake the role of their parents once again. As a result, they are more likely to develop symptomatology of depression and anxiety. A further important finding is that the economic crisis brings into light that parentified people are negatively affected by this situation as conflicts appear in both the family and themselves, as well as feelings of losing their identity.

The strongest theme emerging from the study is the “*Lost identity*” with reference to parentified adults who feel that they lose their role in the family and have not found their identity. This finding supports claims of Earley and Cushway[6] that parentification in childhood is possible to affect future behavior depending on how they assume their caretaking role. Later conclusions drawn by Hooper et al.[31] discussed that childhood parentification can have long-lasting negative effects mainly on young adults which can affect their personality development. This view is sustained by the participants since they stated that their caring role was affecting their view of themselves and their status in the family as it was reinforced by their experiences of parentification in childhood.

When concerned about the emotional needs of the family, leaving your needs behind in order to cover the others’ request, participants report feelings about their identity. The financial crisis has flattened participants’ identity taking into account that they are parentified. The participants highlighted that they feel tired of the responsibilities they have undertaken all these years. As a result, both participants questioned who they are. There is a strong need from both of them to search for and discover their true role in the family.

A common theme of parentification are the damaging effects of the second type of emotional parentification on their personal development, an issue raised by Jurkovic, Jessee, &Goglia [3] who suggested that children may feel that they have to be the ‘comforter, rescuer and peacemaker’ of the family. Participants supported the view that the negative consequences of childhood parentification follow them until their adulthood as it is highlighted in the result section. So, they are more likely to be influenced by the changes from the financial crisis as it is a very stressful and traumatic experience.

A second theme which arose from the study is marital and family “*Conflict*”. This issue is mentioned in the literature by Barnett and Parker[4]. During this situation the child/adult feels responsible for the family. Children involved in these behaviors begin to feel like conciliators in arguments between parents (divorced or not) and feel forced to “choose”

one parent over the other. Therefore, emotional parentification is crucial for the child and is more damaging since the child feels guilty of failures in the family as he/she feels like the rescuer and peacemaker of the family [3].

Several researchers have found that parentified people feel unfairness coming from their home environment. This perception however can have both negative and positive results in adulthood [2,9-14]. The experiences of the participants in the present study reflected these findings as they feel pressure from the home environment which has negative effects on their emotional development. For instance, the home environment enhanced the participants’ personal distress as their caregivers pay attention only to their own needs instead of the needs and requests of their children. Thus, the parentified adults revealed negative symptoms such as depression or anxiety. These findings are supported in the present study since the participants provided through the interview signs of conflict demonstrating the role reversal between themselves and their parents.

Childhood parentification has also been linked to increased personal distress in late adolescence and adulthood. Jacobvitz and Bush[25] examined symptoms of anxiety and depression among women who recalled growing up in families characterized by parent-child role reversal. They found that caregivers focused on their own emotional needs instead of meeting their children’s needs and they rely on their children for emotional support and intimacy [25]. This view is further supported by the current research has all participants stated that they are repeatedly changing roles with their parents, thus experiencing feelings of depression and anxiety.

Escaping into a private world of fantasy gave the opportunity to the participants to bear the increased responsibilities towards their families. The fantasy of escaping one’s destiny is clearly evident in the findings.

Escapism has not been mentioned as a theme in current literature about parentification. However, studies have noted “escape to fantasy” as a mechanism to avoid painful thoughts in avoidant personality disorder [32]. Escapism as identified theme in the present study indicates escaping to fantasy can be seen as a protective mechanism for parentified adults in order to bear painful conditions and thoughts.

Escaping from pressures and stresses of everyday life was a necessary action for the participants in order not to collapse. However, by escaping into a virtual world the risk of developing depression, low self-esteem or anxiety increases as it is apparent in the present study.

The last theme which arose from the study is “*Depression*”. Other studies supported that families in both economic and social crisis have greater chances of suffering the negative effects of parentification since role reversal may increase problems of behavior and depression [20,21,22,23,24], such as negative cognitions [33], hopelessness [34], self-esteem [35]. Depression in adolescence is thought to be a precursor to major depressive disorder in adulthood [36].

The results reflect a variety of participants’ perceptions

and feelings regarding the effects of financial crisis in relation to parentification. They mentioned feelings of depression coming up as a negative effect when being exposed to stressful situations such as the actual financial crisis. Causing mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety and high levels of stress, through parentification and crisis situations is found also by Jacobvitz and Bush[25].

Findings from the current study are supported by other studies regarding parent-adolescent relationship and mainly the emotional parentification which counted as predictor for adolescents' sense of self, depression and self-esteem [20-25]. More specifically, this phenomenon has consequences for their personality since they are exposed to permanent concerns, i.e. for mother's health or the financial well-being within the family. Emotional efforts can be destructive for these adolescents because trials and tribulations are "unseen work" that is neither recognized nor acknowledged by the other family members [23]. Hence, this lack of recognition in the context of parentification can lead to mental disorders.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the effects of economic crisis on the phenomenon of parentification. Findings arising from the data demonstrate that the economic crisis negatively affects parentified adults by developing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and stress. In addition, parentified adults realise that the economic crisis brought to their life more conflicts and the feeling of losing their identity. A limitation of the current study is the small sample size; however it indicates that the economic crisis has negative effects on parentified adults. Future studies should focus on more specific populations. This finding adds to our growing understanding of parentification and its different effects on adults' lives during periods of economic crisis.

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