

FROM EXPERIENCES OF PARENTIFICATION TO THE CHOICE OF HELPING PROFESSIONS: DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY, RISK OF PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT, AND PERSPECTIVES FOR PREVENTION

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Parentification, defined as the reversal of family roles where children take on developmentally inappropriate caregiving responsibilities, has long been recognized as a complex developmental experience with both risk and resource potential (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2007). Research has shown that parentification is linked to increased vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and relational difficulties, but also to heightened empathy, sensitivity, and interpersonal competence (Hooper et al., 2011; Tedgård & Wirtberg, 2021; Dariotis et al., 2023).

The presented research project aims to investigate the relationship between childhood experiences of parentification and the professional functioning of helping professionals. Particular attention is given to the balance between empathy and risk of professional burnout, especially in professions where emotional regulation and boundary-setting are central to clinical effectiveness. This study will compare four professional groups: psychotherapists, physicians (psychiatry, family medicine, oncology), nurses, and a control group of IT specialists.

The quantitative part of the project will use the Filial Responsibility Scale – Adult Version (FRS-A; Jurkovic, 1997) to assess emotional and instrumental parentification, the Perth Empathy Scale (PES; Roberts & Strayer, 1996) to measure empathy, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) to examine emotion regulation strategies, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981) to assess burnout. The qualitative part will include narrative interviews analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on experiences of childhood roles, motivations for career choice, and reflections on boundaries in clinical practice.

The project seeks to provide insights into how early caregiving roles may shape professional identity, empathy, and vulnerability to emotional exhaustion in helping professions. By examining both risks and resources, the study aims to inform preventive and supportive strategies in professional training and supervision. The findings are expected to have practical implications for reducing burnout, strengthening resilience, and fostering sustainable careers in healthcare and psychotherapy.



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