

IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD PARENTIFICATION ON EMOTIONAL REGULATION DIFFICULTIES AND SELF-CONCEPT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Purpose_ This study aims to examine the extent to which childhood parentification predicts emotional regulation difficulties and shapes self-concept within a university student population.

Design/methodology/approach_ A quantitative design was used to analyze the study variables among 130 selected students (17 to 25) from universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Standardized tools were used such as Parentification Inventory (PI), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) and Robson Self-Concept Questionnaire (RSCQ). Data collection followed ethical guidelines, assuring informed consent. SPSS version 26 was used for statistical analyses, which includes regression analysis and independent sample t-test.

Findings_ Results indicated that childhood parentification is a positive predictor of both self-concept and emotional regulation difficulties, explaining 18.5% and 9.6% of the variance. Gender was not a significant predictor of self-concept in the regression model, nor were significant gender variations found in levels of parentification or emotional regulation difficulties. However, statistically significant gender differences emerged in self-concept, with female students reporting higher scores than their male counterparts, indicating a moderate and meaningful difference between groups.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is globally recognized as a critical developmental time period during which individuals learn to regulate emotions, develop a

self-identity, and cultivate knowledge of themselves in relation to others. These foundational outcomes are heavily depended

upon the parental environment, which ideally provides the emotional support and provide ways necessary for healthy growth. When caregivers respond sensitively to a child's needs, the child is likely to develop robust interpersonal sensitivity and emotional resilience. However, in certain family systems, children are forced into responsibilities that are beyond their developmental capacity. This phenomenon, known as parentification, involves a functional role reversal where the child becomes responsible for fulfilling the parental, emotional, or instrumental needs of the family (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Jurkovic & Thirkield, 2020). In these family systems, the child is forced to provide care rather than receives the care and support that is important for normal developmental growth

The impact of early caregiving relationships develops internal schemas that are important for emotional well-being throughout the lifespan (Thompson, 2016). While supportive caregiving enables children to explore their world with a positive self-perception on the other hand chronic family stressors and crisis such as parental mental illness, substance abuse, or marital conflict can lead the child to perform caretaking roles. Parentification is generally categorized into two forms: instrumental parentification, involving physical household task or chores and sibling care and emotional parentification, which has psychological impact as the child serves as a therapist or mediator for adult conflicts (Hooper et al., 2011). Although some responsibility can foster early maturity but progressively inappropriate parentification often negatively impacts the normal psychological growth, leading to emotional exhaustion and a persistent belief that one's worth is tied only to fulfil the external demands (Fitzgerald, 2005).

One of the most significantly affected domains in parentified individuals is emotion regulation the process by which individuals process, evaluate, and understand their emotional experiences (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Because parentified children are often discouraged from expressing their own pain

to avoid burdening an already stressed family, they frequently develop emotional suppression or chronic inhibition. According to the Process Model of Emotion Regulation, these individuals may rely heavily on maladaptive strategies like expressive suppression, hiding internal distress to maintain an outward appearance of competence (Gross, 2015). Over time, this leads to significant difficulties in identifying emotions and managing stress, as the crucial co-regulation usually provided by caregivers was absent during their early developing years (Sansone, 2024; Nejad et al., 2021).

At the same time, parentification deeply impacts the individual's self-concept, the collection of thoughts and feelings a person holds about who they are (Marsh et al., 2020). These individuals often internalize a performance-based self-concept, feeling valuable only when helping others. According to Self-Discrepancy Theory, a profound discrepancy occurs between the actual self and the ought self the version of themselves defined by duty and obligation (Higgins, 1987). This discrepancy often manifests as identity confusion and a reliance on external validation, which becomes particularly problematic during the transition into emerging adulthood (Borchet & Lewandowska-Walter, 2022).

In the context of South Asia, and specifically within the sociocultural framework of Pakistan, these dynamics are often shaped by traditional values and norms that emphasize self-sacrifice. Cultural conditioning frequently misinterprets parentification as commendable maturity, leaving the underlying psychological distress unaddressed (Irfan et al., 2024; Tiwari & Woodward, 2025). While this role reversal may start in childhood, its impacts are most acutely felt during the university years. Emerging adulthood is a phase defined by identity exploration and the pursuit of independence (Arnett, 2014) however, for students with a history of parentification, the academic environment can trigger feelings of inadequacy and severe emotional burnout (Sharma & Khanam, 2023).

Despite the growing body of international literature, there is a lacking of empirical research exploring how the dual burden of impaired emotion regulation and a fragmented self-concept impacts university students within Pakistan. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the impact of childhood parentification on emotion regulation difficulties and self-concept among university students. By examining these variables, this research seeks to inform campus counseling strategies such as adaptive emotional expression, developing resilience and promote interventions that help at-risk students transition from the role of lifelong caretaker to autonomous, emotionally regulated adults.

Methodology

Design

The present study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the impact of childhood parentification on emotion regulation difficulties and self-concept. The study was conducted in two phases: a pilot study to confirm the psychometric properties of the instruments, and a main study to test the predictive impact of the variables and examine group differences.

Sample and Selection

The sample consisted of 130 undergraduate students (including both males and females) from various universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to recruit participants aged 18 to 25 years. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in a university program and to have experienced parentification in their early lives. Students with severe psychiatric disorders or those outside the target age range were excluded. Data collection was carried out over a period of 6 to 10 months to ensure data quality and minimize the impact of missing values.

Measuring Instruments

Three standardized and validated instruments were used, along with a demographic information sheet to collect data on age, gender, and family background.

- **Parentification Inventory (PI):** Developed by Hooper et al. (2011), this 22-item scale assesses the extent of childhood role reversal across subscales of parent-focused, sibling-focused, and perceived benefits of parentification. It is a five-point Likert scale. In the pilot study for this research, the scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$).
- **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS):** Developed by Gratz and Roemer (2004), this 36-item instrument measures challenges in emotional monitoring and modification across six domains. It uses a five-point Likert scale with 11 reverse-scored items. The pilot study yielded a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.84$.
- **Robson Self-Concept Questionnaire (RSCQ):** To measure global self-concept, the 30-item scale by Robson (1989) was utilized. It evaluates self-worth and competence via seven subscales. This five-point Likert scale includes 16 reverse-scored items and showed a reliability of $\alpha = 0.85$ in the pilot phase.

Procedure

The research adhered to strict ethical standards. Following departmental approval, participants were reached in university classrooms and common areas. All participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study objectives and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. After the pilot study ($n=50$) confirmed instrument reliability, the main data collection was completed. Responses were screened for outliers and missing data before being coded for statistical processing.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for demographic profiling. Regression analysis was the primary statistical tool used to determine the impact of childhood parentification on emotion regulation difficulties and self-concept. Additionally, independent samples t -tests were conducted to examine significant differences based on gender.

Cronbach's alpha was used to verify the internal consistency of the scales within the study sample.

Results

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test among Childhood Parentification, Emotion Regulation Difficulties and Self Concept in Male and Female (N = 130)

Variables	Male M	Male S. D	Female M	Female S. D	t	P	Cohen's d
Childhood Parentification	72.6	9.88	75.1	13.1	-1.243	.216	0.22
Emotion Regulation Difficulties	102.6	15.31	104.7	19.3	-0.697	.487	0.13
Self-Concept	110.4	32.62	124.60	27.7	-2.669	.009	0.47

The above table indicate the results of independent sample t -test of parentification among male and female. the mean value for parentification is (M=72.61). and the value of standard deviation is (S. D=9.88). and female (M = 72.61, SD = 13.18). it indicates that the rate of parentification higher among the females as compare to males. Similarly for emotion regulation difficulties, males (M = 102.62, SD = 15.31) and females (M = 104.75, SD = 19.33). which indicate that emotional regulation difficulties higher among females as compare to males. Similarly for self-concept, male (M = 110.41, SD = 32.63) and females (M =124.61, SD =27.77). Which indicate that females scored higher on self-concept as compared to males. The above table indicate the result of the independent t-test of the parentification is (t=-1.243) where the p value (p=.216). which indicate that the result is not statistically significant and hypothesis is rejected. The above table indicate the results of the

emotional regulation difficulties t value (t = 0.697) and with p value (p = .487). which indicate that the result is not statistically significant and hypothesis is rejected. The above table indicate the result of the independent t-test of self-concept t value (t = -2.669) and p value (p = .009) which indicate that the result is statistically significant and hypothesis is accepted. The above table indicate results of independent t-test of the parentification range of Cohen's D is (d = 0.22) consider small effect size showing a minor difference between the groups. The above table indicate results of independent t-test of the emotional regulation difficulties range of Cohen's d is (d = 0.13) consider small effect size showing a small difference between the groups. The above table indicate results of independent t-test of the self-concept range of Cohen's d is (d = 0.47) consider medium effect size showing a moderate difference between the groups.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Emotion Regulation Difficulties(N=130)

Variables	SE	B	B	95% C. I		T	P
				LL	UL		
PI	.127	.305	.455	.12	.70	3.576	.001
Gender	2.963	.24	.818	-4.99	6.63	.276	.783
R	.31						
R ²	.096						
A. R	.75						

A multiple regression analysis conducted to examine whether parentification predicts emotion regulation difficulties (DERS) among university students, while controlling for gender. The regression model was statistically significant. The p-value is .001, which is lower than 0.05, so the result is statistically significant (F =3.126)

explaining 9.6% of the variances in emotion regulation among university students. The confidence interval also includes (0.12 to 0.70), which means the effect is positive. This suggest that higher level of parentification significantly predict greater emotion regulation difficulties.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting a Self-Concept(N=130)

Variables	SE	β	B	95%C. I		T	P
				LL	UL		
PI	.215	.366	.976	.555	1.397	4.546	.000
Gender	4.984	.190	11.726	1.957	21.495	2.353	.20
R	.430						
R ²	.185						
R	.172						

A multiple regression analysis conducted to examine whether parentification predicts self-concept among university students, while controlling for gender. The regression model was statistically significant. The p-value is .000, which is lower than 0.05, so the result is statistically significant (F =14.441) explaining 18.5% of the variance in self-concept among university students. The confidence interval also includes (1.96 to 21.50), which means the effect is positive. This suggest that higher level of parentification significantly predict greater self-concept.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the impact of childhood parentification on emotional regulation difficulties and self-concept among university students. The results show vital perspective into how parentification in the family

systems develop emotional functioning and self-identity. Children are expected to fulfil adult responsibilities untimely, that interrupt the usual roles. These formative years show up long standing psychological impact, especially when person shift into university life, where autonomy and personality turn into main goal (Hawkins,2024). The constructs were measured correctly and reliably, the reliability analysis verified that all instruments used in the study showed internal consistency (Hooper, 2007). The reliability of measurements is crucial when assessing complex psychological variables as it validates that results indicate actual relationships rather than measurement error. The consistency found in the current study aligned with existing researches that has verified these instruments over various populations. The study provides vital outcomes that emotional dysregulation is predicted by

childhood parentification among university students. With respect to the process model of emotion regulation, early interactions where caregivers provide supportive environment that help build adaptive emotional coping. On the other hand, parentified children are anticipated to neglect and suppress their own needs and prioritize the needs of others, thereby they lack support that was necessary for their normal developmental growth. Consequently, emotional dysregulation occurs over time as they rely on unhealthy coping skills such as emotional inhibition and hiding feelings (Fitzgerald, 2005). These outcomes are coherent with existing study that is demonstrating that early emotional dysfunction cause long lasting unprocessed emotions (Hawkins, 2024). These findings further align with previous studies that emotional dysregulation may occur due to early role reversal because of invisible boundaries and chronic stress enduring during early years (Fitzgerald, 2005). Parentified individuals were forced to fulfill demanding responsibilities beyond their ability that prevent them to develop effective coping strategies due to ongoing pressure to perform the duties. Within university settings, these unsettled problems can may cause hindrance in adapting to social and academic demands and hypersensitivity. That's why it is important to consider developmental history at the time of examining emotional functioning. Overall, it is highlighted that early relational experiences can may cause difficulties in regulating emotions (Hooper, 2007). Furthermore, the analysis found that the self-concept is significantly predicted by childhood parentification among university students. This indicates that how individual perceives themselves can be influenced by caregiving experience. The relationship between parentification and self-concept provides further information for the growth of self-concept (Hawkins, 2024). Parentified individuals may develop a self-concept that is influenced by early caregiving roles and external expectations. They may internalize early family responsibilities and present themselves as competent and mature. The developmental stage

in which individuals are expected to explore themselves their role-based self-perception becomes more prominent. This result indicates that how individual see themselves are shaped by early experiences of caregiving, that shape their self-worth and identity, as indicated by earlier studies (Mukhtar et al., 2024). Hawkins (2024) notes that parentified individuals may develop a sense of self heavily influenced by early roles and external expectations. While traditional literature frequently emphasizes the negative repercussions of role reversal such as identity confusion and emotional distress (Çetin Demirtaş et al., 2025) the results of this study offer a different perspective by showing a positive predictive relationship. Specifically, Tiwari and Woodward (2025) infer that when caregiving roles are navigated within certain cultural contexts, they can lead to a sense of resilience and "meaning-making," which may explain the positive predictive value found in this research.

Furthermore, students may internalize early family responsibilities and present themselves as highly competent and mature. Mukhtar et al. (2024) indicate that how individuals see themselves is shaped by these early experiences of caregiving, which define their sense of self-worth through perceived utility. However, this transition is complex; Sharma and Khanum (2023) infer that students can enjoy their life more fully when they learn they do not always have to be a supporter for their family. As noted by Çelik Kanca and Demircioğlu (2025), the impact of parentification on self-esteem is still an area of academic debate, with some evidence suggesting that it can foster social competence even while posing risks to emotional health. This suggests that the role reversal becomes internalized as a psychological pattern of "high-functioning" competence that continues to shape identity well into the university years (Zaeiby & Goldner, 2022). The findings indicate no significant gender related differences in parentification and emotion regulation difficulties between male and female university students. This proposes that despite potential differences in the types of roles assigned within the

family, emotional impact of parentification is consistent. While some studies indicate that males are likely to perform instrumental duties and females instrumental parentification, but present study shows no difference.

However, significant gender differences observed in self-concept as female reports higher level of self-concept than male. This may be due to cultural norms where the roles are linked to female identity. They may internalize those roles as part of their self-identity, that may shape structured self-concept. Overall, the findings suggest that identity-related outcomes vary across gender but emotional outcomes may be consistent (Hawkins, 2024). This finding proposed that gender-based social norms, traditions may shape self-concept, especially in communal societies where roles are defined differently based on genders (Cho et al., 2025; Hawkins, 2024).

In addition, awareness of parentification is necessary because individual may function normally but experiencing underlying psychological distress. Overall, the study provides deeper understanding of how early caregiving roles and experience can shape personality and psychological outcomes.

Recommendations

To address the psychological impact of childhood parentification, several recommendations can be proposed based on outcomes of the current study. First, the development of mental health programs should be prioritized by the universities that especially focus on difficulties in emotional regulation. Since the study observed that emotional dysregulation is significantly predicted by childhood parentification, several interventions can help students develop healthier coping strategies such as cognitive reappraisal techniques, stress management workshops and emotional awareness trainings. Instead of relying on maladaptive strategies, these strategies can help students manage and regulate their emotions in effective ways. Secondly, it should incorporate screening for childhood parentification by university counselling services during psychological

assessments. As parentified individuals are seen as responsible and immature, they may not be aware that their identity-related and emotional difficulties are due to early role reversal, so this approach is important. Counselors can provide focused interventions by identifying these early patterns of childhood caregiving and the parentified individuals can work on their personal growth, setting boundaries, and expressing and regulating emotions in a better way. Moreover, within university settings to strengthen self-concept implementation should be done. As the current study found that self-concept is predicted by childhood parentification, several programs can be beneficial that target identity formation, positive self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence. This approach can help differentiate between abnormal role reversal and personal limits (Fitzgerald, 2005). To encourage students to explore their personal values, identity and goals beyond their caregiving roles, workshops should be organized by the counsellors.

Future directions and limitations

It is suggested for future research, to study and explore other variables in-depth that may have impact on the association between childhood parentification, self-concept and emotion dysregulation. Other elements can provide deeper insights of the impact of childhood parentification such as attachment styles, social support and encouragement, cultural factors. To explore how the effects of parentification evolve over time and psychological outcomes, longitudinal studies are recommended. Qualitative studies can also be done to gather personal experiences of the parentified individuals in collectivist cultures. This would help understand the impact of childhood parentification deeply (Hooper, 2007).

Conclusion

On the whole, the current study examined the impact of childhood parentification on emotional regulation difficulties and self-concept among university students. It is demonstrated in the

findings that both emotional regulation difficulties and self-concept are the predictors of childhood parentification. In house, students who endure childhood parentification face difficulty while developing self-concept and manage emotions. Significantly, it is highlighted in the present study that parentification is often an unnoticed and invisible phenomenon, especially in collectivist societies where these roles are normalized. Parentified individuals may experience identity conflict, emotional exhaustion and stress. For providing psychological support and promoting the well-being of students understanding this invisible phenomenon is important. Overall, the outcomes of research emphasize the need to increase awareness and directed interventions. These issues can be addresses and mental health professional can support students to develop authentic self-concept and emotional wellbeing.

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