

Research Paper

The Impact of Parentification on Perfectionism and Self-Esteem Among Daughters in Indian Families

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ABSTRACT

While parentification has been extensively studied in Western contexts, limited research has explored its impact within Indian families, particularly on daughters. This study addresses that gap by examining the relationship between different dimensions of parentification—parent- focused, sibling-focused, and perceived benefits—and psychological outcomes such as perfectionism and self-esteem among Indian daughters aged 18–30. A sample of 159 participants completed the Parentification Inventory (PI), Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Data were analysed using Spearman’s correlation and linear regression. Results revealed that parent-focused parentification was positively associated with perfectionism, while perceived benefits of parentification were negatively associated with perfectionism and positively associated with self-esteem. Sibling- focused parentification showed a weaker, inconsistent relationship. These findings suggest that the psychological impact of parentification depends not only on the caregiving role but also on how these roles are perceived, with positive interpretations serving as a buffer against maladaptive outcomes.

Keywords: *Parentification, Perfectionism, Self-Esteem, Indian families*

Parentification is a role-reversal phenomenon in which children take on caregiving responsibilities typically meant for adults (Jurkovic, 1997). It occurs when a child is compelled to assume parental responsibilities within the household, often due to the emotional or physical unavailability of the actual caregivers (Hooper, 2007). This can involve both instrumental tasks, such as taking care of household chores or finances, and emotional tasks, such as providing emotional support to parents or siblings (Rana & Das, 2021). Parentification is often seen as a result of dysfunctional family systems, where parents are unable to fulfil their caregiving roles due to various factors, including mental illness, substance abuse, or overwhelming life stressors (Engelhardt, 2012). The roles and responsibilities assigned to children within a family can significantly impact their emotional well-being, self-concept, and overall personality development. For instance, a child consistently praised for their academic achievements may develop a strong sense of self-worth tied to performance, while a child frequently criticised may internalise feelings of inadequacy (Hooper, 2007).

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This role reversal can manifest in different forms, including parent-focused parentification, where the child takes on responsibilities towards a parent, and sibling-focused parentification, where the child assumes caregiving duties for siblings (Borchet et al., 2020). Tomeny et al. (2016) found that parent-focused parentification was related to higher anxiety and stress among typically developing siblings of children with autism spectrum disorder. While some level of responsibility within the family can promote maturity, resilience, and independence, excessive and inappropriate caregiving burdens may result in long-term psychological distress, identity confusion, and difficulty in forming healthy interpersonal relationships (Malagayo, 2024). Malagayo (2024) in her research, highlights the complex nature of parentification, noting that empirical evidence indicates it can have both potentially positive and negative impacts.

The phenomenon of parentification takes on unique dimensions in Indian family structures, where collectivist values and strong familial bonds play a significant role in shaping family dynamics. Indian families are often characterised by intergenerational caregiving, hierarchical relationships, and an emphasis on duty and sacrifice (Kağitçibaşı, 2007). Within this cultural framework, daughters, in particular, are expected to take on caregiving roles from an early age, frequently prioritising the needs of their family over their own aspirations (Chaudhary & Sharma, 2019). The gendered nature of caregiving in Indian families places a disproportionate burden on daughters, often requiring them to provide emotional and instrumental support to parents and siblings, even at the cost of their personal well-being.

This culturally embedded expectation contributes to high levels of parent-focused parentification, where daughters assume responsibilities that should ideally be managed by adults. While such roles may initially be perceived as fulfilling cultural duties, over time, they can lead to significant emotional exhaustion, stress, and role confusion. The long-term effects of parentification in Indian daughters may manifest in personality traits such as perfectionism and low self-esteem, which can influence their overall mental health and life outcomes (Jurkovic, 1997).

Perfectionism

One of the key psychological consequences of parentification is the development of perfectionistic tendencies. Perfectionism is characterised by setting excessively high personal standards, engaging in critical self-evaluation, and striving for flawlessness (Frost et al., 1990). While perfectionism can be adaptive in certain contexts, maladaptive perfectionism—marked by fear of failure, excessive self-criticism, and chronic stress—has been linked to negative emotional outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Children who experience parentification often develop perfectionistic tendencies as a coping mechanism to gain parental approval, maintain family harmony, or ensure that they do not become an additional burden on their already struggling caregivers (Hooper et al., 2011). Studies indicate that parent-focused parentification is positively correlated with perfectionism, as the constant need to meet a parent's emotional needs may instil unrealistically high personal standards (Mukhtar et al., 2024).

Self-Esteem

Another crucial psychological construct affected by parentification is self-esteem, which refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their self-worth and capabilities (Rosenberg,

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1965). Healthy self-esteem is essential for psychological well-being and serves as a protective factor against mental health challenges.

However, the emotional burden of caregiving can lead to feelings of inadequacy, particularly if their efforts are not acknowledged or validated by family members (Hooper et al., 2011). Smith (1998) found that authoritative parenting fosters higher self-esteem, while authoritarian parenting hinders it. Mishra & Bhatt (2021) affirmed the link between supportive families and stronger self-concept. Borchet et al. (2020) also found a positive association between perceived benefits of parentification and self-esteem. However, the relationship between parentification and self-esteem is complex, and this study did not find a significant correlation between them.

The relationship between parentification, perfectionism, and self-esteem is multi-layered. Studies indicate that parent-focused parentification is positively correlated with perfectionism, as the constant need to meet a parent's emotional needs may instil unrealistically high personal standards (Mukhtar et al., 2024). However, the perceived benefits of parentification may moderate these effects, such that individuals who view their caregiving roles positively may experience lower levels of perfectionism and higher self-esteem (Borchet et al., 2020; Sowa, 2024). On the other hand, sibling-focused parentification may have a more neutral or mixed impact, depending on the quality of sibling relationships and the supportiveness of the family environment (Tomeny et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of examining not only the type of parentification but also the individual's subjective evaluation of their caregiving experience.

Despite growing literature on parentification, very few studies have investigated its differential impact on perfectionism and self-esteem across distinct dimensions—particularly in non-Western cultural settings such as India. Given the collectivist nature of Indian society, where familial duties are often emphasised, understanding these dynamics is essential. Moreover, there is limited evidence exploring the perceived benefits of parentification and how they may shape psychological outcomes differently from its burdensome aspects. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the relationship between parent-focused, sibling-focused, and perceived-benefit dimensions of parentification in relation to perfectionism and self-esteem among daughters in Indian families. By doing so, the study contributes a culturally grounded understanding of parentification's psychological impacts.

METHODOLOGY

Aim: The primary aim of this study is to investigate the impact of parentification on perfectionism and self-esteem among daughters in Indian families, specifically focusing on different dimensions of parentification.

Objectives:

- To assess the relationship between parent-focused parentification and perfectionism.
- To examine the relationship between sibling-focused parentification and perfectionism.
- To explore the relationship between the perceived benefits of parentification and perfectionism.
- To assess the relationship between parent-focused parentification and self-esteem.
- To assess the relationship between sibling-focused parentification and self-esteem.

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- To explore the relationship between the perceived benefits of parentification and self-esteem.

Hypothesis:

1. There will be a significant relationship between parent-focused parentification and perfectionism.
2. There will be a significant relationship between sibling-focused parentification and perfectionism.
3. There will be a significant relationship between the perceived benefits of parentification and perfectionism.
4. There will be a significant relationship between parent-focused parentification and self-esteem.
5. There will be a significant relationship between sibling-focused parentification and self-esteem.
6. There will be a significant relationship between perceived benefits of parentification and self-esteem.

Sample & Its Selection:

- Women in the age range of 18-30 were randomly selected. (n=159)
- Inclusion Criteria: Women between the ages of 18 & 30 who are willing to participate.
- Exclusion criteria: Women with serious cognitive problems or those who are unable to offer informed consent.

Description Of Tools Employed

1. Parentification Inventory

The Parentification Inventory was developed by Hooper (2009). This is a self-report scale that evaluates childhood parentification experiences. "It consists of 22 statements and is scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale. This inventory includes three subscales to measure different aspects of parentification:

- Parent-Focused Parentification includes 12 items assessing experiences of taking on nurturing roles and emotional responsibilities toward parents or caregivers.
- Sibling-focused parentification comprises 7 items, which measure responsibilities and caregiving roles undertaken for siblings.
- Perceived Benefit of Parentification consists of 3 items aimed at evaluating the perceived personal growth and emotional benefits derived from the parentification experience.

Scores from the Parentification Inventory are derived by averaging the scores from each subscale. Scores range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater experiences of parentification. The Parentification Inventory is considered a psychometrically reliable tool for assessing parentification.

2. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale

The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) was developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990). This is a 35-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess different dimensions of perfectionism, including both adaptive and maladaptive traits. It includes six subscales: Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubts about Actions, and Organisation. Frost et al., 1990)

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3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was developed by Rosenberg (1965). It is a 10-item self-report measure used to evaluate global self-worth and self-acceptance. Participants respond on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Five of the items are reverse scored. Higher total scores reflect higher levels of self-esteem. (Rosenberg, 1965)

Procedure:

Data were collected via Google Forms. Participants completed informed consent, followed by the three standardized tools. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

Statistical Analysis:

The collected data was analyzed using IBM SPSS. The following statistical techniques were applied:

- Descriptive Statistics: Mean and Standard Deviation were computed for each variable to understand the general trends in the data.
- Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation: This non-parametric test was used to determine the strength and direction of association between the parentification variables (parent- focused, sibling-focused, and perceived benefits) and the outcome variables (perfectionism and self-esteem).
- Linear Regression Analysis: Conducted to assess the predictive power of parentification subscales on perfectionism and self-esteem.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	Parent-Focused Parentification	Sibling-Focused Parentification	Perceived Benefits	Perfectionism	Self-Esteem
1. Parent-Focused	1				
2. Sibling-Focused	.568**	1			
3. Perceived Benefits	.087	.213**	1		
4. Perfectionism	.256**	.139	-.451**	1	
5. Self-Esteem	.039	.083	.460**	-.534**	1
Mean	3.09	2.87	3.12	121.29	15.70
Standard Deviation	0.786	0.780	1.122	22.543	5.807

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlations among the study variables. A significant positive correlation was found between parent-focused parentification and perfectionism ($\rho = .256, p < .01$), while sibling-focused parentification showed a weak, non-significant correlation ($\rho = .139, ns$). Perceived benefits of parentification correlated negatively with perfectionism ($\rho = -.451, p < .01$) and positively with self-esteem ($\rho = .460, p < .01$), suggesting that viewing caregiving roles positively is linked to lower perfectionism and higher self-esteem. No significant correlations were observed between either parent-focused or sibling-focused parentification and self-esteem.

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These findings partially support the hypotheses and underscore the differing psychological outcomes based on the nature and perception of parentification.

Table 2 Linear Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable	R	R ²	F	Sig.	Predictor	Beta	t	Sig.
Perfectionism	0.553	0.305	22.715	0.000	Parent Focused	0.221	2.672	0.008
					Sibling Focused	0.174	2.047	0.042
					Perceived Benefits	-0.500	-7.229	0.000
Self-Esteem	0.528	0.279	20.003	0.000	Parent Focused	0.037	0.433	0.665
					Sibling Focused	-0.024	-0.279	0.781
					Perceived Benefits	0.529	7.509	0.000

Table 2 presents the results of a linear regression analysis examining the effects of parentification dimensions on perfectionism and self-esteem. For perfectionism, the model was significant ($R = 0.553$, $R^2 = 0.305$, $F = 22.715$, $p < .001$), with parent-focused ($\beta = 0.221$, $p = .008$) and sibling-focused parentification ($\beta = 0.174$, $p = .042$) as significant positive predictors, and perceived benefits as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.500$, $p < .001$). For self-esteem, the model was also significant ($R = 0.528$, $R^2 = 0.279$, $F = 20.003$, $p < .001$), with only perceived benefits significantly predicting self-esteem positively ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < .001$), while parent-focused and sibling-focused parentification were not significant predictors. These results suggest that caregiving roles contribute to perfectionism, whereas self-esteem is more strongly influenced by how beneficial these roles are perceived to be.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to investigate the impact of parentification on perfectionism and self-esteem on daughters in Indian families. This study examined the relationships between three dimensions of parentification—parent-focused, sibling-focused, and perceived benefits—and two key psychological outcomes: perfectionism and self-esteem in daughters of Indian families. Grounded in the socio-cultural context of India, where familial obligations, gender roles, and emotional caregiving are deeply rooted, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of how early caregiving experiences shape adult personality traits and mental well-being.

As hypothesised, a significant positive relationship was found between parent-focused parentification and perfectionism. This supports previous research, which posits that children, particularly daughters, who are required to meet the emotional needs of their parents, may develop unrealistic internal standards and a fear of failure (Mukhtar et al., 2024; Hooper et al., 2011). The constant emotional burden and the absence of validation may lead them to believe that they must be perfect to maintain harmony or gain approval. Such internalized expectations are particularly relevant in Indian households, where daughters are often expected to uphold family reputation and emotional cohesion (Chaudhary & Sharma, 2019). This aligns with Menon et al. (2024), who found that

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perceived parental expectations in India significantly contribute to maladaptive perfectionism, often motivated by fear of negative evaluation.

Sibling-focused parentification, however, did not exhibit a significant relationship with either perfectionism or self-esteem in the correlation analysis. While the regression model suggested a modest link to perfectionism, the overall association was weak. This is consistent with the work of Tomeny et al. (2016), who noted that sibling caregiving may sometimes be experienced positively or viewed as normative within family systems, especially in collectivist cultures like India.

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its examination of the perceived benefits of parentification. The findings revealed a negative correlation with perfectionism and a positive correlation with self-esteem, suggesting that when caregiving roles are viewed positively, they may protect against self-critical tendencies and foster a healthy sense of self-worth. This resonates with findings by Borchet et al. (2020) and Sowa (2024), who emphasized that not all forms of parentification lead to dysfunction—positive reframing and emotional meaning-making can have developmental advantages. In families where children feel appreciated or where their contributions are seen as valuable, early caregiving may foster resilience, competence, and maturity.

Surprisingly, neither parent-focused nor sibling-focused parentification showed significant direct relationships with self-esteem. This deviates from previous assumptions that caregiving burdens are directly associated with lower self-worth (Steans, 2024). A potential explanation could be the absence of emotional reinforcement from caregivers or cultural norms that discourage emotional expression. In the Indian context, daughters may be expected to “do what is needed” without acknowledgement, leading to a neutral or even suppressed impact on self-esteem unless they personally perceive their roles as meaningful.

Additionally, the results affirm the broader theoretical understanding of perfectionism. Maladaptive perfectionism—rooted in fear, criticism, and emotional pressure—can have detrimental effects on emotional health and self-image (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Dunkley et al., 2012). The negative correlation found between perfectionism and self-esteem in this study supports Khossousi et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis, which noted that individuals with higher perfectionistic concerns often report lower levels of self-worth. Therefore, in parentified daughters, the perfectionistic drive may not serve as a motivator but rather as a coping mechanism to mask insecurity and maintain family functionality.

These findings underscore that parentification is not a monolithic experience. Its impact is influenced by the type of caregiving role assumed, the relational dynamics involved, and most importantly, the subjective meaning attached to the experience. While parent-focused caregiving may cultivate perfectionistic tendencies due to emotional burden, perceived benefits of caregiving, especially when viewed as meaningful or identity-affirming, can serve as psychological strengths.

Implications and Limitations

This study has several implications for understanding parentification, particularly within the Indian context. The finding that perceived benefits of caregiving are associated with positive outcomes highlights the importance of considering individual interpretations of family roles.

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Additionally, the association between parent-focused parentification and higher perfectionism underscores the need for clinical interventions that address this specific form of parentification, given its potential detrimental effects on mental health.

The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality. The reliance on self-report measures may have introduced bias. Furthermore, the sample may not fully represent the broader Indian population, and future research should strive for greater diversity. Finally, more research is needed to clarify the precise mechanisms through which parentification influences psychological outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the limited but growing literature on parentification in Indian families. While parent-focused roles can contribute to perfectionistic stress, perceiving caregiving positively may bolster self-esteem. These insights may inform culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions for young women. Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of early identification of parentification experiences and their psychological effects. Mental health professionals, educators, and parents must work collaboratively to foster environments where caregiving roles are equitably distributed and emotionally validated. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts and the role of sibling dynamics more deeply in shaping these outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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