

Research Paper

Exploring The Relationship Between Parentification and Burnout in Personal and Professional Spaces Among Adults

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of elder siblings who experienced parentification, with a focus on its impact on emotional well-being, relational dynamics, and coping mechanisms. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six English-speaking working young adults aged 18–45 years who met the clinical cut-off for parentification (≥ 85) on Mika's Parentification Scale. Thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts generated four core themes: Relationship Patterns (among family, sibling, romantic relationships, and friendships and peers); Responsibility vs Self-Neglect; Emotional Exhaustion and Coping Strategies; and Performativeness vs Performance. Findings revealed how early caregiving roles shaped relational boundaries, fostered self-sacrificial tendencies, and influenced perceptions of intimacy and trust. Participants reported high emotional labor, recurring burnout, and reliance on both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. The tension between outward competence and internal distress emerged as a salient feature of their narratives. These insights underscore the long-term psychosocial consequences of parentification and highlight the need for interventions addressing self-care, boundary-setting, and authentic self-expression. Implications for counselling practice and future research on sibling birth order effects are discussed.

Keywords: *Parentification, Elder siblings, Emotional exhaustion, Relationship patterns, Performance, Self Neglect, Thematic analysis*

Parentification of children has been a long-term practice in history to post modern times, where elder siblings have taken responsibility for their younger siblings, household work, dropping their own personal needs and supporting their families with finances and necessary needs. This has even spilled into their adult lives, taking care of ill parents or siblings with disabilities affecting their healthcare needs and falling into caregiver burnout (Chase, 1999).

Parentification can be defined as a “functional role reversal in which the child sacrifices their own needs for attention and comfort towards accommodating and caring for logistical and emotional needs of the parent” (Chase, 1999). The concept of “Parent child” was first introduced in 1967 which explained the rise of children assuming parental responsibilities in

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lower economic families, being forced to work early and indulge in childcare of their younger siblings. (Minuchin et al, 1967)

Burnout can be defined as a state of physical, emotional exhaustion, fatigue and frustration and inability to achieve expected outcomes with a lack of rest (Fredenburger,1974). On the other hand in parentified siblings, one can find caregiver burnout which can be defined as physical and mental exhaustion of one's own resources and fatigue caused by caring for others who might be ill and need support.

The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between the parentified child and the kinds of burnout experienced. Following the theory of Anna Freud's "broken home" (1965) leading to vacuum of a loss, filled by the child in a parental role. The interactions between the child and the parent also leads to the learned responses of caregiving beyond the family role and in their personal and professional workplaces.

The final aim of this study is an attempt to inform research which is current and up-to-date and themes related to the underlying factors in this area and understand the impact of parentification of children and the burnouts they experience. This will be done by the qualitative method of research which tries to understand the individual's unique perception, lived experiences and social reality. With the use of Thematic analysis over the experience of certain individuals, their experiences and how they cope and manage to live with the aftermath of being a parentified child. Elder siblings i.e. First borns have been chosen on the basis of Adler's Birth order theory describing characteristics of a first born child, specifically as the "responsible" one.

Research question: Exploring the relationship between the parentification of children and experienced caregiver burnout in professional and personal spaces.

METHOD

The present study examines how experiences of parentification shape young adults' perceptions and experiences of burnout in personal and professional spaces. The focus is on how such early role reversals, particularly among elder siblings, spill over into attitudes, traits, and role-taking behaviors that influence their engagement with stress and exhaustion in adulthood.

Research paradigm and approach

This research adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, grounded in a relativist ontology that acknowledges multiple subjective realities. An interpretivist epistemology underpins the study, emphasizing the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants through dialogue (Gill, 2014; Smith, 2007). The axiology recognizes that the researcher's values, background, and reflexivity influence the research process, and these influences are documented and reflected upon to maintain transparency and rigor (Redman, 2018).

Theoretical framework

Three key frameworks guide this study. Parentification theory (Mika et al., 1987) provides the foundation for understanding the early role reversals that characterize the phenomenon. Role-taking theory (Groggel et al., 2022) explains how cognitive and emotional tendencies to assume others' roles can contribute to vulnerability to burnout. Finally, Maslach's

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conceptualization of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001) offers a structure for understanding emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment as they are subjectively experienced.

Research design

A qualitative phenomenological design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology, in particular, supports an interpretive stance, enabling the researcher to uncover the meanings participants ascribe to parentification and burnout within their life contexts (Smith, 2007).

Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of the study is to explore how parentification influences burnout experiences in young adults. The objectives are: (1) to describe experiences of parentification among elder siblings, (2) to examine how participants perceive and describe burnout in personal and professional domains, and (3) to understand how traits and attitudes derived from parentification influence these burnout experiences. These objectives directly address the research problem by connecting early caregiving roles to later emotional and occupational functioning.

Research questions

1. How do elder siblings experience parentification within their family context?
2. How do they perceive and articulate burnout in personal and professional settings?
3. What are the ways associated with parentification that influence their experiences of burnout?

These questions provide a focused framework for exploring the phenomena while keeping the scope confined to the selected population.

Variables and operational definitions

Parentification is defined as the role reversal in which a child assumes caregiving responsibilities for parents or siblings (Mika et al., 1987). Burnout is defined according to Maslach et al. (2001) as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Role-taking traits are conceptualized as cognitive and emotional tendencies to assume the perspectives and responsibilities of others (Groggel et al., 2022). As this is a qualitative study, these constructs are explored as phenomena of interest rather than as variables subjected to measurement.

Research setting

The study was conducted online with participants based in Bangalore, India, between March and April 2025. Online data collection allowed participants to engage in interviews from familiar environments, promoting openness and reducing logistical constraints (Saunders et al., 2015).

Population and sampling

The target population comprised young adult elder siblings aged 18 to 45 who reported experiences of parentification. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants most likely to provide rich and relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2020). A homogeneous sampling approach was adopted to focus on elder siblings in chronological birth order, as their experiences of role reversal are often distinct (Smith et al., 2009). Ten

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participants completed the screening survey, and six who met inclusion criteria were selected for interviews. Inclusion criteria required participants to be elder siblings, reside in Bangalore, and demonstrate elevated parentification scores. Those who did not meet these criteria were excluded. This sample size was deemed adequate for achieving data saturation in phenomenological inquiry (Guetterman, 2015; Subedi, 2021). The 18-45 age band reflects definitions frequently used in the literature. For instance, a recent systematic review defined young adults as 18–35, providing an evidence base for age boundaries (Cereño, 2023). Extending to 45 allowed inclusions of mid-career individuals still operating within a broadly young-adult life stage

Data collection methods

A two-stage data collection process was followed. First, participants were screened using Mika's Parentification Scale (Mika et al., 1987) administered via Google Forms. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences of burnout and role-taking. The interview guide was developed based on Maslach's burnout framework and role-taking theory, and it was validated by a field expert to ensure conceptual clarity (Zhang et al., 2024). Field notes were taken after each interview to capture contextual impressions and researcher reflections.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through online channels and invited to complete the screening form. Eligible individuals were contacted to schedule interviews, which lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted via Zoom. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher engaged in reflexive journaling throughout to document personal assumptions and analytic decisions (Newman, 2021). An audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency and rigor in the analytic process.

Ethical considerations

- Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained digitally, with participants briefed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and their rights, including the ability to withdraw without penalty (Xu et al., 2020; Manti & Licari, 2018).
- Confidentiality was maintained by assigning codes to transcripts and storing data in encrypted, password-protected files (Crow & Wiles, 2008; Newman, 2021).
- Reflexivity was used to enhance confirmability and dependability (Bellalem et al., 2023), primarily due to the researcher's own disposition as the second born in their family, in ties with their elder sibling and observant of them.

Data analysis plan

Manual coding was used, and a codebook will be developed iteratively during analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Codes were generated inductively, and themes were constructed through ongoing reflexive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trustworthiness was supported through thick description, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling (Bellalem et al., 2023; Newman, 2021).

A major delimitation would include the age criteria being set between 18-45 years of age, which excludes any parentified adults aged 45 and above in their late adulthood, and below 18 years in their adolescence or childhood. Also owing to the accessibility for interviews

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and any parental consent procedures that may take more time resources, this was set in the study. Chronological birth order of elder siblings instead of perceived birth order was chosen, since the perception of birth order is not purely attributed to the participant, but also their family dynamics, which would involve extensive procedures and time resources taking into account the same.

Parentification and burnout codebook

Themes	Subthemes	Definition	Example from Transcript
Relationship Pattern	Family Dynamics	Role reversal with parents, where the participant took up parental duties for both their parent(s) and sibling, as well as spousal role with their parent(s)	"I had to take on the role of a parent and therefore also a caregiver." - AM "My mom and my dad would have their own problems in their relationship... And she'd come to me." - RVM "Adult issues that I shouldn't have been a part of in the first place." - AM
	Sibling Dynamics	Sibling focused caregiving in the past or in present, and an equivalent and warm or cordial relationship between them.	"Growing up I've always been my brother's shield no matter what." - NM
	Romantic Relationships	Lack of space to pursue, inability to receive care from partners or emotional drain in caregiving for partner	"The receiving part of the relationship was quite uncomfortable in the beginning." - ND "Sometimes it does affect my romantic relationship, because sometimes I feel that I have to be there for the other person more than what I can be. And that affects like in the sense I feel drained, I feel emotionally exhausted. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed because of how much I am giving to that person" - SH
	Friendships and Peers	Conditional and transactional view of relationships by participants, lack of trust in reaching out to them for help in various extents	"Even though I know that this person is there for me... it is still so hard." - MN "Growing up, I also thought relationships were very transactional... I didn't sort of believe in love."- RVM
Responsibility versus Self Neglect	Duty Mindset and Expectations	Physical and mental self-neglect over losing	"I'm in a perpetual state of guilt and regret all the time." -

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Themes	Subthemes	Definition	Example from Transcript
		focus on obligatory duties and roles, high expectations internalised and self-criticism if not met	AM "Like a candle that burns out and just left with, like, a little bit of wax." - NM
	Performance Pressure	Obligatory focus and external expectations that lead to internalised duty mindset	"Putting up a performance for others... but no one really sees what goes on backstage." - SH
	Values tied to Helping and Boundary setting	Perfectionism, self-criticism and internalised standards, self-awareness	"You're not able to, like, help them in a way that they need help." - RVM "At least a little bit I can set the boundary and be like okay no I need I have some other things." - SH
	Leadership and Management	Household management, task and role monitoring in professional and personal spaces	"It would be me that would help out in the cooking and getting the place ready" - MN "They know who's going to divide up all the work, they know who's going to give the ideas." - NM
Performativeness vs Performance	Lack of trust in help taking	Putting on a complex external view of performance to avoid showing vulnerability in task performance	"Having to always have a brave face, always going to have your shit together" "Everything's fine. Nothing happened, even when it was not fine." - MN "There was just unconditional help. There was no Hey, can I do this for you?" - NM
	Personal Accomplishment	Cynicism, vicious self-criticism and feelings of shame and guilt when standards are not met	"It could be like a chaos, like going four or five monologues at the same time." - ND "Since so many people expect that much from me then that naturally becomes my expectation of myself." - SH
Emotional Exhaustion	Masking and suppression	Hypervigilance and self-neglect, task avoidance, putting up face	"I need to cover up emotions, I need to be sensible, sensitive, gentle, polite, intellectual." - NM "I feel like I want to cry... But

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Themes	Subthemes	Definition	Example from Transcript
			I don't know how to let it out." - RVM
	Burnout	Emotional exhaustion and low mistake tolerance	"My throat will become dry, I'll get chest pains, I'll be very sweaty. I'll feel very fatigued." - SH "I feel very spent and very empty." - AM "I'm just too tired to deal with it, and let the consequences come." - AM
	Coping	Long-term coping such as self-awareness and pattern recognition and awareness, as well as social isolation and avoidance of emotions and tasks	"Indulging in my addiction or whatever, like, my vices, like, there was a point in my life where I was smoking a lot." - RVM "I take alone time." - SH "I've been in therapy for for a few years now." - NM "Second year of college, I have the confidence to be like, yeah. No." - NM

RESULTS

Six participants (age 22–26; 5 females, 1 male) who scored on the Parentification Scale (Mika, 1974) were interviewed. Analysis produced four core themes with related subthemes: **(1) Relationship patterns; (2) Responsibilities versus self-neglect; (3) Performative functions versus performance; and (4) Emotional exhaustion.**

Theme 1 — Relationship patterns. Participants described both instrumental and emotional role reversal with parents, sibling-focused caregiving, altered romantic relationships, and guarded peer dynamics. Parental role-taking included decision-making and crisis management duties that were largely one-way rather than reciprocal. Representative parental-role quotes:

“I had to take on the role of a parent and therefore also a caregiver.” — AM.

“My mom and my dad would have their own problems in their relationship... And she'd come to me.” — RVM.

Sibling caregiving was a central childhood experience for most participants; several described later reciprocal warmth with younger siblings that served as a partial protective factor: “Growing up I've always been my brother's shield no matter what.” — NM.

Romantic relationships were affected through difficulty receiving care and limited emotional bandwidth: “The receiving part of the relationship was quite uncomfortable in the

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beginning.” — ND. Friendships were often experienced as conditional or transactional, producing hesitation to seek help: “Even though I know that this person is there for me... it is still so hard.” — MN.

Theme 2 — Responsibilities versus self-neglect. Participants reported a pervasive duty mindset, internalized perfectionism, and persistent self-criticism tied to familial expectations. Physical and cognitive symptoms (fatigue, burnout) and difficulty prioritizing self-care were common. Representative quotes:

“I’m in a perpetual state of guilt and regret all the time.” — AM.

“Like a candle that burns out and just left with, like, a little bit of wax.” — NM.

Attempts to set boundaries and leadership/management roles (instrumental parentification) coexisted with difficulties in daily task management:

“At least a little bit I can set the boundary and be like okay no I need I have some other things.” — SH.

“It would be me that would help out in the cooking and getting the place ready.” — MN.

Theme 3 — Performative functions versus performance. Participants described masking exhaustion and maintaining an outwardly competent identity (e.g., “the good girl,” “strong one”) that impeded help-seeking and delegation. This performative identity linked with diminished personal accomplishment and cynicism. Illustrative quotes:

“Having to always have a brave face, always going to have your shit together.”

“Everything’s fine. Nothing happened, even when it was not fine.” — MN.

Theme 4 — Emotional exhaustion. Emotional suppression, hypervigilance, task avoidance, and psychosomatic symptoms were reported across contexts. Coping strategies ranged from interpersonal withdrawal and brief breaks to therapy (two participants) and, in one case, substance use. Representative quotes:

“I feel like I want to cry... But I don’t know how to let it out.” — RVM.

“I feel very spent and very empty.” — AM.

“Indulging in my addiction or whatever, like, my vices, like, there was a point in my life where I was smoking a lot.” — RVM.

“I take alone time.” — SH.

CONCLUSION

- Major findings distilled into four core themes of Relationship patterns — pervasive role reversal with parents and varied sibling dynamics (protective warmth in some cases, enduring one-way support in others), Responsibilities versus self-neglect i.e. an internalised “duty mindset,” perfectionistic self-criticism, and lack of self-care; Performativeness versus performance — masking of fatigue and reluctance to delegate, preserving a caregiving identity; and Emotional exhaustion seen with suppression/hypervigilance, task avoidance/procrastination, and coping via withdrawal or, in one case, substance use. These experiential patterns map onto burnout dimensions (emotional exhaustion, cynicism/depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment) described in literature (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and are consistent with theoretical accounts that link sustained role-taking to emotional drain (e.g., Groggel et al., 2022; Hooper, 2007). Elder-sibling parentification commonly involves both instrumental and emotional role reversal that persist into young adulthood and shape functioning across family,

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- Parentification-related processes — repeated cognitive/emotional role-taking, internalised perfectionism, boundary diffusion, and low trust in help-seeking appear to contribute to patterns of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment consistent with established burnout aspects. Sibling warmth and reciprocal support can act as protective factors, producing various results resilience for some, chronic exhaustion for others. These conclusions answer the research questions by linking lived parentification experiences to subjective burnout phenomena and identifying related mechanisms.
- **Theoretical significance.** The findings support integrating attachment/family-systems perspectives on parentification with role-taking accounts of empathic labour and burnout models (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Burnout theory would benefit from explicitly incorporating family-origin role burdens and performative identity processes as predisposing variables. Clinicians and supervisors could screen for parentification histories in young adults presenting with exhaustion, perfectionism, or boundary difficulties. Interventions prioritising boundary skills, self-compassion, and safe help-seeking are indicated.

Limitations

- **Methodological limitations.** Include a small, purposive sample that was predominantly female, trainee counsellors, limiting generalisations. The use of a single self-report screening instrument (Mika et al., 1987) and a conservatively high cut-off (≥ 85) focused the study on pronounced cases of parentification but reduced representativeness. Experiences are retrospective and subject to reconstruction bias. Trustworthiness relied primarily on reflexive journaling; additional strategies (e.g., member checking, inter-rater reliability) were not employed, constraining confirmability.
- Limitations include a small, gender-skewed sample, and recruitment via a screening instrument (Mika et al., 1987), all of which limit generalizability. Future research could test with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs (Zach et al., 2021), and evaluate interventions (boundary training, sibling support) for their effectiveness in preventing the transition from caregiving competence to chronic exhaustion.

Recommendations

Future studies should use larger, more diverse samples, employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to trace trajectories from childhood role shifts to adult burnout. Methodologically, researchers should triangulate data sources, and adopt additional trustworthiness procedures to strengthen credibility.

DISCUSSION

This study documents how pronounced parentification among elder siblings maps onto sustained interpersonal role-taking, internalized duty/perfectionism, performative self-presentation, and emotional exhaustion. The emergent themes align with prior work describing instrumental and emotional parentification (Hooper, 2007; Chen et al., 2019) and with core burnout dimensions (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Leiter, 1988), while adding process-level detail about family-origin role mechanisms in a young Indian adult sample. Persistent role reversal, leadership/management responsibilities, and sibling caregiving mirror Hooper (2007) and Chen et al. (2019). Participants' masking, cynicism, reduced personal accomplishment, task avoidance, and psychosomatic strain resonate with Maslach

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& Jackson's burnout framework and interpersonal formulations of burnout (Leiter, 1988). Internalized perfectionism, punitive self-criticism, and boundary diffusion accord with family-system descriptions of caregiving burden (Boumans et al., 2018) and role-taking mechanisms (Groggel et al., 2022). The heterogeneous role of sibling warmth—sometimes protective, sometimes absent—parallels Yağmurlu et al. (2020) and Borchet et al. (2020).

The data support extending burnout models to explicitly incorporate early family role burdens and performative identity processes as predisposing variables. An integrative account—linking attachment-based internal working models and family-system role reversals to sustained cognitive–emotional load—emerges: early instrumental/emotional caregiving fosters a duty-oriented self that masks distress, erodes help-seeking, and amplifies vulnerability to exhaustion (Hooper, 2007; Groggel et al., 2022; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emphasizing family-origin role dynamics as upstream contributors reframes burnout as not only an occupational phenomenon but one rooted partly in developmental relational histories.

For clinicians and supervisors—particularly in counselling and mental-health training—screening for histories of parentification can aid early identification of burnout risk. Interventions should prioritize boundary skills, self-compassion, safe help-seeking, and re-authoring performative identity scripts. Given participants' reports of constructive long-term strategies (assertiveness, identity beyond caregiving), resilience-focused interventions align with findings from informal caregiver literature (Boumans et al., 2018).

The sample's composition (predominantly psychology students/trainees) may have heightened participants' awareness and articulation of constructs like burnout and boundaries, shaping narrative style. Retrospective reporting and professional exposure may amplify recollected parentification. Cultural and gender patterns (female majority, two-child families) likely influenced caregiving adoption and masking tendencies. Selection via the Parentification Scale (Mika et al., 1987) produced a purposive sample with pronounced parentification; findings therefore speak best to pronounced cases rather than population prevalence. Small sample size ($n=6$) and demographic clustering limit generalizability. Reflexive journaling and bracketing were used to mitigate interpretive bias, but replication with a broader, more diverse sample is needed.

This study provides process-level evidence linking early family role burdens to burnout processes and performative identity strategies. Future work should quantitatively test the proposed integrative model, examine moderators such as sibling warmth and cultural norms, and evaluate targeted interventions (boundary training, self-compassion, help-seeking) for individuals with histories of parentification.

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Conflict of Interest

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