

# Process of Parentification And Construction of Ego Identity in The Cameroonian Adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

Culture and idiosyncratic family configuration play a significant role in neglect, such as parentification. Some family systems may engender an inappropriate overlap in subsystems, with member participating in roles that are traditionally reserved for other members. We have the case of adolescents in parental roles. The adolescent is brought to make personal choices that will have long term repercussions on varied domains of his life. To this effect, the society should give to him the possibility of a psycho-social moratorium which is a necessary period for the construction of a true identity. So how the construction of self-identity would be effectuated in the case of parentified adolescents. We carried out a semi-structured interview on five adolescents in Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon who are in a situation of parentification. For the analysis, we used the content as well as the thematic analysis of the interviews. The findings show that the parentified adolescent have had no time to live the stage of adolescence. They are early parents because of the responsibilities they carry at an age or time they are not ready or prepared for. What is particular and special about them is the extent to which they are able to construct a positive self and give positive self-view of life. So, the process of parentification will have positive repercussions on the construction of ego identity of the adolescent. The findings of this study has shown the importance of contextual study as a good number of literature on parentification have shown the destructive and maladaptive impact of parentification on the development of adolescents.

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## 1. Introduction

Erickson (1968) considers the evolution of identity as a construction that is specific to the period of adolescence. In fact, during this period the adolescent is brought to make personal choices which will have long term repercussions on varied domains of his life. The repercussions will touch the ideological, religious, professional aspects of the life of the adolescent among many other aspects. To enhance the evolution of identity, Erikson (1968) wishes that the society should give to the adolescent the possibility of a psycho social moratorium, that is a period during which commitments are postponed to the future in favor of the roles of experiments. These experiments are susceptible to subsequently found their realizations to truly personal choices without exclusion of infantile identifications which would be henceforth motivated in a different way. It is clear that this period of moratorium and exploration is necessary for the construction of a true identity.

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Given that the period of moratorium is of great importance for the construction of a true identity, we are tempted to ask the question to know what now happens in a situation where identity is imposed on an adolescent for one reason or the other. This is for example the case of children in parents roles who are imposed the identity of a parent. In Cameroon, aspects of parentification are mostly noticed from many angles: children are involved in subsistent activities like selling (groundnuts, water, bananas, oranges and many others), some work as domestic servants, others on farms and a good number in their homes where they carryout a variety of activities like taking care of the younger siblings and of house chores as a result of the absence of the parent especially the mother. These children tidy the house, cook, go to school, take care of their younger ones, and assist them in their homework. In short they act the nurse. However this parentified adolescent is also a child who needs to be cared for by the parents so as to ensure the normal development of the child but this case he is treated as an adult. A good number of questions can emerge among which are the following: what picture does a parented child paint of himself? How is his relationship with peers, parents and authority? What are the reasons advanced on role reversal and how does it impact on the child's development?

### *1.1. The Process of Parentification*

Parentification is the assumption of a parental role by the child, role reversal, and a disturbance in generational boundaries. Chase (1999:5) provided a broad definition that serves as a good starting point for the better understanding of this construct:

*<Despite numerous description of theories, concepts and definitions, it is generally believed that parentification in the family entails a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for logistical or emotional need of the parent>.*

Cross generational boundaries are also referred to in the literature and both "child as parent" and "child as mate" role reversal can be considered to be examples of cross generational boundary transgressions. Boundaries represent the implicit and explicit rules and expectations that govern family theorists such as Minuchinand Spark cited by Cushway (2002), uphold that clear and defined boundaries are essential for healthy functioning of the family and its individual members. Inappropriate alliances, such as a child acting as a mate to a parent, are believed to upset the balance of the family system and compromise the individual member's growth and development.

Parentification is a phenomenon that touches children all over the world. According to a publication by UNESCO institute for statistics 2014, 52 % of cameoonians between the ages 5-14 years do combined school attendance and work; working for the survival of the family that he/she is called upon to take care of. Parentification in the family entails a functional and /or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs of attention, comfort and guidance in order to accommodate or pay for the emotional or logistical need of the parent (Chasse 1999). This means that the child sacrifices his own personal needs to satisfy those of another person. The parentifying adult enlist the child to fulfill his need to be cared for. This means that the parentified child seeks to make the others happy to the determined of his own happiness. Some authors asserted that children who experience parentification can perform a range of duties: from responding to emotional needs of parent or siblings (including issues such as low self esteem) or acting as the peacemaker for the family (emotional parentification) to duties such as preparing meals, doing household chores, and handling financial matters (instrumental parentification). Some factors are precursor to the parentification. This factors include: culture, gender, death, sickness, handicap, parents that present addiction disorder, sickness of one of the children, recomposition of the family, mono parental family, multi parental family, reconstituted family, conflict between parents,

separation of parents, position of birth, adoption, exile, immigration, low socio economic level among many others Kelley et al. (2007).

Adolescents have a good number of expectations from the later: expect the adolescent to respect a certain code of behavior adapted to each culture or society. The adolescent also has expectations about the self and the world around him that enable him in the construction of identity. This pressure from the society (external forces) and the internal forces might lead to crisis. In adolescence, many people find that the tension between the internal forces of the self and the external forces of society is particularly high. Adolescents begin to explore different roles or ideas about themselves. They may change their behavior or physical looks. They might change their minds about what that means. If parents and friends are supportive to this young person and allow some amount of experimentation with roles, the adolescent will likely end up with a cohesive, full identity that expresses who he is.

## **2. Methodology**

This research is a qualitative research and we opted for a clinical orientation based on a case study. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data on five Cameroonian adolescents resident in Yaoundé specially those in the phenomenon of parentification. The participants aged from 14 years to 18 years, of both sexes and issued from different backgrounds were selected according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. Our main objective was to understand how the process of parentification will sound on the construction of their ego identity. To this effect, we constructed an interview guide consisting of the main themes discussed with the adolescents in the course of the interview. For analysis, we used content and thematic analyses we did the analyses case by case and thematically. The aim of content analysis was to bring out from the document and an interview guide, the significance, associations and significance that are not directly perceived with a simple reading of the document. To simplify the analysis of the data collected, we went through the following process: retranscription of the interview into a form that will be directly accessible for analysis, rereading of the interview in order to have the full meaning of the interviewee's speech, regrouping and restructuring of the discourse in relationship to the themes.

## **3. Findings**

The reasons for parentification as well as the process differ from one participant to the other. One of them Aminatou starts when the mother becomes sick and it accents when she dies, Bosco takes a new identity with the poor health situation of his grand mother, Joseph on his part starts with the poor economic situation of the family and it reaches its peak with the depression of the mother, Ernestine assumes parental roles when the mother becomes an alcoholic and finally, Solomon takes a new identity with the death of both parents.

According to Hooper (2007) culture play a significant role in neglect such as parentification. Some family system may engender an inappropriate overlap in subsystem, with members participation in roles that are traditionally reserved for other members, that is parent in childlike roles and children in parental roles. The development of interpersonal boundaries is a necessary and natural process emerging as the newborn's undifferentiated sense of self grows toward health adults autonomy (Scharf, 2009). Role distinctions within healthy relationship emerge to reinforce and define interpersonal boundaries (Johnston, 1999) but can break down when stressed. This is often observed when poverty (Burton, 2007), a parent absence due for example to military deployment (Faber et al., 2008), debilitating illness or death (Nelson & While, 2002), create practical and emotional gaps within the reconfigured family system.

It is important for us to have in mind that the family is a group of individuals, a system in which interactions and inter-personal relationships develop among its members. For there to be a healthy functioning of the family and its individual members, there is the need for clear and

well defined boundaries to be put in place. We are interested to know how an adolescent in this context will construct his identity.

Personal identity is situated in the intersection of the self and the context. It is a set of goals, values and beliefs that the individual is aimed at: professional projects as well as all that constitutes his individual particularity in relationship to the others. In the case of our study, the context here is the family and more especially that of assuming parental roles by adolescents. Our adolescents have what they give to themselves by themselves and what they receive from the others. This is the case of valorization of Ernestine when she says *“I am a young woman who has a lot to offer especially to my family. I know i have the responsibility to take care of this family. I am a shepherd”*. This is her own self impression. Concerning how the others see her, she says *“They see me as hardworking...People apparel what i sac. Some people even think that i reason more than my age. One of my aunts says that i am full of wisdom”*. From the above illustration, we can see that the other person is at the same time a model and a mirror, A model because the genetic perspective has demonstrated that self identification is derived from identification in the other person and not the reverse (Tap, 1988). A mirror in the sense that it is from the way the other looks at us that they get a reflection of one's self identity.

Ego identity is precisely the feeling conviction that the ego is capable of integrating thought process toward a tangible collective future and that it develops to a well organized ego in the frame work of a social reality. What is called ego identity is more than the fact to exist but it is more of the ego quality of this existence (Erikson 1978). Our participants have portrayed their existence not only from the fact that they exist or that they are alive, but more special from different and numerous engagements seen from the many responsibilities that they are called to do. The example of Bosco *“I work on my grandma's farm where i grow crops that we consume. in order to make money for the satisfying of the other needs. i do some clearing of forms, working in constructionists. During the dry season i am paid to mould bricks. This its what gives me money to solve the many problems. I do the cooking, cleaning, buy medication for grandma”*. One of the dimension in the search for an identity is commitment. Commitment refers to firm decisions regarding aspects such as vocation, political ideology, religion and social roles, and includes specific strategies for achieving personal goals and a desired life path. The Cameroon adolescents can be said to be committed to social roles. This commitment is caused by the family situation of the individual which include the death of a parent, ill health of a care giver and alcoholism as it is the case of our participants. To this effect the adolescent is obliged to take the role of the parent. Their commitments can be seen from the decisions they make to take care of the family and its needs. The case of Aminatou shows it when she says *“Made me to take a firm decision that i could not count on any one even my family members. I had to feign for these children. I decided to play the role of my mother”*. Still in the light of commitment, this is what Solomon, one of the participants says *“So i took a firm decision that i had to work for those i was left with”*. This commitment is also manifested from the activities that our adolescents carry out to ensure the survival of the family.

Although we have illustrated in the above paragraphs that our adolescents are committed as a results of loyalty to their respective families, we also have instances where almost all of our participants show prove of commitment out of any external factors. This is seen from the fact that they have their future ambitions and are bent or committed to realizing them. In spite of the fact that they have to work hard for the survival of their respective family they each have their future perfectness that they are striving at all cost to attain. for instance, we see Bosco who is a student and will love to be a teacher, he says that he has passion for teaching, *“I admire any one who stands in a classroom to impact knowledge on the others. Teaching is a passion for me. If God helps i will like to become one”*. Joseph on his part will love to do business, so he is working hard to raise money to this effect. this is what he says *“I would like to be a*

*business man. I will start from a small business and if i make more money i will increase the business. So i will need to work hard to raise money for this purpose”.*

All of our participants can be classified under the instrumental type of parentification. To Bowen (1978), taking on a role and performing instrumental tasks engenders in the parents child feeling of accomplishment and contribution. From the interviews, we see how our participants express these feelings of accomplishment and contribution. This can be illustrated from the type of activities they carry out and from what they say concerning their achievements. The new identity enable each and every one of our participants to take new and strong resolutions which have to do with their determination to feign for the up keep of their respective families. This is due to their conviction that they have no one to count on for support but they can do something on their own for survival of the family. This explains why they work to have food and money for their families. It is also worth noting that the new identity has a strong positive influence in the development of most of our participants. This is illustrated from the positive self and high self esteem that they portray from the acknowledgments, admiration and approbations given to them by the others and that they give to themselves concerning their achievements. They even accord value to their new selves with appellations such as “I am a parent, a shepherd, a guardian, a mother, a father”. To this effect, they acknowledge the fact that they are different from their age mates who are not in situations of parentification as they do not have the same responsibilities. These are instances of positive construction.

We can point out to the fact that our adolescents in this state are able to answer the questions that preoccupy the minds of every adolescent; who am i and what shall i be in the future? This is illustrated from what they acknowledge that they are capable of doing and from their choices of their future careers and role models: teaching, nursing, business, military. We can also note the importance of the other (non self) in the lives of these adolescents. They know what others think about them, whether positive or negative. Also because of the importance of the other in their lives all of our participants do mention the fact that they decided to work for the up keep of the family and that their future career will help them to have money for the education of their sibling. This findings can help us to say that parentification can have a positive impact on the construction of identity.

#### **4. Discussion of Findings**

The findings obtained from this study have enable us to have a global view of the phenomenon of parentification and the construction of ego identity in the Cameroonian adolescents. From our analysis , we can say that the parentified adolescent have had no time to liveth stage of adolescent. They are early parents not just because of their ages but also because of the responsibilities they carry at an age or a time they are not ready or prepared for. Our adolescents suffer in one way or the from the responsibilities they have, but what is particular and special about them is the extent to which they are able to construct a positive self and give a positive self view of life. According to Erickson (1968), it is necessary for the society to give to the adolescent a period of “psycho-social moratorium”. To him, this is the period during which the adolescent has the opportunity to make a true life choice. According to Marcia’s identity status theory (1966), adolescents have to decide upon their own roles through experiences that expose them to opportunities and situations that challenge how they understand and manage such experiences. Their struggles and exploration through this exposure will promote a more in-depth and multi angled appraisal of their experience, build up their stress-coping abilities and advance their problem-solving efficiency and effectiveness. Winnicott (2004) advices the society that for the safety of the adolescents and that of their immaturity, the society should not promote or encourage their accession to a false maturity by transmitting to them a responsibility that is not of their age fighting for it. Winnicot (2004) thinks that immaturity is a precious element in the adolescent table. What Winnicot (2004) says is very important but what

preoccupies our mind is the situation of adolescents to whom society has got no consideration for them, those adolescents to whom the family situations have obliged them to become mature or be adults at a time they are still adolescent. We have some cases where adolescents who went through the stage normally and successfully resolved the crises.

It is necessary for us to know how the type of parentification will sound on the construction of ego identity. We want to know if the decision to take care of the parents was a free will decision of the adolescent or if he was obliged by the parent or their family members, or he was forced by the family situation to take the responsibility of the family.

Another area we will want to look at is to know whether the construction of ego identity will be done in the same way in boys and girls. We decided in this study to take participants of both sexes to see if the process of parentification was lived differently or not by adolescents of both sexes and if it was going to have different impact on the construction of their identity. From the analysis came to realize that the situation might be not live in same way in both girls and boys, but the aim of each is the survival of the family with the end result being the construction of a positive ego identity.

It is also important for us to see if the family situation will play a role in the construction of the ego identity or not. Our participants evolve in different families with specific background. We have participants from single parenthood, though they were orphan during the time of the interview. We also have divorced, polygamous and alcoholic family situations. The fact that the adolescent does not have someone who cares for him does not mean that he/she cannot make out meaning out of life. In some cases of neglect or difficult situations that adolescents find themselves that makes it difficult for them to make out meaning in their lives, some have resulted to stealing prostitution and even street children. The adolescents in this study came to understand that when someone has no one to help the person can provide help and give a sense of direction to their lives.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study concerns adolescents who evolve in particular family conditions where some of them are forced by the family situations to take on responsibilities or parental roles. It is important to note that the study does not in any way concern adolescents who have particular psycho or socio-pathological disorders. Our objective was to understand how adolescents construct their ego identity in an in-habitual environment where the parent is absent or unable to assume the responsibilities of the family. When the adolescent assumes these parental roles to which he is not prepared for, we can talk of early parentality. The findings we brought to the field from five adolescents and analyzed show that adolescence is a period of transition in which the adolescent must change his group membership. While both the child and the adult have a fairly clear concept of how they fit in to the group, the adolescent belongs partly to the child group, partly to the adult group without belonging completely to either group. In later stages of adolescence, the child develops a sense of sexual identity. As they make the transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescents ponder the roles they will play in the adult world. In this study, the reasons for parentification as well as the process differ from one participant to other. The new identities enable each and every one of our participants to take new and strong resolutions which have to do with their respective families. This is due to their conviction that they have no one to count on for support but they can do something on their own for the survival of the family. It is also important to note the importance of the other in the lives of these adolescents. They know what others think about them; whether positive or negative. Also because of the importance of the other in their lives all of our participants do mention the fact that they decided to work for the keep of the family and that their future career will help them to have money for the education of their siblings. We can conclude that the process of

parentification will have positive repercussions on the construction of ego identity in the Cameroonian adolescents.

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