

## **Parentification: A Disguised Form of “Child Labour” in the Family System**

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**Abstract:** Child labour is typically defined in terms of economic activities undertaken by a child that disrupts his/her usual age appropriate experiences of childhood and that jeopardizes his/her normal physical, cognitive, social and personality development [1]. In a way, child labour is a role reversal - what is considered to be adult work/responsibility/duty is assigned to the child. Pushing the limits of this definition will allow experiences of psychological role reversal to be included in the purview of child labour of different kind. Parentification is the role reversal due to the distortion or lack of boundaries between and among family subsystems - parental and children. This leads to child inappropriately assuming or implicitly or explicitly receiving roles and responsibilities (usually reserved for parent) towards the family's other child/children or towards a parent who in turn depend on child for his/her physical or emotional needs [2]. In this paper a case of parentification of a unique kind is presented. The paper explores the nature of role reversal and its immediate and long-term developmental consequences experienced by the “parental child” – the child who is parentified.

**Key words:** Child Labour, Parental Child, Parentification, Role Reversal

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### **I. Introduction**

A family is a living, open system. It consists of individuals who are connected in ways that mutually influence one another. In order to carry out system functions, family evolves explicit and implicit rules, known as family structure, that regulate family functioning. More specifically, the concept of “boundaries” represents the usually implicit emotional and psychological limits or rules that define various family relationships and their transactions such as who participates in which situations, when and how [3].

The most important boundaries that exist cross-culturally are the “intergenerational boundaries” or “cross-generational boundaries or generational hierarchy” [2][3] [4]. These are parent-child boundaries – differentiation of parental roles vis-a-vis children's roles. Healthy parent-child boundaries are clear, yet flexible and hierarchical whereby parent plays a role of a provider/care-giver; and children are dependent/care-receiver. Parents guide and nurture their children; children seek comfort and advice from their parents. These boundaries/generational divisions serve two significant functions - protecting spousal bonds and ensuring developmentally appropriate separation-individuation of children from their parents [5] [6].

#### **1.1 Parentification: Role Reversal in the Family**

When intergenerational boundaries are disturbed or dissolved, there is a breakdown of expected generational roles and the loss of psychological distinctiveness between individuals in a family [7]. It is considered maladaptive for child development and well-being. There are various types of parent-child boundary dissolutions, of which role reversal is highly researched upon.

In role reversal child inappropriately assumes or given a role of a parent for the family's other child/children or for a parent who in turn depend on child for his/her physical or emotional needs. This phenomenon is also termed as “parental child” [8] and parentification [2].

There are two distinct modes of parentification: instrumental parentification (physical parentification), where child is entrusted with concrete tasks and emotional parentification, where child is required to meet psychosocial/emotional needs of parent/s by becoming a confidant or mediator [9].

The paper presents a case of parentification of a different kind. It demonstrates how the environmental circumstances and parental messages formed the child's worldview. The case also traces the process of child psychologically abdicating his role as dependent/care receiver of the family and making psychological commitment to rescue his parents by shouldering their responsibilities. The study assesses the damage this commitment has caused to the child and infers that psychological commitment towards parental roles seem to be equally bad if not worse than the real instrumental or emotional parentification.

### **II. Method**

A Case study method was used to understand a form of disguised “child labour” in the family system. A single case of a child, Sourabh (name changed) who experienced role reversal in his family was studied. In-depth interview of the child concerned (who at present is an adult, 20 year old) was conducted to explore his worldview from early years till today. Family circumstances, early childhood experiences, parental messages as experienced by the child were investigated to understand child's experience of parentification. After the entire case is being written down, the child and his mother both reviewed it to validate the account of experiences presented in the case.

### **III. The Case Study**

Sourabh (S) was first-born of two children (sons) of parents belonging to middle class socio-economic background. Initially, at the time of marriage, S's mother was working in a bank as a clerk. But when S was about 3 years and the second child was born, she left her job to look after the children. Since then she worked as a house maker and did not work outside home for earning and supporting the family financially. As a person she has been mild-natured, meek and unconfident.

S's father was running friend's business satisfactorily at the time of his marriage. However, over a period of time, his working life was characterized by a string of businesses, none of which really supported the family over an extended period of time. Financial stability and security have constantly eluded the family, which then had to depend on the resources from the extended family like S's grandfather and uncle.

S's father never wanted to marry. He wanted to devote himself to religious-spiritual service. However, it was kind of family pressure that resulted in his eventually getting married. His family had also implicitly promised him that they would help support his family, as he did not have a steady flow of income.

After marriage S's father continued to devote his time to religious-spiritual service and tried to "escape" his responsibility as a father towards his children. S was sensitive to the fact that father was not available and if asked for anything, he (father) turned to his brother or sisters (S's uncle and aunts) to get those things for his children.

#### **"Things would have been different if baba (father) would have been working" (S)**

S's mother too constantly postponed buying things that children demanded.

#### **"Soon we will buy it, not today/now." "This is how it is, we cannot afford it." (S's Mother)**

This led to S feeling that his parents were not of "any use" to them and he (S) needed to do something about it.

S has also been unusually sensitive to class differences among his own family and that of his paternal and maternal grandparents, uncle and aunties. Each and everything that reflected the class superiority of others and relatively subordinate status of his family caught S's attention - lifestyle related matters such as size of the house, neatness with which it was maintained, nature of furniture, celebrations organized, purchases made, clothes worn to mention a few. He started looking at everything through these lenses.

When S was 10, his father suffered heart attack, which added to S's sense of responsibility.

By the time, S was 11 years old, instead of being a carefree child engrossed in school, friends and play activities, he spent most of his time thinking and worrying about his family's financial situation. He almost stopped going to relatives'/ family friends' places for any kind of celebration, as for him every encounter with them was a reminder of his family's dissatisfactory economic conditions. All the time, he was measuring how much short his family falls compared to others.

#### **"I forgot that I was a student. I have never been a student. Father was not working. What would happen? I have been worrying about it. ... Nobody thinks so much as I did in that age. I did not enjoy my childhood."**

This led to S constantly asking his mother questions like – Why their house is not good? Why they are not as rich as others? What needs to be done? When their situation will improve?

Inadvertently, during this period, S's mother, in the process of calming him down, communicated parentifying messages summarizing that they (parents) couldn't do much about their situation and she looks upon him to change the family's situation.

#### **"When you grow up, you buy a big house?" "You want ..., you grow up and get it" "If you feel this way, then see to it that you stand on your feet and achieve it" (S's Mother)**

Insidiously, S took up responsibility of doing something about improving his family's situation. It seemed he took up responsibility that was meant for his parents and tried to become a parent. He started saying...

#### **"I will be a big person" "I will buy a big house" "I will pull my family out of this situation" "Being elder son, it is my duty" (S)**

It was a psychological commitment that he made to himself and his family. He started thinking of ways of becoming rich and improving his lot. For example, S's house was occupied by lot of unnecessary, old things, which demanded cleaning. The adults in the family who should have cleared the mess never took the initiative. S took responsibility of that and started cleaning up things and maintaining neatness in the house, as he desired to have better, cleaner home.

#### **"I felt that they (parents) are not going to do anything. I only have to earn my living. Nobody is going to give me anything" (S)**

#### **“In childhood I experienced adulthood” (S)**

But the responsibility of improving family's status was too huge for small shoulders. Maturity and judgment were yet to develop; experiences were yet to be gathered. Besides, path was long. With little or no patience, desperation and anxiety started building up.

S's mother emphasized education as a way to climb socioeconomic ladder.

#### **“If you study hard now, you can shape up your future”“Don't waste your time. You study. Focus on your study” (S's Mother)**

It was so much ingrained on S's mind that education is a vehicle for progress that in order to achieve socioeconomic mobility, S decided to do well in studies. However, it turned out to be a compulsion for him. School was not a fun place for S. Other students were not playmates but the base of comparison. Their success was the source of envy, jealousy and anxiety. Moreover, responsibility about the family that he took upon himself was huge and he started feeling stressed up and anxious. His anxiety would not allow him to concentrate, leading to deterioration in school performance causing further anxiety about how his dream would be realized.

Thus, a vicious cycle was established and S got trapped in it.

Today S is 20 year old. He has not achieved his full physical potential, which became source of further inferiority complex. He has completed his 12<sup>th</sup> standard with great difficulty (1+3 attempts total). He is struggling with anxiety, depression, confusion and lack of direction. His dream is far from being realized. The future is still bleak for S.

#### **IV. Discussion**

In the family system, clear intergenerational boundaries – differentiation of parental roles as provider vis a vis children's roles as dependent – are significant for the healthy functioning of the system. Parents guide and nurture their children who in turn, seek comfort, security and advice from their parents. In case of S, one sees clear disruption in these boundaries leading to role reversal – he tried to assume the adult role, as his parents could not meet his expectations and needs.

Parent-child relationship is significant for the growth of a strong and stable sense of self in the child. By serving as a “self-object”, parents let the child internalize a sense of self [10]. But if the parent or self-object does not have a secure or stable enough sense of self, then the parent is preoccupied with his/her own issues and is unable to be responsive to the child's object-need for mirroring and idealization and this deprives the child of parental caring and bonding [11]. S clearly missed his father who was uninvolved with his family and mother was ineffective in providing a sense of security. According to Karpel [12] there are four variables – two characteristics of parents – failure of parenting, preoccupation with marital conflict and two characteristics of children – capacity for concern and a developmental “readiness for responsibility” that interact with each other to shape up the parentification in the family. S's parents' inability to guide, their lack of responsiveness to S's needs and S's age inappropriate concern towards family's issues and desire to find quick fix for the same interacted with each other leading to pathological parentification. Family system's perspective throws light on how social systems seek a steady state – homeostasis [13]. It explains why S actively tried to fill in the void in the family to achieve semblance of control and stability by psychologically taking up a role, which his parents failed to fulfill. Parentification is not seen as inherently pathological phenomenon [2]. During the initiative vs guilt and the industry vs inferiority stages of Erikson's [14] psychosocial development, the child is believed to contribute to his parentification process. During these periods the parentified roles complement child's developmental needs. Winnicott [15] [16] too talked about natural developmental process for child wanting to ‘contribute-in’ to a relationship with the parent. Minuchin et al. [8] (1967) too de-pathologized parentification in the context of lower economic classes where children assume parental role to support family. However, in case of S, the responsibility taken up was too overwhelming for him. He bit more than he could chew. The absence of parental support and guidance additionally made parentification a toxic process for him. Moreover, the impatience and desperation that he experienced led to feeling of inadequacy in the form of inferiority and guilt and consequent building up of anxiety. Simultaneously, he was distracted from his own developmentally appropriate needs and pursuits.

S's mother's messages can be rated as innocuous messages given to encourage the child to grow well and become capable adult. But they also might have communicated to S... “grow fast and fix everything, because I can not do it”. Inadvertently, thus, the mother hurried S into adult role and contributed to S believing that he is the saviour of the family. Though he did not actually start earning money during that period, he made psychological commitment to himself and the family that he would set the things right.

The case of Saurabh thus showed that it is not just the physical work assigned but even psychological responsibility either given or taken by children can cause adverse impact on their overall development. As a response to family's socioeconomic conditions, facing deprivation linked with financial stress, with the experience and belief that parents are ineffective and with covert maternal messages, S tried to wear shoes too big for him. He thus faced abdication of

his childhood status along with its pleasures and opportunities for growth and development. Additionally, inability to accept one's lot and desperation to change the circumstances in the absence of emotional support and coping resources contributed towards the unique parentification, leading to huge and irreparable damage to one life.

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