

PARENTIFICATION IN RURAL AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHER
FAMILIES: A STUDY OF ADOLESCENT COMPETENCE IN CONTEXT

by

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(Under the Direction of VELMA McBRIDE MURRY)

ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this dissertation was to examine parentification from a cultural and resilience perspective. Using longitudinal data, this dissertation represents one of the only efforts to clarify the family patterns of at-risk families that create parentification, and to discover the conditions in which parentification serves as a protective factor. Additionally, this study begins to refine our understanding of this complex family relationship by distinguishing among discrete domains of parentification. Data from the National Institute of Health, National Institute of Child and Human Development Study of Competence in Children and Families was utilized to complete the analyses. Participants involved in the present study included 156 randomly selected rural African American single-mothers with a first-born child aged 10-12 years. Based on both the risk and resilience model and the ecological model, the current study investigated the effects of maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, parenting practices, and adolescent parentification on adolescent internalizing and externalizing behavior over time. Multiple hierarchical regression analyses revealed that instrumental aspects of parentification which fulfilled a functional need for the family contributed to adolescent

competence through self-regulation, thus indicating that a valuable aspect of parenting for African American single-mother families may be relying on the oldest child for childrearing and household tasks. Furthermore, it was also found that when an adolescent performed emotional aspects of parentification within the family the adolescents from this sample displayed evidence of decreased self-esteem and increased depression resulting from emotional parentification. These results highlight the need to distinguish between domains of parentification in both research and clinical practice and further to consider the unique impact of familial and cultural processes at play which shape the development of parentification. Indeed, the current study also made clear that there are differing processes which reflect in the occurrence of each domain of parentification in rural African American single-mother families.

INDEX WORDS: Parentification, adolescents, African American single-mothers, resilience, self-regulation, parenting processes, maternal psychological functioning

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It has been well documented that 50% of children born during the 1980s and 1990s will spend at least part of their childhood living with a single-parent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989, 1991). In fact, births to single women constitute 28% of all births in the United States, including 11% of Asian American, 20% of White, 37% of Hispanic, and 67% of African American (U.S. Bureau of the Census). Further, women head 44% of African American families with no spouse present (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

Because a disproportionate number of African American children are raised in poverty and by single-mothers, the literature on African American families is replete with studies attempting to describe the negative consequences of this family form on child development. Several researchers contend that poverty negatively affects African American children's development by reducing psychological functioning of mothers, which in turn has been linked to less effective parenting (Elder, et. al., 1995; McLoyd, 1990). In recent years, however, some scholars have begun to examine how single-female headed families and their children survive and overcome adversity despite facing challenges commonly associated with rearing children in poverty (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001). Highlighted in these studies are protective factors that reduce the consequences of risk and in turn foster resilience, namely linking maternal resources, (Bluestone & Tamis LeMonda, 1999; Brody, et. al., 1999; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Muslow & Murry, 1996 and Paikoff, et. al., 1997); maternal well-being (Jackson, 1993; 1998; Jackson, et. al., 1998; Taylor, et. al., 1997; McGroder, 2000; and

Wilson, et. al., 1995), and parenting processes (Brody & Flor, 1997; Brody & Flor, 1998; Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; Kotchick, et. al., 1997; and Murry & Brody, 1999) to positive child outcomes. Others have attempted to examine more closely the relevance of family structure to child development and have concluded that children reared in single-mother-headed families are more vulnerable than their peers raised in two-parent households to have academic problems, psychological problems, and engage in risky behaviors (Ford, Brown-Wright, Grantham, & Harris, 1998; Baer, 1999; Ricciuti, 1999). According to Murry (2000), however, these findings may be due to the fact that research studies about African American single-parent families are often framed using a deficit model. Thus, perpetuating problem-focused models does not further our understanding of why a vast number of children in single-parent households succeed despite the odds (Brody, et. al., 1996; Demo & Acock, 1996; Morrison, 1995; Kleist, 1999; Richards & Schmiege, 1993). This suggests a need for further studies that identify adaptive processes operating in single-parent families.

Although current literature has begun to examine protective factors in families, there is a need to begin to reconceptualize the way that we think about family functioning in certain contexts. Researchers must take into consideration variations in culturally prescribed and ethically legitimate parenting approaches when seeking to uncover processes that enhance or inhibit child development. The current study endeavored to identify processes used by rural African American single-mother families to manage in the face of the difficult circumstances they confront. It was speculated in the current study that economic circumstances as well as African American cultural expectations

which emphasize a collective participation in household and childrearing tasks may lead to a functional reliance on others within the household, namely, children.

Early work examining parenting in rural African American families provides support for this notion (Young, 1970). Young's work describes adaptive processes used by families facing uniquely challenging circumstances that allow them to function competently. The role of the first-born child of rural African American families is illustrated as the *nurse-child* (p. 284):

The position of nurse-child is held by the oldest in the family, boy or girl. He or she is responsible for all the other children, tends the food the mother may have left cooking before going to work, or makes the sandwiches, serves lunch to the children, diapers the baby and knee-baby if they are left in his charge, fixes bottles, puts them in bed for naps. The nurse-children are bossy but gentle and protective and easy-going.

Young (1970) further explains that first-born African American children in these situations are competent and embrace their role due to it being a privileged position.

It is important to note here that not all African American families exhibit these familial and cultural patterns, yet some families have adopted these values and expectations based on a functional need due to such things as economics and family structure. It would not be unusual to find similar patterns in, for example, farm families or families where a parent is ill, etc. Investigating family processes in families facing structural or economic risk in particular therefore may be useful in understanding how these families function effectively and in turn the ways in which this role fosters positive development in children.

It should be highlighted that the distinctive nature of the family patterns reported above are markedly different from the picture that Western clinical literature portrays of a child given such adult responsibilities. It is not surprising then that Young (1970) concludes by affirming that the African Americans participating in her study were distinctive in terms of organization, values, and behavioral styles from Caucasian Americans and that psychoanalytic interpretations based on traditional Western models must be modified for this culture. Based on this evidence, the current study speculated that a valuable and effective aspect of parenting, parentification, may not be recognized as beneficial in this population due to studies influenced by Western standards that frame parentification as a destructive pattern violating societal norms. The proposed longitudinal study therefore attempts to reconceptualize our understanding of this phenomenon in terms of how and under what conditions can parentification function as a protective factor?

One explanation for our currently limited view of parentification may be inherent in the difficulty that comes from trying to define and measure this phenomenon. At present, parentification is defined as a phenomenon producing an adult child due to the occurrence of role reversal and generational boundary dissolution between parent and child (Chase, 1999). It is thought to be a relationship dynamic in which children fulfill either practical or emotional duties for their parents that are beyond their developmental capabilities (Wells & Miller, 2001). Further, it is thought that parentification does not necessarily produce adverse outcomes in children; yet the studies to date have focused almost exclusively on the destructive nature of this family pattern and have failed to

uncover the instances in which parentification may foster positive child development. This may be the result of a lack of attention to the measurement and examination of the unique contributions of instrumental and emotional tasks to child outcomes. That is, do children who meet instrumental tasks within the family experience their role differently than children who meet emotional tasks? The present study sought to answer these questions.

Also noticeably absent from current literature is an examination of parentification which includes alternative cultural values and economic circumstances that may alter the impact of this practice on child competency outcomes. It has been speculated that it is the ethicality, or perceptions of fairness, (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Jurkovic, Thirkeild, & Morrell, 2000) that create destructive parentification. That is, when the child is not recognized for their contributions, deleterious outcomes of parentification may occur. An alternative cultural perspective in which reliance on children is expected, may then create parentification which fosters development for children. The current longitudinal study therefore also sought to understand the circumstances in rural African American single parent families that increase the likelihood of parentification in children and how that role in turn explains competence in the adolescent. A prospective study was conducted given that following a sample over time reduces the ambiguities that are inherent in cross-sectional research and allows the researcher to account for change over time in adolescent outcomes.

It is valuable to consider the population of rural African American single-parent families because rural families in general and African Americans in particular live in

communities that have high unemployment rates, low wages, and low educational levels but lack the facilities and services afforded to urban families and are thus considered to be at distinct risk for damaging outcomes. These issues need to be at the forefront of researchers, policy makers, educators, and practitioners as efforts are undertaken to design interventions and prevention programs and policies specifically aimed at this subpopulation. It also suggests the need to move beyond problem-focused to competence focused approaches in order to identify those processes that are working in these families that in turn foster positive child development.

The period of adolescence was chosen due to the assumption that the foundation for the types of relationships one has with oneself and others are based on the experiences learned within the context of our family of origin (Anderson, 1999). Further, adolescents making the transition to junior high school are considered to be particularly vulnerable given the differing dynamics of the new system in conjunction with an already fragile sense of self. When parents face challenges due to a lack of resources resulting from being single or economically strapped, parenting processes can suffer (Brody & Flor, 1997; Elder, 1995; Kalil & Eccles, 1998; McLoyd, 1990; Miller & Davis, 1997; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2000) and often children can be at risk for compromised outcomes such as those cited above. Current research increasingly suggests the need to be concerned about the influences of family and environmental circumstances on multiple dimensions of adolescent development. The current study addressed these issues in a sample of at risk adolescents.

The specific conditions examined in relation to parentification in this study included maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes in rural African American single mother families in poverty. Extensive research has covered these constructs and it has been well documented that poverty affects how parents interact with their children (Kalil & Eccles, 1998; Miller & Davis, 1997; Elder, 1995; McLoyd, 1990). It is thought that economic stress creates difficulties between parents and children by negatively impacting family processes (Brody & Flor, 1997; McLoyd, 1990). This is because financial stress is indirectly related to less nurturing parenting and low parent-child relationship quality through its impact on maternal psychological functioning. The present study predicted that because single mothers in general, and rural African American mothers in poverty in particular, face the substantial economic and instrumental difficulties of raising a child without a partner, relying on the oldest child would be a functional and adaptive practice that allowed these women and their children to cope with additional burden.

In summary, the impetus for this research was to examine patterns in rural, African American single mother families that link maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, parenting processes, and parentification over time and to determine under what conditions in families is parentification linked with competence in adolescents from these families. Additionally, the author sought to clarify our current understanding of parentification by examining independently the extent to which instrumental and emotional tasks impact the external and internal outcomes of the phenomenon.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were posed and tested in the present study using hierarchical multiple regression:

- 1) Maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes will contribute to the parentification of adolescents in rural, African American single-mother families.
- 2) Adolescent instrumental parentification will significantly predict variations in externalizing behavior among rural African American adolescents residing in single mother families.
- 3) Adolescent emotional parentification will explain variations in internalizing behavior of African American adolescents reared in rural, African American single-mother families.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of parentification has received criticism in two main areas: 1) studies have continuously approached parentification from a pathological viewpoint; and 2) there is a failure to place parentification in the context of larger cultural and historical forces (Chase, 1999). This study represents an effort to fill this empirical void in the parentification literature. As such, both the risk and resilience model and the ecological model were used to frame the study of parentification. This conceptual framework is presented first. Next, the contextual factors impacting parentification are discussed with emphasis on the specific links hypothesized in the proposed model. In the last section, an overview of parentification is provided with emphasis on the difficulties in defining the concept as well as current thoughts on why and how parentification operates and influences child development, specifically, adolescent competence. I will begin with a description of the conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

Two models were incorporated into the framework for this study. These were, the risk and resilience model, which provided a perspective whereby parentification could be broadened and redefined; and the ecological model, which considers contextual as well as personal factors important when explaining phenomena. Theoretically, a risk and resilience model is often used to characterize at risk families and to help explain successful families in difficult situations. As such, the risk and resilience model was

useful when applied to a sample of at risk individuals in the study of parentification. This is because the model focuses on circumstances and individual characteristics that foster competence and healthy behavior (Bogenschneider, 1996) thereby shifting the emphasis from pathology to adaptive responses. Further, according to this model, families facing economic hardships are not equally in jeopardy, but have individual, familial, and contextual differences which result in divergent outcomes, therefore parentification can be thought of as the result of distinct needs; producing outcomes other than those highlighted by studies using a deficit focus. Most importantly, this paradigm enables and encourages researchers to redefine and broaden their views about the characteristics that constitute positive family functioning and the means of attaining it (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1996). This was critical to the reexamination of parentification given that our understanding of this phenomenon is based largely on clinical theories, which emphasize the Western values of separateness and independence.

The risk and resilience model also helps to explain why some single mothers and their children succumb to the risks they face and others do not by examining individuals who are resilient, or who have the ability to recover from negative experiences and situations (Murry & Brody, 1999). Based on the resilience literature, situations confronting families living in challenging circumstances may be mediated through mechanisms referred to as “protective factors” (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992) and may consist of family/individual resources, skills, and abilities. Protective factors are defined as individual or environmental characteristics or processes that enhance one’s

ability to circumvent the potential negative consequences associated with stressful events, thereby promoting adaptation and competence (Garmezy, 1983; Werner, 1992).

Protective factors may exert direct effects on child outcomes by insulating children and parents, thus altering, but not necessarily eliminating, the relations between risks and outcomes. Based on Masten's (2001) work, a variable-focused approach was implemented in this study as it allows one to test for multiple linkages among measures of the degree of risk or adversity, outcome, and potential qualities of the individual or environment (to be discussed below) that may function as a protective factor for those facing risk. Masten (2001) states that this type of design is advantageous because it "maximizes statistical power and is well suited to searching for specific and differential links between predictors and outcomes that have implications for intervention" (p.229). The present study contributes to the literature because investigations that consider how assets, risks, and protective factors influence each other over time are rare but vital to our understanding of family functioning in adverse conditions (Masten, 2001). The overall aim of the current study was to begin to fill this gap. The differentiation of the conditions faced by a given subset of the population also has ecological relevance.

In order to organize the individual and environmental characteristics examined in this study, the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), which assumes that development is not context free and therefore occurs in conjunction with the influence of culture, social class, and environmental setting in which the individual grows, was used. As mentioned, single parents' resources and means of coping have been examined in the literature; however, while parentification has been conceptualized ecologically when

trying to determine the causes of this phenomenon (Jurkovic, 1997); no studies have considered the possible impact of contextual factors on parentification (Chase, 1999). For this reason, the current study represents an important first step in that it considered the distal factors of culture, economics, and family structure that forecast developmental outcomes of parentified adolescents from an at-risk population. In the next section of the paper the author will summarize the studies examining the unique cultural, family structure, and economic contexts in which rural African American single-mother families reside that may explain variations in the experience of parentification for this population.

Contextual Factors Influencing Parentification

Cultural

The following section will outline a distinctive ‘cultural tradition’ that some African American families have adopted. This is considered a cultural tradition based on the fact that culture represents the ways that people make sense of and process their world (Serrano & Hou, 1996) and in the United States some African American families facing challenges in meeting their needs have adopted processes that help them to function and remain resilient. These processes will be discussed below in relation to familial and cultural expectations and their potential influence on parentification. The section begins with a clarification of what is traditionally considered important when examining the process of parentification in families. Next, the author highlights the distinct cultural viewpoints held by some African American families. These issues provide support for the speculation that parentification could operate as an adaptive and functional process in the African American single-mother family.

Theory on parentification points to three main premises as being central to the development of parentification: the social expectations of the role of the child, expectations for how children should be reared, and the relationship between the parent and the child. Thus, in order to understand parentification one must recognize the societal expectations for child rearing, prescribed social roles of family members, and the effects of culture upon them. In order to do so, it is necessary to recognize the unique contributions culture makes to family processes.

Culture reflects the ways that people make sense of and process their world and thus influences their behavior (Serrano & Hou, 1996). The African cultural tradition of collective survival has been examined and found to contribute to resiliency through mutually supporting relationships and flexibility in family roles (Akbar, 1980). What this means is that clinicians and policy makers working with African American families must recognize that some families have adopted processes, such as interdependence and enlisting the help of older siblings, which could be viewed by traditional Western theories as enmeshment, boundary invasion, and/or destructive parentification. In reality however, these processes have been found to be a protective factor for African American adolescents (McCabe, Clark, & Barnett, 1999).

In a recent study on parentification by Jurkovic, Thirkield, and Morrell (2000), African Americans reported more instrumental caregiving than European Americans but did not report any higher scores on the unfairness scale. These findings corroborate evidence that African Americans may place a different value on family loyalty, cooperation, and kinship ties (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). This

research represents one of the only examinations of parentification to consider cultural implications; however it was done retrospectively on one member of divorced families and thus may not fully capture how parentification operates in differing cultures and family types. Further, it does not take into account the importance of other sources of support.

This is an important cultural consideration because many African American families socialize children early to form multiple attachments within their family and fictive kin due to the belief that survival is enhanced by the group (Barnett, Kidwell, & Ho Leung, 1998; Young, 1974). It can be assumed that within African American families utilizing multiple caregivers, children appear to be able to form secure attachments and consequently are no more likely to be susceptible to destructive parentification than their counterparts reared in traditional households.

It is essential that future studies take differential normative role patterns, such as those found in many African American families, into account when investigating family processes. In order to begin to fill this gap, the current study examined parentification in rural, African American single-mother families. Being from a single-parent family was another contextual issue taken into consideration in this study.

The Single Parent Family

Undeniably, single-mothers have a great number of demands on their time and the stress of managing their heavy load can lead to a greater reliance on their children. This is thought to be the case due to the time availability theory which posits that the division of household labor in a family results from different constraints on various family

members' time (Gager, Cooney, & Call, 1999). Weiss (1979) portrayed children in single-parent families as 'growing up a little faster' due to the greater contribution to family functioning that they make than their peers in two-parent households. Confirming this, it was found by Gager and colleges (1999) that teen's efforts and contributions to household chores are greater in single parent families, especially for girls. Demo and Acock (1993) similarly concluded that children's contributions to the maintenance of the home are greater, both in absolute hours and in total share of household work, when they reside in single parent households as opposed to two parent households. Clearly, it is not uncommon for children raised in single-parent households to provide support beyond that which their counterparts in two-parent households provide. Given that this practice appears to be customary in single-parent families, parentification may indeed operate differently than it has traditionally been studied.

It is thus valuable to consider the effects of parentification on children raised in specifically single-parent households. Only one early study by Weiss (1979) examined single-parent families and parentification and found that because the contributions made by children in single-parent households are considered essential to family functioning, children were viewed as more responsible, independent, and attuned to family values and worries than peers raised in two-parent households. While more responsible and independent, Weiss (1979) also described some difficulties experienced by the adolescents in these households, namely greater stress and less security as a result of sharing parent's problems and uncertainties. This suggests that there may be discrete functions of parentification which produce different outcomes for children. In

conclusion, Weiss (1979) pointed out that children raised in single-parent families could escape destructive parentification if their nurturance needs are met early and parental support is continuously provided.

Although informative, the above mentioned study was conducted almost three decades ago, utilized a primarily white sample, did not adequately address the composition of the single-parent household, and did not clearly distinguish between the unique impact of instrumental and emotional tasks on child outcomes. While it highlighted that single-parent households can escape destructive parentification, it does not address at-risk populations and additionally does not provide information on how parentification may be an adaptive response in single-mother families. This issue was examined in the present study. Literature on the factors influencing the processes that contribute to parentification in single-mother families will now be presented.

The factors that were predicted to impact parentification are presented in terms of their linkages, from distal to proximal, in the order of maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes.

Maternal Psychological Functioning and Maternal Resources

Research on maternal resources in single-parent families suggests that growing up in a single-parent family does not in itself predict negative outcomes, rather, the life circumstances that are more prevalent among single-parent families, such as economic difficulties and low educational levels, appear to account for any sub-optimal outcomes observed (Demo & Acock, 1996; Hilton & Devall, 1998; Miller & Davis, 1997; Morrison, 1995). One explanation is that parents who are poor have poorer health, both

physically and emotionally, than those who have better economic situations (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Liaw & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Jackson, Gyamfi, Brooks-Gunn, & Blake, 1998). Low and unstable income is thought to increase the risk of emotional distress by increasing the level of economic pressure (Elder, et. al., 1995). When single-mothers feel economic pressure, their sense of self suffers. For example, it appears that for rural single-mothers, their level of depression and self-esteem is mediated by their perceptions of their current situation (Brody & Flor, 1998). Therefore, maternal personal resources were operationalized as mother's reported perceptions of adequate income, time, and money for necessities. Additionally, support from relatives was considered an important resource for this sample due to the fact that robust extended family networks can buffer the direct and indirect effects of stressful life events on family functioning and child development (Debow, Edwards, & Ippolito, 1997; Hill, 1972; McLoyd, 1990).

Social support is speculated to carry out such a crucial role in the functioning of African American single-parent families because extended family members are often directly involved in the care and support of children when no spouse or partner is available to do such tasks. In general, social support from extended family members positively influences African American children who live in high-risk environments through the provision of financial and instrumental support. Grandmothers help to stabilize the family by deflecting the potential negative consequences of risk for their grandchildren (Hunter, 1997; Kellam, Ensminger & Turner, 1977; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). African American single mothers are more likely than White single mothers to utilize grandmothers for child care (Taylor, et. al., 1993) and those who do report greater

self-reliance, better adjustment, greater parenting efficacy, and more extensive use of parenting processes such as acceptance, firm control, monitoring, and autonomy granting (Jackson, 1998; Mulsow & Murry, 1996; Taylor & Roberts, 1995; Wilson et al., 1995).

In their extensive study on three-generation African American families, Taylor, et. al. (1993) indicated that regardless of generational membership, respondents interacted with family members on a frequent basis, displayed a high degree of family affection, and were fairly frequent recipients of informal help from extended kin. This support included money and advice or information helpful to securing or advancing in a job. The most important type of assistance received was that of child care. Indeed, the literature on social support in African American families describes a decrease on the burden of child care (Jackson, 1998) and a positive effect on financial obligations (McLoyd, 1998). Further, rural African American families have been characterized as having firm parenting processes with optimal child outcomes occurring most often in households where there was instrumental support provided (in the form of co-caregiving) (Brody, Stoneman, and Flor, 1995, 1996). It appears that the pattern of larger family units could serve as a preventative measure for adverse parentification outcomes in African American single-mother households, as single-mothers with more support will be less likely to inappropriately rely on their children. Therefore, mother's report of support from relatives was included as a maternal resource.

There is an association between poverty and compromised parenting processes; however, this link is thought to be mediated by emotional distress, which undermines parenting (Elder, et. al., 1995; McLoyd, 1990). Parenting is believed to be compromised

by financial stress because it is indirectly related to less nurturing parenting and low parent-child relationship quality through its impact on maternal psychological functioning, such that mother's confidence in her parenting is reduced. According to Elder and colleagues (1995) parents with low and unstable incomes experience more emotional stress and view themselves as less efficacious than do parents of higher incomes. The link between maternal psychological functioning and parenting processes will now be discussed.

Maternal Psychological Functioning and Parenting Processes

There is substantial evidence that parental psychological health influences parenting behavior (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Liaw, 1995; Conger, Ge, & Elder, 1994; McLoyd, 1990). In particular, there are links between depression and parenting processes. For example, maternal depression predicts more negative perceptions of children (Jackson, 1994). Taylor and colleagues (1997), who used an urban sample that included mothers from both single-parent and two-parent families, found that maternal psychological functioning predicted greater acceptance of children and lower levels of firm control. Brody and Flor (1997; 1999) confirmed the link between maternal psychological functioning and parenting processes.

Specifically, Brody and Flor (1999) found support for the fact that rural African American single mothers' beliefs in their ability to be good parents was related to specific developmental goals, which in turn were related to competence-promoting parenting behaviors such as regular family routines, positive mother-child relationships, and mothers' involvement in their children's schooling. Based on the research supporting

this link, the current study operationalized maternal psychological functioning as depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and hostility and predicted that maternal psychological functioning would contribute to the variation in parentification. Moving from distal to proximal influences on parentification, it is now necessary to describe the parenting processes that were examined in the current study.

Parenting Processes

The current study conceptualized parenting processes as descriptions of the support, involvement, and communication between parent and adolescent. This was based on the fact that in general, the family environment that appears to foster destructive parentification is one in which appropriate boundaries are distorted or absent. These families exhibit signs of developmentally inappropriate task allocation to one or more children, unequal distribution of tasks, and insufficient recognition and support for their work. The support, involvement, and communication of the family is thus assumed to reflect the likelihood that parents will inaptly rely on their children and/or ignore the contributions that the child is making. This assumption is also based on evidence from several studies which have examined competence promoting parenting processes and found these to be key elements for African American children's academic achievement, psychological adjustment, self-regulatory ability, and competence (Brody & Flor; Brody & Murry, 2001; Murry & Brody, 1999; Taylor & Roberts, 1995).

As mentioned in the introduction, another important element of parenting for single-mothers in challenging circumstances is to rely on oldest children to contribute both instrumentally and through caretaking tasks (Young, 1970; 1974). These are

fundamental aspects of parentification, which has been discussed in both the clinical and family studies literature to date as destructive to child development given the studies which have used almost exclusively Caucasian and two-parent family samples. I will briefly review this literature and then present support for a reexamination of this concept.

Parentification

Definition and Early Conceptions in the Literature

Parentification is a widely used concept in clinical psychology and marriage and family therapy and has been examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives including self-psychology, family systems, and sociocultural contexts (Carroll & Robinson, 2000). Chase (1999) describes parentification as a process that occurs in families which generally entails a functional and/or role reversal whereby the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for the logistical or emotional needs of the parent. This descriptive process was evident in the study of families as early as the late 1950s, but the official term, parentification, did not emerge until 1973. For example, Mahler and Rabinovitch (1956) described the process as children assuming "unnatural roles" (e.g., buffer, pawn, confidante) to fortify fragile family ties, especially in the marital dyad, and as such having harmful effects on the child's development (p.53). During the 1960s, several other articles were published which described children as overburdened as a result of the loss of a parent, physical abuse (Morris & Gould, 1963), or through the care taking of younger siblings in response to a low functioning parent (Rosenbaum, 1963).

In 1967 Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, and Schumer used the term "parental children" in their landmark study addressing families in the slums. Placing this construct in the larger context of socioeconomic class, family size, and family functioning, Minuchin, et. al. (1967) reported that the parental child was one whose parents and/or siblings implicitly or explicitly gave them the responsibility of child-rearing and other adult functions within the family. The participating families in this study were identified as having an absent or under functioning father, which was thought to contribute to the mother's anxiousness and reliance on the parental child. Minuchin, et. al. (1967) attempted to characterize those circumstances linking the parental child role to developmental outcomes of children by noting that assigning children parental responsibilities was helpful in developing coping skills as long as the responsibilities were shared by several siblings, the tasks did not exceed the child's abilities, and the child received support and recognition for their efforts. Noteworthy is the fact that during the early conception of what later became known as the parentified child, it had not yet taken on the pejorative connotations that later clinical explanations would entail.

In subsequent work however, Minuchin shifted his discussion of the parental child by including structural terms to describe families in which parental children had violated subsystem boundaries. These children were portrayed as overly involved in the parental subsystem and under involved in the sibling subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). Thus, the power structure within the family was disrupted and thought to be problematic because there was not clear demarcation of where the parental subsystem ended and the sibling subsystem began. Despite the early definitions of this family phenomenon, interestingly,

the theoretical explanation offered by Minuchin served as the impetus for subsequent conceptualization of this phenomenon. Thus emerged a deficit, problem-focused approach in future studies of parentification. For example, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), who believe that reciprocity and balance are essential to human relationships and further elaborated on the concept of boundary violation in relation to children taking adult roles, were the first to use the term *parentification* and defined it as "the subjective distortion of a relationship as if one's partner or even children were his parent" (p., 151). According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), parentification was a problematic family function when the balance of give and take was absent in the parent-child relationship and in turn disrupted the child's development. Also implied in their work was the intergenerational transmission of pathological parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973, Bowen, 1978). That is, the parent was attempting to make up for deficits in their own childhood experiences in response to not having a strong parental figure, and subsequently attached parent-like qualities to their children.

Clearly, parentification was a much-utilized concept in the clinical psychology and marriage and family therapy literature as early as the 1950s, a concept that described maladaptive family processes in which reliance on children resulted in adverse child outcomes. During subsequent decades researchers extended their work beyond the limited approach of defining and describing parentification to identifying the causes or circumstances in families that increased children's vulnerability to becoming parentified.

Etiology of Parentification

Although the body of research and theoretical papers focusing on parentification is in its infancy, the bulk of consideration has been given to examining its causes. This research has accounted for several proximal factors within the individual, such as temperament and child's capacity to care (Jurkovic, 1997), and the family, such as, a dysfunctional marital relationship (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981); high functioning families (Wells and Miller, 2001); and substance abuse (Bekir, McLellan, Childress, & Gariti, 1993; Madanes, 1981) or psychological disturbance (Zahn-Waxler, Kochanska, Krupnick, & McKnew, 1990) present in one or both parents. In general, parentification is commonly thought of as a transgenerational transmission process in which deprivation, boundary disturbance, and/or poor attachment are present in several generations of the parentified child's family (Jacobvitz, Morgan, Kretchmar, & Morgan, 1991). As a result of a parent's insecure attachment and lack of love and acceptance in their own childhood, they look to their child to fulfill unmet needs. Despite the fact that most studies of parentification do not go beyond using it as an outcome variable, there are studies documenting the internalizing and externalizing consequences of this family pattern for child development.

*Implications for Child Development**Internalizing Behaviors*

The central internalizing outcomes associated with parentification in children include depression and low levels of self-esteem (Jurkovic, 1997; Wells & Jones, 2000; Jones & Wells, 1996; Wells, Glick-Hughes, & Jones, 1999). Additionally, several

studies have illustrated that destructive parentification is directly related to various personality outcomes in adults (Jones & Wells, 1996; Jurkovic, 1997; Hughes, & Jones, 1999; Wells & Jones, 2000). For example, children who were expected to take care of parents' emotional or physical needs and suppress their own autonomous strivings (e.g., by being 'mother's little helper') manifested *masochistic personality traits*. On the other hand, when children were encouraged to fulfill a parent's dream (e.g., be a great athlete or musician), the individual displayed *narcissistic personality tendencies* (Wells & Jones, 1996). Further, Wells & Jones (2000) found that parentified children exhibit shame-proneness as adults in response to their true talents and strivings.

Externalizing Behaviors

In terms of the research on externalizing behaviors, parentified children show evidence of dysfunctional perfectionism; doubts about actions; a high concern about mistakes, parental expectations, and parental criticism; and engaging in risky behavior (Jurkovic, 1995; Jurkovic, 1997; Wells & Miller, 2001).

Additionally, parentification appears to influence the peer relationships of both children and adults. As a result of their adult roles, parentified children have trouble relating to others and feel as though they do not fit in. Further, adolescents and adults have been found to enter into unhealthy, codependent (Wells, et. al., 1999), overfunctioning (Valleau, Bergner, & Horton, 1995), and/or compulsive caregiving (West & Keller, 1991) relationships.

While informative, the majority of these studies are cross sectional and based on two-parent, Caucasian families and thus fail to take into account the distal (contextual)

issues of family structure and culture. Additionally, many of these studies do not differentiate between the economic circumstances of participants and thus do not address the mediating and/or moderating impact of variations in income level on parentification in families. The current study therefore includes these contextual factors in the study of parentification. Moreover, what became apparent in the review of literature on parentification was that because of the emphasis on Western values, the majority of these studies utilized a pathological focus which failed to account for the occasions when parentification could operate as an adaptive process in families and serve to buffer them from negative outcomes. There are however, noted positive characteristics associated with parentification.

Support for a Reexamination of Parentification

A few scholars have implicitly recognized the healthy and advantageous outcomes that parentification may foster in individuals. These aspects include an oversensitivity to nonverbal messages and as such the ability to read and respond to others feelings, needs, and expectations and a strong sense of competence, self-reliance, and responsibility (Wells & Jones, 2001). However, as mentioned, there remains virtually no literature documenting the conditions in which parentification can lead to these positive attributes and thus our understanding of the occasions when parentification may serve as a beneficial function in child development is limited. In order to begin to decipher these instances, a brief review of the literature investigating children and housework will be given. This literature will help to situate parentification in a nonclinical population in

which housework and child care, two important aspects of parentification, are viewed as socializing experiences (Larson & Verma, 1999).

The kind of work children do within the home is important to consider given that how a child or adolescent spends their time can be viewed as a means through which they gain knowledge of rules, scripts, goals, and life skills. For example, a child who spends more time doing schoolwork than any other activity will most likely gain literacy skills but lack certain other social skills. For the purposes of this review, the author will focus on the known correlates of time spent doing work.

Children and Household Work Literature

Children in Western countries spend more time on household tasks than Eastern countries and it is speculated that this is the result of western cultures valuing self-sufficiency and development of individual responsibility (Larson & Verma, 1999). Further, females tend to associate housework with a higher degree of psychological involvement than boys (Russell, Brewer, & Hogben, 1997). Girls were thought to not only be more committed to the household work, but to derive a greater degree of competence from doing so (Russell et. al., 1997). Contrary to these assumptions however, the examination of developmental implications of time in labor in Western Caucasian samples revealed that there is only little evidence of benefits from housework (Larson & Verma, 1999; Goodnow, 1988; Russell, Brewer, Hogben, 1997), for both boys and girls. Children appear to learn the appropriate skills, but evidence of generalized learning of responsibility and achievement or feelings of competence is minimal (Call, Mortimer, & Shanahan, 1995).

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that children of other ethnic groups, for example rural African children, have shown correlations between family labor and qualities such as responsibility, self-reliance, and nurturance, with the clearest patterns for participation in child care (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). These authors suggested that being involved in the giving of nurturance, comfort, and help to younger children and contributing to the functioning of the family were intrinsically rewarding so being responsible and self-reliant became self-motivated. It is clear that there are benefits associated with children occupying a position of responsibility within the family, however, further investigation on the nature and benefits of nurturing work done by children in differing populations deserves attention. Specifically, more empirical evidence is needed to flush out the instances when reliance on children leads to positive outcomes. Studies examining this issue using minority populations in the United States are rare, correlational in description, and completed decades ago. However, the findings of Whiting and Whiting (1975) as well as the implication that parentification can contribute to an adolescent's sense of responsibility and purpose when it is not internalized, the tasks are age appropriate, socially legitimate, and the child is recognized for their contribution (Jurkovic, 1997), do suggest the need for empirical evidence bolstering our understanding of the conditions in which parentification produces positive outcomes. When considering empirical evidence however, issues of definition and measurement of parentification must be taken into account.

Issues of Definition and Measurement of Parentification

One explanation for the lack of attention to the positive attributes of parentification as well as to when and how parentification may operate differently, may lie in the nebulous definition and description of parentification as well as inadequate measurement in the literature to date. As can be seen from the literature, the etiology of parentification remains vague and fails to account for the specific processes operating which create parentification as well as a clear demarcation between the kinds of parentification tasks that contribute to specific adolescent outcomes. The author will briefly review the issues of description and measurement which emerged during this review of parentification.

Recognizing that parentification lacked sophisticated designation, the premier researcher of this topic made an effort to clarify variations in degree of parentification and to also differentiate functionality from dysfunctionality (Jurkovic ,1997). As such, parentification was described as a continuous variable with categories or prototypes of parentification based on degree of caretaking responsibilities (from nonparentification to destructive parentification). The occurrence of these four prototypes; however, is based largely on descriptions of the properties of the parentified role that have been clinically observed (Jurkovic, 1997). Additionally, there are nine parameters used to classify an individual which are described as “important dimensions of its developmental, psychological, [and] sociofamilial context” (Jurkovic, 1997, p. 7). These include: *overtness* (direct evidence); *type of role assignment* (instrumental or expressive); *extent of responsibility* (degree and duration); *object of caretaking* (mother, father, or siblings);

age appropriateness (extent of inappropriateness); *internalization* (degree to which it has been internalized as an organizing part of the child's identity); *family boundaries* (underlying familial transactional processes); *social legitimacy* (viewed as expected and adaptive by culture does not necessarily reflect healthy parentification); and finally, *ethicality* (balance of fairness between children and their care givers over the generations) (Jurkovic, 1997). While this conceptualization of parentification offers an important step towards increased elucidation of the concept, to date, measurement of parentification has not captured these distinctions.

For example, some studies have utilized methods such as case study (Malcom & Keller, 1991) or observational data (Johnson, 2001) which are limited to subjective estimations of parentification. Further, many of the above reviewed studies (Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Jones & Wells, 1996; Goglia & Jurkovic, 1992; Valleau, Bergner, & Horton, 1995; Wells & Jones, 2000; Wells & Jones, 1998) utilized the Parentification Questionnaire (PQ) (Godsall & Jurkovic, 1995), a 15-item self-report measure asking participants to answer questions regarding the degree of instrumental and expressive parentification experienced by the participant retrospectively in their family of origin. Unfortunately, the PQ, which derives a composite score, does not distinguish between instrumental and emotional parentification and further lacks the capacity to identify the circumstances in which parentification exists and manifests functional or dysfunctional outcomes. More recently, Jurkovic, Thirkield, and Morrell (2001) tested a new multidimensional measure of parentification with adult children of divorce in which past instrumental caregiving and past emotional caregiving are given two individual scale

scores. While this study attempts to tease apart parentification's subtypes, it is a retrospective study which did not account for what, if any, varying outcomes result from instrumental versus emotional parentification. This study also assumed that family structure (created by divorce) was the origin of the parentification and did not take into account alternative family processes that may have been operating.

Clearly there is a need to understand the circumstances in which parentification occurs as well as the elements of parentification which create positive or negative outcomes for parentified adolescents. As such, the aim of the current study was to identify the emotional and instrumental factors present which create functional and/or dysfunctional parentification and the extent to which context is relevant to functional outcomes. Specifically, given the lack of precision in distinguishing between the kinds of parentification (instrumental or emotional) and the unique impact of each on child outcomes, the current study utilized measurements designed to target separate instrumental and emotional tasks associated with parentification. Both instrumental and emotional parentification were then tested to determine the distinct impact of each on adolescent outcomes. Additional analyses were also conducted to illuminate the circumstances present in families which contribute to either instrumental or emotional parentification in an effort to understand the extent to which context is relevant to parentification.

It was predicted in the current study that parentification would be a beneficial practice for rural African American single-mother families when children performed instrumental tasks for the family, such as childrearing and household duties, in terms of

self-regulation. This hypothesis was based on the reviewed literature which suggests that these single-mother families face unique risks and as such are likely to implement alternative processes in order to overcome the challenges that they face as evidenced by the work of Virginia Young, who described the positive impact of the position of ‘nurse child’ (1970), as well as the work of Larson and Verma (1999) which views housework and child care as socializing experiences leading to self-reliance. Contrary, when children performed excessive emotional tasks, it was predicted that children would exhibit lower scores on internal measures of functioning (self-esteem and depression). This prediction was based on literature describing the internal deficits associated with parentification (Jurkovic, 1997; Wells & Jones, 2000; Jones & Wells, 1996; Wells, Glick-Hughes, & Jones, 1999). I will now describe the adolescent outcomes examined in this study.

Adolescent Outcomes

Internal

Depression and low self-esteem Depression negatively impacts adolescent development and functioning (Peterson, et.al., 1993) and has been linked with adolescent suicide, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Kandal, Raveis, & Davis, 1991). Additionally, adolescent depression is thought to be a precursor to major depressive disorder in adulthood (Robertson & Simons, 1989). Given the severity of outcomes associated with adolescent depression, there is a need to understand the factors related to the etiology of this psychiatric condition. While adult depression has been extensively researched, studies explaining adolescent depression are infrequent. Some causal models

of adolescent depression have however been presented including such internal factors as negative cognitions (Beck, 1974), hopelessness (Hammond & Romney, 1995), and self-esteem (Carlson & Kashani, 1988), and more recently, family factors such as parental happiness (Lasko, Field, Gonzalez, & Harding, 1996) and parent-adolescent communication (Brage & Meredith, 1994).

Specifically, Lasko and his colleagues (1996) investigated Caucasian, middle-class adolescents' perceptions of social support from friends, parental unhappiness, and parent-adolescent intimacy in relation to depression. Findings revealed that the parental variables of parental unhappiness and parent-adolescent intimacy were more related to adolescent depressed mood than friend variables suggesting that the focus of the etiology of adolescent depression may lie within the family. In another study, Brage and Meredith (1994) investigated family strengths, defined as the family's ability to cope with problems and conflicts that arise in family living, and parent-adolescent communication in relation to self-esteem and depression. It was found that neither family strengths nor parent-adolescent communication had a direct effect on adolescent depression; however these factors had an indirect effect on adolescent depression through self-esteem (Brage & Meredith, 1994). Both self-esteem and depression are important internal outcomes to investigate in adolescents, especially those at a distinct risk. The literature appears to indicate that family factors are central to explanatory models; however, further investigation in at-risk populations warrants our attention. Due to the significant negative relationship between self-esteem and depression (Brage & Meredith, 1994; Yanish & Battle, 1985), the current study included both self-esteem and depression as internal

outcomes examined in adolescents from rural, African American single-mother families. Given the above mentioned findings which suggests that aspects of parental psychological functioning and parenting impact self-esteem and depression, the current study expected that emotional parentification, also thought to be influenced by maternal psychological functioning as well as parenting processes, would have a direct effect on both adolescent self-esteem and adolescent depression. As mentioned, this prediction was also based on findings suggesting internal deficits associated with parentification (Jurkovic, 1997; Wells & Jones, 2000; Jones & Wells, 1996; Wells, Glick-Hughes, & Jones, 1999).

External

Self-regulation. The fundamental nature of self-regulation involves overriding one's impulses and has an internal locus of causality in which individuals are engaged in meeting personal goals or outcomes purposefully. Self-regulation is an essential requirement of children's feelings and behaviors of competence in a wide range of activities (Bronson, 2001). In fact, self-regulation is thought to be one of the most important resources a child has for school success (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999). Students who are more self-regulated are more independent, more motivated, and perceive themselves as more in control and competent (Ryan, Connell, & Grolnick, 1992). Self-regulation is thought to be particularly important during the transition to junior high as this brings an increasing number of responsibilities, both academically and socially, to the already vulnerable adolescent. Of additional significance for the present study is the view that self-regulation is an essential protective factor for youths

considered to be at risk by promoting academic achievement and decreasing externalizing and internalizing problems (Brody & Flor, 1998; Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999). For these reasons, understanding processes in families that promote self-regulation is valuable to our understanding of resiliency in an at-risk population of adolescents in junior high. The home environment of adolescent's is thought to contribute to their self-regulation (Brody, Dorsey, Forehand, & Armistead, 2002; Brody, et. al., 1994; Brody & Ge, 2001; Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999).

Specifically, organized home environments and positive parent-child relationships (Brody, et. al., 1994) as well as mother and father involvement and support of adolescent autonomy (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999) have been found to contribute positively to adolescent self-regulation. These studies were conducted using Caucasian adolescents from two-parent families, thus increased research is necessary in diverse populations. More recently, using a sample of African American adolescents from single-parent families, Brody and colleagues (2002) investigated the relationship between high-levels of maternal involvement, support, and monitoring and adolescent self-regulation. In their discussion, the authors suggest that "organized and predictable environments in which children are valued and their participation in the rules and procedures that govern their behavior is solicited" enhance adolescent self-regulation (Brody, et. al., 2002, p. 282). Based on evidence that home environments, parenting processes, as well as the suggestion that adolescents' contribution to their situation enhance self-regulation, the current study predicted that instrumental parentification would produce variations in self-regulation outcomes of the adolescents in this sample.

Conclusions

The literature to date examining parentification provides valuable information about the causes and effects of this often pathological family process. As it has traditionally been studied, parentification appears to produce deleterious effects in children who have been inappropriately relied on or unduly burdened with adult responsibilities by their parent or parents. Yet in some circumstances it can promote resourceful and competent individuals (Chase, 2001); unfortunately, these instances have been given little attention. Clinicians as well as researchers need the tools with which to distinguish between problematic and nonproblematic parentification and to understand the complex situations which create beneficial and resilient outcomes for children in differing situations. Ecologically and culturally sensitive investigations will aid in the advancement of services, programs, and policies tailored to the unique needs of families from diverse contextual situations. In accordance with this aim, the overall goals of this study were 1) to identify the conditions in which parentification occurs in rural African American single-mother families and 2) to examine the associations between parentification and child outcomes in rural African American single-mother families.

Hypotheses

The following questions framed the study:

What are the linkages of maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes that explain the formation of parentification in rural, African American single-mother families; what aspects of parentification contribute negatively to adolescent outcomes in this population; and what aspects

of parentification serve as a protective factor by contributing to self-regulation in adolescents from rural, African American single-mother households?

As mentioned within the text the hypotheses were as follows:

- 1) Maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes will contribute to the parentification of adolescents in rural, African American single-mother families.
- 2) Adolescent instrumental parentification will significantly predict variations in externalizing behavior among rural African American adolescents residing in single mother families.
- 3) Adolescent emotional parentification will explain variations in internalizing behavior of African American adolescents reared in rural, African American single-mother families.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This study is part of an ongoing research program at the Center For Family Research, University of Georgia, involving African American single-mother families in rural Georgia. Funding for this research program was obtained from the National Institute of Health, National Institute of Child and Human Development, and human subjects approval has been applied for and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia. Data for the Study of Competence in Children and Families have been collected for eight waves: Fall 1992 through Fall 2002, from single African American women, two of their children (ranging in age from 6-11), and teachers of both of the children. The overall aim of this research project has been to understand the processes involved in families facing economic hardship that are linked with competence in rural African American school-age children living in single-mother households.

Study Sample

Participants involved in the parent study included 156 randomly selected African American single-mothers with a first-born child aged 10-12 years. These single-mothers were recruited from 6 rural (or nonmetropolitan) counties in Georgia (recruitment explained below). The U.S. Bureau of the Census defines nonmetropolitan counties as having a population of 20,000 or less. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census the poverty rates in rural areas are comparable to those in urban areas, and thus the current sample is expected to be at or below the poverty line, which is \$12,195 set by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Two waves of data were selected for the current study given that

observing a sample over time reduces the ambiguities that are inherent in cross-sectional research and allows the researcher to account for change over time in adolescent outcomes. The first wave of data contains the variables related to maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes. The second wave of data, which reflects target children during early adolescents, includes the variables of parentification and adolescent self-regulation outcomes. This time frame was chosen due to literature which suggest that during early adolescence individuals are particularly vulnerable to poor school performance given the transition to junior high school which is made at this time (Grolnik & Kurowski, 1999), thus self-regulatory outcomes are particularly important for this age group (Brody, Dorsey, Forehand, & Armistead, 2002; Brody, et. al., 1994; Brody & Ge, 2001). Descriptive statistics for each wave will be provided in the next section. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for demographic information for mother and adolescent at Time 1 and Time 2, respectively. The data utilized for Time 1 in the present study were collected between September 1997 and May 1998. One hundred and fifty-six families participated in this wave of data collection. The women ranged in age from 24 to 67 years, an indication that some of primary caregivers transitioned into grandmotherhood status at an early age, (mean age of 32 years). Most of the women ($n = 60$) had two children; the mean number of children was three with a range between 2 and 10. Fifty-seven of these women reported that they were not in a significant relationship with a partner at the time of data collection; 54 reported having a partner who did not share a residence with them; 17 reported that they were not married but had a cohabitating partner; 12 were married; 4 were married but separated.

from their spouse. Of the 87 who reported having a partner currently, the average length of the relationship was 5.9 years (54% had been in these relationships four years or less). Thus, these mothers, although in terms of legal marital status, were single, few of them were rearing children solo (Murry, et. al., 2002). An examination of monthly income for these participants reflected, on average, \$1235 (range = \$120-\$3800), with a per capita income of \$273 per month. Thirty-six (30%) of the mothers reported receiving AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children); seventy-nine mothers (51%) reported receiving food stamps, 13 mothers (9%) indicated that they were recipients of WIC (Women, Infant, and Children); twenty-eight (18%) receive SSI (Social Security Insurance).

Forty percent of the mothers reported having graduated from high school or earned a GED as the sum of their formal education. Thirty-three percent reported that they had finished their education at some point between grades 9 and 12 before receiving a diploma. Twenty-one percent reported being educated beyond high school; two participants had earned a bachelor's degree. Four participants had less than an eighth grade education.

The adolescent data utilized in this study was collected between September 1998 and January 1999 (Time 2). Seventy-nine female and 73 male adolescents participated in this wave of data collection. The adolescents ranged in age from 8-16 ($m=11.7$ years).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Mothers at Time 1 and Adolescents at Time 2

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Time 1	32.38	6.13	24-67
Mother's Age (years)			
Maternal Education	3.93	1.04	2-7
Maternal Monthly Income	\$1184	\$648	\$120-\$3800
Per Capita Income	\$263	\$174.6	\$26-\$1,267
Time 2			
Adolescent's Age (years)	11.7	1.8	8-16

Note. ^a: 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school, 3 = high school + post-secondary, 4 = college or better

Recruitment Strategies

To insure that a viable African American community existed in the county, the sample was drawn from only counties in which 25% or more of the population is African American. These counties were Barrow (34% African American); Elbert (39% African American); Greene (52% African American); Oglethorpe (48% African American); Walton (31% African American); and Wilkes (37% African American). A list-assisted random digit dialing (RDD) sampling method was used to generate a working residential number rate. In list-assisted sampling all 100-banks of numbers that start with the same eight digits that have at least one residential number in a published telephone directory are identified. This method avoids the problems associated with cluster sampling and

number allocation. The sampling frame is composed of the list of 100 banks for the catchment area (the counties identified). After a family has been randomly selected for participation, families were contacted by community liaisons, such as pastors and teachers, who had been informed of the study by an African American staff member. It was the African American staff member's responsibility to establish rapport with the community liaison so that they could disseminate information about the study. The community liaison then informed prospective families about the purposes of the project. The names of families that expressed interest were given to the research staff member who then contacted the family.

All families participating in the project were paid \$100 for their participation. Six African American students and community members were asked to serve as home visitors in the collection of data (self-report) in order to enhance rapport and cultural understanding. The home visitors received training in the administration of interviews conducted by the principle investigator and the research staff involved in the recruitment of families.

Procedure

The African American staff member who contacted the family informed them again of the purposes of the study as well as the potential risks and benefits. Families were further told that they did not have to answer all of the questions and could stop at any time. Potential risks included the small possibility that the content of the questionnaires could have produced psychological discomfort for some participants. Typically however, these measures have been found to incite individuals to learn

something about themselves and participants are pleased to have the opportunity for introspection (Brody & Flor, 1998). Potential benefits to the participants included an increased knowledge concerning family life and the credit that they have contributed to the knowledge base of normative family life in their community. Potential benefits to society included the addition of knowledge about processes that serve as protective factors in a population for which little information is available.

All families participating in the study were assigned a case number to ensure confidentiality and that the names of families participating in the study would be kept in a locked filing cabinet for the purposes of disbursement of payment for participation. [Note: all of this information was included in the informed consent that was signed during the first home visit.]

Research staff contacted families whom agreed to participate in the project to schedule their home visits. This was done one week prior to their home visits and a reminder call was made one day prior to each visit. Two home visits, each lasting two hours, were made with each family within a 7-day period. Approximately two home visits were conducted each day, five days a week, for four months. Informed consent forms were completed during the first home visit. At each home visit, the home visitor administered self-report questionnaires to the mother in interview format. Each interview was conducted privately between the mother and the researcher. The questionnaires were presented in interview format to avoid any literacy concerns. When Likert-type responses were required, participants were shown a card with a series of dots in graduated sizes that corresponded to the magnitude of the responses from which she was

to choose, and she was asked to indicate her feelings using the dots on the card. Home visitors recorded all answers on a laptop computer that had been formatted with the questionnaires. In the event of technical difficulties, the home visitor completed a hard copy of the measure. All interview data was checked by a research assistant and stored on a mainframe computer.

Measures

In family research it can often be difficult to find measures that unquestionably represent the constructs in question given that family researchers are typically studying constructs that are either internal, symbolic, and/or behavioral in nature (Copeland & White, 1991). The measures selected for the present study yielded interval level measurement that lent themselves to the analyses utilized in this study. Several guidelines were followed in selecting measures from the parent data set. First, consideration was given to conceptual definition of the various constructs included in the study's heuristic model by relying on related literature. Selection was also based on the soundness of the selected variables based on results from psychometric analyses. Specifically, the author tested for internal consistency (reliability) in the current study by looking at the patterns of correlations among all the items assessing a trait. This has been reported (the Cronbach alpha). An additional technique that was used to decrease measurement error and increase validity was to have more than one measure for the constructs in the model.

Also acknowledged and addressed in the parent (original) study was the need to insure the cultural relevance of the selected measures for rural African American

families. This issue is of particular importance given that most of the instruments used in this study had been standardized using White, middle-class families. Thus, measures selected in the present study are revised instruments based on feedback from focus groups comprised of 40 rural African American community members (Brody, et. al., 1996). Each focus group member rated each instrument planned for use on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not appropriate for rural African American families) through 3 (appropriate) to 5 (very appropriate). The instruments that attained a mean rating of at least 3.5 were retained. Next the focus groups reviewed each item on each scale and suggested additions or deletion of items based on the relevance or lack thereof for rural African American families.

As mentioned, data for this study consisted of data from two waves of data collection of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Study of Competence in Children and Families. Data from Time 1 was comprised of information collected from mothers and adolescents and assessed maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes. Data from Time 2 provided information on adolescent parentification and adolescent internal and external outcomes as reported by mother and adolescent. A summary of the specific measures used to assess these constructs follows.

Time 1 Measures

Maternal personal resources. Maternal personal resources consisted of four variables. The first three variables were obtained to measure subjective perception of resource adequacy. Having (1) *adequate supply of necessities*, (2) *adequate time*, and (3) *adequate money* were measured from items included in the subscales from the Family

Resource Scale (Conger, 1995) and were used to determine mother's perception of resource adequacy. These measures were chosen as they relate not just to maternal per capita income, but also assess mothers' subjective perception of how adequate they feel their resources are for meeting basic needs. For example, the adequate supply of necessities subscale inquires about mother's perceptions of having "enough clothes for your family," while the adequate money subscale pertains to the perception of having "enough money to pay monthly bills." Finally, the adequate time subscale is useful as it ascertains how much a mother feels she is able to accomplish the things that her family needs. Respondents answer these questions on a Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all adequate) to 3 (sometimes adequate) to 5 (almost always adequate). These subscales have a Cronbach alpha of .92 (necessities), .90 (time), and .86 (money).

The fourth (4) variable included in maternal resources was support from relatives which was measured using the Relatives subscale of the Social Support Network Scale (Conger, 1995). This subscale contains questions such as, "How easy is it to have a family member watch your children for a few hours when you are called away suddenly?" The Cronbach alpha for this instrument is .86.

Maternal psychological functioning. Maternal psychological functioning consisted of three variables reported by mother. The three subscales were derived from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), a widely used self-report assessment of psychological functioning (Derogatis & Spencer, 1982). The BSI is a 53-item Likert type self-report assessment with answers ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (extremely). The subscales utilized in this study included, (1) interpersonal sensitivity (Cronbach alpha of

.86), (2) depression (Cronbach alpha of .85), and (3) hostility (Cronbach alpha of .76).

Items include questions such as “In the last week, how much have you had feelings of being annoyed or irritated.”

Parenting processes (interaction). Parenting processes (interaction) measured four domains of family interaction occurring in the family, including degree of involvement and support reported by mother and adolescent, using a modified version of the Interaction Behavior Questionnaire (IBQ) (Prinz, Foster, Kent, O’Leary, 1979). The modified version of the IBQ is a 20-item true/false questionnaire that assesses involved and supportive parenting and correlates .96 with the long form. The short form has a Cronbach alpha of .88 for mothers. The maternal measure includes questions such as, “You listen when your child needs somebody to talk to,” and “You enjoy spending time with your child.” The short form of the IBQ for adolescents includes such items as “Mom and I reach agreements during arguments;” and “I am well behaved in my discussions with mom” and has a Cronbach alpha of .84.

Parenting processes (communication). Parenting processes (communication) was measured by the Destructive Arguing Inventory (DAI) filled out by the adolescent (Kurdek, 1994). The Cronbach alpha for this instrument was .87. This measure is a 7-item Likert type, self-report questionnaire that includes items such as “You and your mom’s arguments are left hanging and unsettled.”

Time 2 Measures

Adolescent parentification. Separate measures were used to assess for instrumental and emotional aspects of parentification. *Instrumental parentification* was

conceptualized as performing household and childrearing tasks as these are functions performed within the family which contribute to the daily operation of the household.

Emotional parentification was conceptualized as adolescent's perceptions of, worries about, and knowledge of maternal sadness and family finances as these reflect adolescent's emotive work within the family. These manifest variables were operationalized based on the work of Jurkovic (1997) who described the parameters of parentification including *type of role assignment*. Instrumental and emotional parentification were measured separately given the prediction that each impacts adolescent outcomes uniquely.

Instrumental Domain of Parentification was measured by using items included in the Schwirian Measure (SWR), a 25-item questionnaire that assess' mothers report of the degree to which their child is involved in and participates in *household tasks* (Cronbach alpha of .83) and *childcare* (Cronbach alpha of .72). This measure asks questions such as "...tell me how often your child is expected to do these chores: help prepare meals; do yard work..." and "...tell me how often your child is expected to look after younger brothers and sisters when parent(s) are busy at home..." Answers range from 0 (never/very infrequently) to 4 (daily).

Emotional Domain of Parentification was measured using a composite score from items included in three scales. First, to assess for adolescent's level of awareness and concern for family finances, the *Child's Perception of Family Finances* (FFD) was used. The FFD is an 11-item self-report measure with a reliability coefficient of .82. Next, two subscales from the Children's Perceptions of Parents Sadness (CPP) (Goodman,

Hartman, & Connell, 1995) were used to assess the extent to which the child provided support for mothers by determining the adolescent's level of awareness and concern for mother's sadness. The CPP is a 21-item Likert-type self-report questionnaire. The two subscales utilized in the current study were the CPP Frequency (Cronbach alpha .58) with questions such as "My mother gets sad a lot" and the CPP Perceived Threat (Cronbach alpha .77) with questions such as "When my mother gets sad, I worry that I'll have to take care of more things at home." Answers range from 1 (True) to 2 (Sort of True) and 3 (False).

Adolescent Outcomes

External

Self-regulation. Adolescent self-regulation was measured using the self-control subscale from the Child Self Control (CSC) measure (Humphrey, 1982). The CSC is a 15-item Likert-type scale filled out by the adolescent's mother. The self-control subscale has a Cronbach alpha of .92.

Internal

Self-esteem. Adolescent self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSE is a 10-item Likert-type scale. All items revolve around liking and/or approving of the self. A reliability coefficient of .92 (Robinson & Shaver, 1973), and a test-retest reliability of .85 are reported for this measurement (Siber & Tippett, 1965). Questions, such as, "You feel that you have a number of good qualities" are answered on a True/False scale from 1 (completely false) to 5 (completely true).

Depression. Adolescent depression was measured using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977), a self-report depression scale for research which has been used widely with community samples. The CES-D Depression subscale consists of 20 items. Cronbach alpha is .84.

Analytic plan: Multiple hierarchical regression analyses were utilized to test the hypotheses set forth in this project due to the ability to forecast variance in selected outcomes using multiple predictors entered in stepwise fashion. First, correlation analyses were conducted using the variables selected for study to determine if significant relationships existed among the variables in the proposed hypotheses. After significant relationships were shown to exist, these correlation analyses then informed appropriate regression models to be tested and run.

Testing Proposed Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1:

Maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes will contribute to the parentification of adolescents in rural, African American single-mother families. To test this hypothesis, separate hierarchical multiple regression models were developed for each outcome and variables were entered accordingly from proximal to distal influences on the dependent variable of parentification. Based on the above reviewed literature the variables were entered hierarchically into the model in the following order: (1) parenting processes; (2) maternal psychological functioning; (3) maternal personal resources; (4) the interaction between parenting processes and maternal psychological functioning; (5) the interaction between maternal psychological

functioning and maternal personal resources; and (6) the interaction between parenting processes and maternal personal resources with both instrumental and emotional parentification as independent variables. Interaction terms were entered in order to ascertain if there were moderational effects for any of the variables in explaining variance in the dependent variable.

Hypothesis 2:

Adolescent instrumental parentification will significantly predict variations in externalizing behavior among rural African American adolescents residing in single mother families. To test this hypothesis, regression models were developed to determine the extent to which both instrumental (tasks) parentification and instrumental (childcare) parentification predicted self-regulation.

Hypothesis 3

Adolescent emotional parentification will explain variations in internalizing behavior of African American adolescents reared in rural, African American single-mother families. To test this hypothesis, regression models where developed to test the extent to which emotional parentification predicted both self-esteem and depression.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Based on the risk and resilience model combined with the need to understand ways in which parentification may impact youth at risk, both as a protective and risk factor, the current study investigated the effects of maternal personal resources, maternal psychological functioning, parenting processes, and adolescent parentification on adolescent internalizing and externalizing behavior over time. The specific aim of the current study was to determine under what conditions does adolescent parentification occur in economically stressed, rural African American single-parent families and to ascertain under what conditions does parentification serve as a protective or risk factor for these youth? These questions were addressed by testing several hierarchical multiple regression models examining the effects of maternal resources, mother's psychological functioning, and parenting processes on mother and child reports covering a span of two data points. Specifically, reports at Time 1 on adolescent parentification at Time 2, and the effect of adolescent parentification on adolescent self-regulation and psychological well-being at Time 2. First, data from these two waves were merged into one SPSS data file. Then, several exploratory analyses were conducted including an examination of univariate statistics of each of the study variables. Descriptive statistics of the study variables are included in Table 2. When conducting the regression analyses, missing data was handled by excluding cases listwise, that is, only cases with valid values for all variables were included in the analyses. As noted in the tables below, the final sample

size was reduced by two to three cases, depending on the particular variables being tested.

Table 2*Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of All Study Variables (N=156)*

Variables	M	SD	Range
Resources			
Adequate Money/Time	12.91	5.15	4-20
Adequate Necessity	48.13	5.15	12-60
Adequate Money	11.61	3.14	3-15
Maternal Psychological Functioning			
Interpersonal Sensitivity	.458	.67	0-3
Depression	.385	.55	0-2.6
Hostility	.347	.50	0-2.6
Parenting Processes (Interaction)			
IBQ- Target	14.8	3.8	5-20
IBQ- Mother	15.6	3.9	6-20
Parenting Processes (Communication)			
DAI	15.8	4.4	7-24
Emotional Parentification*			
Child's Perception of Parental	Sadness- Frequency	11.05	3.1
Child's Perception of Parental	Sadness- Perceived Threat	12.05	2.8
Perception of Family Finances		2.81	0-10

Table 2 (continued)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Instrumental Parentification (Tasks)*	1.7	.75	0-4
Instrumental Parentification (Childcare)*	1.03	1.08	0-4
Adolescent Self-Regulation**	12.13	3.5	0-20
Adolescent Depression***	8.8	7.1	0-30
Adolescent Self-Esteem**	39.3	6.5	24-50

Notes. * Higher scores indicate greater degree of instrumental and emotional parentification. **Higher scores indicate greater degree of self-regulation and self-esteem. ***Higher scores indicate greater degree of depression.

Hypothesis 1:

Maternal resources, maternal psychological functioning, and parenting processes will contribute to the parentification of adolescents in rural, African American single-mother families. The models are discussed below separately for both instrumental and emotional parentification. Variables were entered in blocks and ordered from proximal to distal, with the most proximal factors entered first. This method of ordering was used based on the assumption that those factors most salient for adolescent parentification would have the greatest impact on the degree of variability in parentification. Therefore, given the above reviewed literature suggesting that parenting processes are influenced by maternal psychological functioning (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Liaw, 1995; Conger, Ge, & Elder, 1994; McLoyd, 1990), and that maternal psychological functioning is influenced by maternal resources (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Liaw & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Jackson, Gyamfi, Brooks-Gunn, & Blake, 1998), the ordering of the blocks for main

effects was as follows: parenting processes in Block 1; maternal psychological functioning in Block 2; and maternal resources in Block 3. Interaction terms were created in efforts to test the moderational effect of the independent variables parenting processes, maternal psychological functioning, and resources, and the dependent variables instrumental and emotional parentification. The interaction between parenting processes and maternal psychological functioning; the interaction between maternal psychological functioning and resources, and the interaction between parenting processes and resources were entered in Blocks 4 through 6. Analyses were also conducted to determine if gender explained any of the variance in parentification. Only instrumental (child care) parentification revealed significant effects of gender (discussed below).

Predictors of instrumental (tasks) parentification. Table 3 presents the parsimonious model for each predictor explaining variations in instrumental parentification (tasks) reported by adolescents. Parenting processes (communication) were entered into Block 1; explaining 3.7% of the variance in instrumental (tasks) parentification ($R^2 = 3.7$, $p < .01$). The addition of maternal psychological functioning entered in Block 2 increased R^2 to 6.4 reflecting an ΔR^2 of 2.7, ($p < .01$) suggesting that maternal psychological functioning predicts 2.7% of the variance above and beyond that of parenting processes. Maternal personal resources were entered in Block 3 to determine their contribution to the explained variance in instrumental (tasks) parentification over and above the predictive capacity of parenting processes and maternal psychological functioning. The inclusion of resources did not significantly increase R^2 (.062), and predicted 0% of the variance above that of parenting processes

and maternal psychological functioning (\hat{R}^2 of -.002, $p < .05$). Therefore, maternal personal resources were dropped from the model leaving the combined contribution of the combination of Blocks 1 and 2 to explain 6.4% of the variance in instrumental (tasks) parentification. Although interaction terms were entered into the model, none emerged as significant.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Parenting Process and Maternal Psychological Functioning Variables Predicting Instrumental (Tasks) Parentification in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 152)

Variable	df	F	B at Final	R ²	Adjusted R ²	R ² Change	p
Step							
Block 1							
Parenting Processes ¹	151	5.77	.251	.037	.031	--	.018
Block 2							
Maternal Psychological Functioning ²	146	4.90	-.173	.064	.051	.027	.009

Note. ¹Parenting Processes: DAI Negative + DAI Total. ²Maternal Psychological Functioning:

Interpersonal Sensitivity + Depression + Hostility.

Predictors of instrumental (childcare) parentification. Table 4 presents the parsimonious model for each predictor explaining variations in instrumental (childcare) parentification reported by adolescents. Parenting processes (communication) were entered into Block 1; explaining less than 1% of the variance in instrumental

parentification (tasks) ($R^2=.00$ $p<.999$). Parenting processes (communication) was therefore dropped from the model. Parenting processes (interaction) was also entered in an effort to determine its contribution to the variance in instrumental (childcare) parentification. Parenting Processes (interaction) did not contribute to the explained variance in instrumental (childcare) parentification. Maternal psychological functioning was then entered into the model; however, this block also did not significantly contribute to instrumental (childcare) parentification (R^2 of .003 ($p<.51$)), therefore, maternal psychological functioning was also dropped from the model. Resources were then entered to determine its contribution in explaining instrumental (childcare) parentification. The inclusion of resources contributed 2.5% of the variance, producing an R^2 of 2.5 ($p<.10$). Although interaction terms were entered into the model, none emerged as significant.

Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Resource and Gender Variables Predicting Instrumental (Childcare) Parentification in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 152)

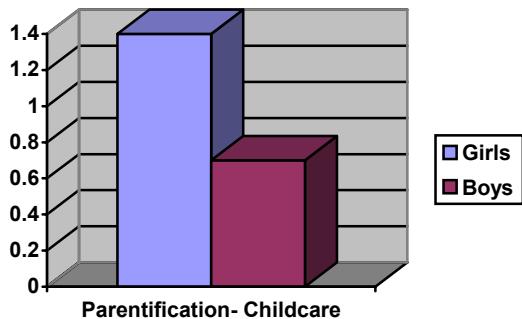
Variable	df	F	B at Final	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 Change	p
Step							
Block 4							
Resources ¹	147	3.8	.58	.025	.018	--	.054
Block 5							
Gender	151	11.36	.265	.070	.064	--	.001

Note ¹Resources: Adequate Money/Time + Adequate Money for Necessities + Adequate Money

Gender was entered in Block 5 in order to examine its' contribution to the explained variance in instrumental (childcare) parentification. As noted in Table 4, gender predicts 7% of the variance in instrumental (childcare) parentification ($R^2 = .07$, $p < .001$). To further determine whether boys versus girls were effected differentially in the manifestation of instrumental parentification, follow-up correlational analyses were conducted. Results from these findings indicated that girls are more likely than boys to exhibit instrumental (childcare) parentification ($r = .265$, $p < .01$) (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Participation in Parentification (Childcare) as a Function of Gender (N=152)



Predictors of Emotional Parentification. Table 5 presents the parsimonious model for each predictor explaining variations in emotional parentification reported by adolescents. Parenting processes (interaction) were entered into Block 1; explaining 5.2% of the variance in emotional parentification ($R^2 = .052$, $p < .01$). The addition of maternal psychological functioning entered in Block 2 did not significantly increase R^2 , reflecting an ΔR^2 of -.001, ($p < .05$); therefore, maternal psychological functioning was dropped from the hierarchical regression analyses. Resources were then entered in Block 3 to determine its contribution in explaining emotional parentification over and above the

predictive capacity of parenting processes. The inclusion of resources significantly increased R^2 to .07, and predicted 2% of the variance above that of parenting processes (ΔR^2 of .02, $p < .05$). The combined contribution of these two blocks therefore explained 7% of the variance in emotional parentification. Although interaction terms were entered into the model, none emerged as significant.

Table 5

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Parenting Process, Maternal Psychological Functioning, and Resource Variables Predicting Emotional Parentification in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 152)

Variable	df	F	B at Final	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 Change	p
Step							
Block 1							
Parenting Processes ¹	148	8.06	-.228	.052	.046	--	.005
Block 2							
Maternal Psychological Functioning ²	143	3.76	-.052	.051	.037	-.001	.026
Block 3							
Resources ³	139	3.40	.264	.070	.039	.028	.020

Note. ¹Parenting Processes: IBQ Mother + IBQ Target. ²Maternal Psychological Functioning: Interpersonal Sensitivity + Depression + Hostility. ³Resources: Adequate Money/Time + Adequate Money for Necessities + Adequate Money

Hypothesis 2:

Adolescent instrumental parentification will significantly predict variations in externalizing behavior among rural African American adolescents residing in single mother families. Due to multicollinearity between instrumental parentification (tasks)

and instrumental parentification (childcare), two models were created. Table 6a presents the model using instrumental (tasks) parentification to explain the variance in self-regulation outcomes of adolescents. Results indicated that instrumental (tasks) parentification significantly predicts 4.5% of the variance in the self-regulation of adolescents from rural, single-parent African American families ($R^2=.045$ $p<.01$).

Table 6a

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Instrumental (tasks) Parentification Predicting Self-regulation in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 153)

Variable	df	F	B at Final	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 Change	P
Step							
Instrumental (Tasks)	151	7.00	.211	.045	.038	--	.009
Parentification							

Table 6b presents the model using in instrumental (childcare) parentification to explain the variance in self-regulation outcomes of adolescents. Results indicated that instrumental (childcare) parentification significantly predicts 4.6% of the variance in the self-regulation of adolescents from rural, single-parent African American families ($R^2=.046$, $p<.01$).

Table 6b

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Instrumental (childcare) Parentification Predicting Self-regulation in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 153)

Variable	df	F	B at Final	R ²	Adjusted R ²	R ² Change	p
			Step				
Instrumental (Childcare)	151	7.24	.215	.046	.040	--	.008
Parentification							

Hypothesis 3

Adolescent emotional parentification will be linked with internal outcomes rural, African American single mother families. Table 7 and 8 present the models that emerged from regression analyses of emotional parentification's predictive value for the dependent variables of depression and self-esteem in adolescents from rural, African American single-mother families. Using depression as the dependent variable, emotional parentification predicted 20% of the variance ($R^2=.202, p<.001$).

Table 7

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Emotional Parentification Predicting Depression in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 152)

Variable	df	F	B at Final	R ²	Adjusted R ²	R ² Change	p
			Step				
Emotional Parentification	150	37.65	.449	.202	.196	--	.000

In terms of self-esteem, emotional parentification predicted 13.5% of the variance ($R^2=.135, p<.001$).

Table 8

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Emotional Parentification Predicting Self-Esteem in African American Adolescents from Rural, Single-Parent Families (N = 152)

Variable	df	F	B at Final	R ²	Adjusted R ²	R ² Change	p
Step							
Emotional Parentification	150	23.17	-.367	.135	.129	--	.000

In summary, parenting processes, maternal psychological functioning, and maternal personal resources appear to have moderate, and sometimes no, impact on the parentification outcomes examined in this sample. For example, mother-adolescent communication and maternal psychological functioning contribute to the development of instrumental (tasks) parentification whereas only resources and gender produced variance in instrumental (childcare) parentification. In terms of emotional parentification, the factors of the relationship between mother and adolescent and maternal personal resources produced variance in level of emotional parentification. Of interest to current theories on gender socialization as well as parentification, gender was not found to contribute to the variation in emotional parentification or instrumental (tasks) parentification. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Regarding the effects of parentification, results indicate that instrumental parentification significantly predicts variations in externalizing behavior, in particular,

self-regulation, while emotional parentification significantly predicts variations in internalizing behaviors, in particular, self-esteem and depression, among rural African American adolescents residing in single mother families. When adolescents in these families participated in household and childcare tasks, they exhibited greater self-regulation suggesting benefits from engaging in this type of work. Contrary, when adolescents displayed indications of emotional parentification, their sense of self and level of depression were negatively affected. As will be discussed in the next chapter, these findings provide useful insight into both the development and consequences of parentification in rural African American single-mother families.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Few studies have examined parentification from a cultural and resilience perspective. Using longitudinal data, this dissertation represents one of the only efforts to understand ways in which family patterns of at-risk families may occasion parentified roles in children, and to discover the conditions in which parentification may serve as a protective factor. Additionally, this study begins to refine our understanding of this complex family practice by distinguishing among discrete domains of parentification. For example, based on theory and prior research describing African American families (Murry, et. al., 2001; Young, 1970; 1974) as well as literature suggesting possible benefits from parentification (Jurkovic, 1997; Minuchin, 1967), it was hypothesized that instrumental aspects of parentification which fulfilled a functional need for the family would contribute to adolescent competence through self-regulation. The analyses supported this hypothesis, indicating that a valuable aspect of parenting for African American single-mother families may be relying on the oldest child for childrearing and household tasks. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that when an adolescent performed emotional aspects of parentification within the family, their internal sense of self would be impacted. This hypothesis was also supported; adolescents from this sample displayed evidence of decreased self-esteem and increased depression resulting from emotional parentification. These results, although preliminary, highlight the need to distinguish between domains of parentification in both research and clinical practice and further to

consider the unique impact of familial and cultural processes at play which shape the development of parentification.

Indeed, results from the current study extend previous research describing parentification by identifying potential family factors and processes that may contribute to parentification. Specifically, the findings suggest that differing factors and processes within the rural, African American single-mother families in this study may influence the later development of emotional and instrumental parentification. These findings reveal processes that can be targeted for intervention to both discourage emotional parentification and facilitate adaptive instrumental parentification. I will now discuss in detail the findings from the present study, beginning with an overall description of the rural single-mother families in the present study. I will then illustrate the processes found to contribute to the development of emotional and instrumental parentification, followed by the internal and external adolescent outcomes associated with each domain of parentification. Next I will state limitations of the current study. Finally, I will present the implications for research and practice that these findings bring to light.

General Description of Family Functioning in Single, Mother-Headed Families

To begin the discussion of results, I will first reflect on the participants themselves. What becomes apparent when viewing these families as a whole, is that the rural single-mother families in this sample challenge assumptions of inherent disadvantages to maternal and adolescent well-being resulting exclusively from family structure and low socioeconomic status. Overall, the families that participated in the current study appear to be functioning well, both internally and interpersonally, thus

corroborating evidence from the few studies that have viewed African American single-mother families from a resilience perspective (Brodsky, 1999; Murry, et. al., 2001).

First, mothers report feeling economic distress; however, it seems that they are managing with the income and resources that they have available as evidenced by their descriptions of adequate money ($M= 11.61$, $SD= 3.14$); time ($M= 12.91$, $SD= 5.15$); and necessities ($M= 48.13$, $SD= 5.15$). That is, the average values reported by the single-mothers in this sample indicate a sense of sufficient supply of personal resources. Further, although prior studies consistently link poverty to less favorable psychological functioning among African American single-mothers (McLoyd 1990), results from the present study indicate that the majority of the mothers in this study report positive psychological functioning ($M= .385$; $SD= .55$), suggesting that poverty does not necessarily produce adverse psychological outcomes for single-mothers. Likewise, the family relationships of the rural African American families in this sample are generally satisfying. The single-mothers and adolescents participating in this study gave an above average rating to the condition of their relationship (mother, $M= 14.8$, $SD= 3.8$) and (adolescent $M= 15.6$, $SD= 3.9$). Conversely, the quality of discussion between adolescent and parent does appear to involve more disagreements than average ($M= 15.8$, $SD= 4.4$). This finding is not surprising in light of the fact that parent-adolescent communication patterns are typically altered during adolescence as adolescents seek greater autonomy (Hock, et. al., 2001; Williams, 2003). In addition, the patterns observed here may be reflective of what Brody and Flor (1997) have characterized as no-nonsense parenting (Brody & Flor, 1997) (to be discussed below) strategies in African American families

that are not necessarily detrimental to either family functioning or adolescent outcomes. I will now discuss overall adolescent outcomes.

General Description of African American Adolescents Adjustment and Development

Many of the adolescents in this study report somewhat above average emotional parentification (perception of parental sadness-frequency, $M= 11.05$, $SD= 3.1$; perception of parental sadness-perceived threat, $M= 12.05$, $SD= 2.8$; and perception of family finances, $M= 2.81$, $SD= 2.5$). This pattern may have implications for clinical intervention as a potential pathway to circumvent negative consequences associated with this domain of parentification. Suggestions for intervention will be provided in another section of this chapter.

In terms of instrumental parentification, the adolescents in these families are participating more in household tasks ($M= 1.7$, $SD= .75$) than they are in childcare tasks ($M= 1.03$, $SD= 1.08$); however neither of these occurred at an excessive level. Again, it can be inferred that despite the constraints which family structure and low socioeconomic status place upon these single-mothers, they are not unduly burdening their children.

Evidence of this lies in the data on adolescent depression ($M= 8.8$, $SD= 7.1$); self-esteem ($M= 39.3$, $SD= 6.5$); and self-regulation ($M= 12.13$, $SD= 3.5$), all of which suggest that these adolescents are, on average, well-adjusted. In summary, the overall findings presented regarding these rural African American single-mother families suggest the need to reconsider the notion that family structure and poverty necessarily create circumstances that compromise family functioning and ultimately, child outcomes. Rather, scholars interested in discernment of how families manage in the face of risk

must consider family processes and other contextual factors in addition to structure and economics that influence maternal and child adjustment. I will now detail results from the current study which investigated processes and contextual factors relating specifically to the development of parentification in these families as well as parentification outcomes for rural African American adolescents from single-mother families. The factors predicted to influence instrumental parentification were that of parenting processes, maternal psychological functioning, and maternal personal resources. I will begin by discussing the findings related to parenting processes. In this section a brief review of the specific parenting processes examined in the current study will be provided. A general discussion of communication and parent-adolescent relationship provides a context in which to understand and appreciate how these functions may be impacting the development of parentification in rural African American single-mother families.

Parenting Processes

Researchers and clinicians have long held that the family environment, particularly one in which appropriate boundaries are distorted or absent, appears to foster destructive parentification; however, specific parenting processes have not been examined. It is widely known that child adjustment and well-being are influenced by parenting processes, such as relationship quality (Luster, Bates, Fitzgerald, Vanderbelt, & Key, 2000; Ricciuti, 1999; Brody, Flor, Hollett-Wright, & McCoy, 1998; Paikoff, Parfenoff, Williams, McCormick, Greenwood, & Holmbeck, 1997; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Murry, 1994) and parent communication patterns (Kotchick et. al., 1998; Rosenthal, Lewis & Cohen, 1996; Whitaker, et. al., 1999). Therefore, these processes

were examined in the current study in relation to parentification. The results obtained extend our previous understanding of the etiology of parentification and suggest that parent-adolescent communication and parent-adolescent interaction could be notable components to the development of this phenomenon. Several plausible explanations for this suggestion are offered.

First, findings from the present study revealed that parent-adolescent communication, specifically destructive arguing, is a significant predictor of instrumental (tasks) parentification. There are several reasons why family communication patterns would be expected to impact this occurrence. In general, research on communication between parents and adolescents asserts that conversations between parent and adolescent are essential in transmitting values, attitudes, and knowledge (Kotchick et. al., 1998). A second reason to expect communication to shape adolescent behaviors in the household is because through this transmission of values and beliefs from parent to child, adolescents presumably learn to make informed decisions (Rosenthal, Lewis & Cohen, 1996). The parental expectations of African American parents, as expressed through their beliefs, values, and behavioral pattern models, serve functionally as adaptive mechanisms and coping strategies, particularly to reflect this population's unique racial experiences (Boykin & Ellison 1995, 101). The findings of these investigators offer a framework with which to view the current results.

Communication patterns directly influenced adolescent participation in household tasks for the participants in this study. Thus, as suggested by Boykin and Ellison (1995), maternal expectations for adolescent behavior are transmitted through messages

conveyed by communicating which in turn may enhance adolescent coping. That is, more arguing between mother and adolescent at Time 1 was found to contribute to the development of adaptive instrumental parentification wherein adolescents engaged in household tasks at Time 2, and ultimately, participation in these tasks lead to self-regulation. This finding can further be understood by the fact that an increasing number of studies show that firm control exercised within affectively positive parent-child relationships predicts positive outcomes, such as self-regulation, social competence, positive mental health, and school success among African American children (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990; Brody & Flor, 1998; Klein & Forehand, 2000; Kotchick et al., 1997; McCabe et al., 1999; Taylor, 2000). Brody, Flor, and Gibson (1998) describe *no nonsense parenting*, a practice that features higher levels of warmth than are typically associated with authoritarian parenting and higher levels of monitoring, control, and vigilance than are typically characteristic of the authoritative style. African American mothers, especially those rearing children in high-risk environments, believe that such parenting processes protect their children from involvement in antisocial activity while promoting their development of self-regulatory competence (Kelley et al., 1992; Lamborn et al., 1996). Therefore, mothers' use of firm control may be perceived by adolescents as problematic and result in more frequent arguments; however as Boykin and Ellison (1995) propose, their behavioral expectations are communicated and adhered to by the adolescent.

Another parenting process examined in the current study was that of the mother-adolescent relationship. Specifically, the interaction between mother and adolescent was

found to contribute to the occurrence of emotional parentification among African American adolescents in this sample. That is, an unhealthy relationship between mother and adolescent at Time 1 increased the likelihood that rural African American adolescents would report taking on a family role characterized as emotional parentification at Time 2. These findings may expand our understanding of the negative portrayal of parentification originating in the early work of Minuchin (1974). Minuchin, for example, portrayed the parental child in structural terms as one who had violated subsystem boundaries. These children were depicted as overly involved in the parental subsystem and underinvolved in the sibling subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). Thus, the power structure within the family was disrupted and thought to be problematic. A more refined characterization of the context whereby parentification may have negative consequences for children were observed in the present study. In particular, when mothers confront economic difficulties, such as those faced by the rural African American mothers in this sample (implication to be discussed in maternal personal resource section below), and the relationship with their adolescent lacks positive interactions, these adolescents are more likely to encroach upon adult worries. It could be speculated that mothers are inappropriately unloading their adult worries onto their adolescent, which occasions negative interactions between the mother and child, and consequently, leaves the adolescent feeling burdened by financial and maternal emotional well-being issues. Support for the findings in the present study is also noted in the work of Boszormeny-Nagy & Spark (1973) who suggested that parentification occurs when the balance of give and take is absent within the parent-child relationship. Findings

emerging in the current study do illustrate that the rural African American adolescents were clearly affected by their relationship with their mother, in that they were more likely to spend emotional energy on financial and emotive issues in the family when the relationship with their mother lacked mutual and respectful exchanges. Contrary, when mothers and adolescents report a positive relationship, emotional parentification role performance is less likely to be evident among adolescents residing in rural single, African American families. The current findings therefore provide some evidence that African American single-mothers in poverty do not necessarily have children who are overly concerned about their well-being and/or the family financial situation but these patterns are more likely to occur when family relationship quality was less than optimum. As Minuchin, et. al. (1967) illustrate, parental responsibilities can be helpful in developing coping skills as long as the child receives support and recognition for their efforts.

Of note, as manifested by the parenting process variables tested in this model, neither communication nor interaction were significant predictors of instrumental (child care) parentification. It seems that irrespective of the kind of relationship that rural African American adolescents have with their mothers, they will participate in childcare as needed. This finding is supportive of the work of Virginia Young (1970; 1974) who discussed that an important element of parenting for single-mothers in challenging circumstances was to rely on oldest children to contribute both instrumentally and through caretaking tasks. Young further elaborated by depicting the role of the firstborn child as that of the nurse child who was responsible for all of the children. In her work,

she found that this was an effective and valuable practice adopted by rural African American families for optimal functioning. This practice appeared to be operating in the current sample. I will now discuss the findings related to maternal psychological functioning.

Maternal Psychological Functioning

Poor maternal well-being has been linked to low paternal involvement (Jackson, 1999); however, neither Brody and Flor (1997) nor Taylor, et. al. (1997) found maternal well-being to predict parenting behaviors or mother-child relationship quality (Murry et al., 2001). These findings inform some of the patterns observed in the present study. For example, maternal psychological functioning at Time 1 significantly impacted the development of instrumental (tasks) parentification among adolescents at Time 2. More specifically, increased manifestation of depressive symptoms among African American single-mothers in this study increased the likelihood that their children performed more household tasks. This finding, therefore, suggests that depressed mothers may have been less involved in household management, which in turn were performed by their children. Jackson (1999) offered similar conclusions in her study of maternal depression and parenting processes of urban, single, African American mothers. Noteworthy, however, was that maternal depression did not foster greater manifestation of children taking on the role of emotional parentification. These findings are contrary to earlier speculation that a single-parent who under functions due to psychological distress unduly relies on their child as a confidant or spouse (Zahn-Waxler, Kochanska, Krupnick, & McKnew, 1990). This conclusion implies that rural African American mothers who struggle with

decreased psychological well-being are able to buffer their children from adverse concern and worry which may be damaging, through the positive parenting processes mentioned above and follows the findings of Brody and Flor (1997) and Taylor et al. (1997). Thus, while maternal psychological functioning remains a salient factor in family well-being, it is not necessarily a forecast for excessive adolescent emotional involvement in mother's personal and financial matters.

Although prior studies have reported links between maternal psychological functioning and compromised parenting (Jackson, 1999; McLoyd, 1990), findings from the present study did not lend support for ways in which this family environment may increase children's vulnerability to having to serve as a surrogate parent. Specifically, having a depressed mother did not influence the childcare patterns of the rural African American adolescents in this study. These findings, in addition to the results mentioned above that parenting processes also did not influence parentification (childcare), suggest that rural African American adolescents are likely to participate in childcare regardless of these family factors. It appears that there may be something operating at a cultural or contextual level which leads to children's involvement in childcare that is not being captured with the family factors investigated in the current study and warrant further consideration in future studies. Findings related to maternal personal resources will now be discussed.

Maternal Personal Resources

It has been suggested that poverty not only means families have limited income, but economic distress affects families' total existence and can impede parents' and

children's social, emotional, biological, and intellectual growth and development (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Economic stress creates circumstances that compromise single mothers' parenting processes (McLoyd, 1990), which increases the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical health disparities between children reared in single-parent and two-parent families (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997). These indications were partially supported in the current study. While present results demonstrated that maternal personal resources did not directly influence the development of instrumental (tasks) parentification, maternal personal resources were found to influence the development of emotional parentification. That is, perceptions of lower personal resources increased the observance of emotional parentification in the rural African American adolescents in this study. When mothers are feeling burdened and challenged rearing children in economically strained circumstance, the boundaries between subsystems appears to suffer in that they may disclose the financial situation to their children, or the consequences of the poverty status of the family are so obvious that adolescents are more aware of and in turn, are more likely to exhibit signs of increased concern for family finances as well as maternal well-being. Again, some support for the need to maintain an emotional boundary around subsystems (Minuchin, 1974) was established in the current study.

On the other hand, there was a small but significant effect of maternal personal resources on instrumental parentification (childcare); specifically, mothers who reported increased resources, such as adequate money, time, and supply of necessities, had children who helped more with childcare. These women may have the ability to garner

social capital or may be more qualified to obtain jobs that expanded the family resources. To ensure that routine family patterns were maintained, the older children may have responded by taking on more child care responsibilities, thus leaving their mothers feeling less burdened. These findings support the hypothesis that when there is a functional need for children to help within the household, oldest children participate and ultimately, family functioning and adolescent outcomes are enhanced. These findings additionally provide evidence for the need to refrain from viewing all single-parent families in poverty as wholeistically ‘at risk.’ It is clear that family structure and economic constraints operate complexly in their influence on either adaptive or destructive parentification. This study suggests that a lack of maternal personal resources and a poor mother-adolescent relationship increase the likelihood of emotional parentification. Contrary, the single-mothers in this study intimate that positive parent-adolescent interaction as well as encouraging adaptive parentification in the form of tasks and childcare can enhance adolescent outcomes. The specific outcomes established in the current study will now be examined.

Self-Regulation

It was predicted that both adolescent task and childcare parentification (i.e., instrumental) would be associated with self-regulation. This hypothesis was supported. Previous findings have given little support for generalized learning and favorable outcomes for participation in these kinds of household tasks (Larson & Verma, 1999; Goodnow, 1988; Russell, Brewer, Hogben, 1997); however, these studies utilized Caucasian samples which suggests that there may be alternative cultural processes

operating in the current sample which enhance the benefits of participation in the household. Whiting and Whiting (1975) indicated that for the African children in their sample, being involved in the giving of nurturance, comfort, and help to younger children and contributing to the functioning of the family were intrinsically rewarding so being responsible and self-reliant became self-motivated. Similarly, the rural African American adolescents in the current study displayed evidence of adaptive parentification through their increased self-regulation. These findings further our understanding of the factors that contribute to resiliency among rural African American single-mother families. The feelings of importance and self-worth which stem from being expected to and acknowledged for assisting mothers in the daily functioning of the household translates into competence through self-regulation. Findings emerging from Virginia Young's (1970) pioneering work on rural African American families are also empirically supported in the current study in that the oldest child does appear to gain skills through his/her privileged position as nurse-child. There are occasions, however, when aspects of parentification do prove to have detrimental outcomes for adolescents. These will now be discussed.

Self-Esteem and Depression

Models of adolescent self-esteem and depression have previously implicated family factors (Brage & Meredith, 1994; Lasko, Field, Gonzalez, & Harding, 1996), however the associations remain unclear. Findings from the current study elucidate this earlier work by revealing that it may be through the mother-adolescent relationship and subsequently emotional parentification that adolescents' sense of self and level of

depression can suffer. This is because, emotional parentification (influenced by the mother-adolescent relationship), was significantly associated with rural African American adolescent depression and self-esteem in the current study. In particular, these adolescents had unfavorable internal consequences when they displayed excessive concern over their mother's well-being as well as the financial well-being within the family. The results obtained in this study thus advance our awareness of how parentification can operate negatively for adolescents. Emotive work may be destructive for these adolescents because unlike household and childcare tasks, worry and concern constitute 'invisible work' in which adolescents can neither see results nor be recognized for their contributions, two key components for adaptive parentification (Jurkovic, 1997). When adolescents in this sample spent excessive emotive energy on their families, they may have been left feeling unrewarded for this effort and the result was a decreased sense of self and increased levels of depression. Before concluding this discussion of results, a brief consideration of gender is warranted.

Gender

Gender differences have been noted in the literature on parentification as female children are traditionally socialized to organize their behavior, goals, and personalities around responsibilities to others, caring, and interdependence (Gilligan, 1982). It has been speculated that parentified women are more likely to exhibit signs of depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Martin, 1995). On the other hand, it has also been found that parentified females have less depression in relation to a greater degree of parentification (Wolkin, 1984) as a function of their satisfaction from fulfilling

socially approved roles. This is consistent with the findings of Russell, Brewer, and Hogben (1997) who reported a link between girls' household work with a higher degree of psychological involvement than for boys. For example, girls indicated that not only were they more committed to the household work, but they derived a greater degree of competence from doing so (Russell et. al., 1997). Findings from the present study help to differentiate these contrasting results.

The rural African American girls in the current study were no more likely than their male counterparts to exhibit either competence or low self-esteem and depression due to their parentified roles. Rather, the likelihood of greater self-regulation or lower self-esteem and increased depression depended on whether the parentified role taken was emotional or instrumental and not upon gender. It appears then, that the rural African American adolescents in this sample did not necessarily derive satisfaction from fulfilling stereotypically gendered roles as suggested by Russell and colleagues, but from fulfilling the *nurse child* role researched by Virginia Young (1970). In essence, the psychological benefits and/or disadvantages of being parentified were equivalent for the boys and girls in this sample and depended upon *domain* of parentification, not gender.

Findings in the current study also make interesting implications regarding the way that rural African American single-mothers parent their children. Although the study of gender socialization of African American children has rarely been investigated (Hill, 1999), findings emerging in this present study provide evidence that gender did not influence polarized involvement in household management, with the exception of childcare, in terms of the likelihood of instrumental (tasks) parentification or emotional

parentification. Thus, the African American adolescents in these families can be thought of as being raised by their single-mothers without gender specific roles. These findings corroborate evidence from such scholars as Peters (1988); Reid and Trotter (1993); Stables and Miranda (1980) who noted that African American cultural traditions do not, in general, advocate gender inequality. Only the role of caring for younger children in the household appears to adhere to the traditional gender roles prescribed by society, that is, girls were more likely than boys in this study to participate in childcare. Although Lewis (1975) reported several decades ago that “all black children are taught to “mother” and are encouraged to be assertive, willful, and independent’ (p. 228), these patterns, particularly child care, were more pronounced among girls than boys in the present study. While the results presented here provide some insight, it is clear that gender socialization in African American single-mother families continues to be an area that requires further investigation.

Important to note, is that taking care of younger children was not damaging to these young girls’ self-esteem or level of depression, rather it increased their self-regulation and thus may serve as a protective factor for other domains of development and adjustment, for example psychosocial competence, academic achievement, and future aspirations.

Limitations

This study contributed to the growing body of literature on parentification and more specifically, on how parentification operates in an alternative culture and family structure than has previously examined; however, some limitations should be mentioned.

These issues include, generalizability, measurement, and the analysis of secondary data. First, generalizability of these findings should be approached with caution. As we begin to appreciate how parentification may operate differently for families of different cultures and structures than those traditionally studied, it is necessary to observe that not all African American families may implement these processes or utilize instrumental parentification in an adaptive manner. Another issue is that while the present data supplies valuable and useful evidence to the current knowledge base, the parameters that were included in these analyses are by no means exhaustive.

For example, although social support was included as a maternal resource, families were not categorized based on the presence or absence of a cohabiting partner or grandmother. As Murry, et al, (2000) warn, African American family membership requires a much broader definition as several generations of extended family members and fictive kin may live together to maintain a strong network of social and economic support (Beck & Beck, 1984, 1989; Wilson, 1989). Categorizing these families in terms of additional adults within the household may have uncovered variations in both the development and the effect of instrumental and emotional parentification on the adolescent. For example, despite the fact that numerous studies have documented the benefits of social support to maternal psychological well-being and family processes (Cutrona, Russell, Hessling, Brown, & Murry, 2000; McLoyd, 1990; Jackson, 1998; Taylor, et. al., 1997), when help is not asked for, it can sometimes take its toll on single-mothers (Rooke, 1984). It seems that the possible cost of having the additional support of extended kin may be a negative impact on mother's internal sense of control, which in

turn, could impact the development of either instrumental or emotional parentification. Therefore, future studies may create methodologies in which the role of an additional adult in the household is categorized to better identify if and when these adults mediate the development and/or outcomes of adolescent parentification. Another parameter consideration is that mother's level of education was not included within the resource variable. Education level has, however, been found to be a mediating factor for mother's perceptions of current situation, which in turn impacts child outcomes (Brody & Flor, 1997). If education had been included therefore, resources may have been a greater influence on variations in level of parentification.

An additional measurement issue is that of how to assess parentification itself. As discussed, this was a concern addressed in the present research endeavor and while this investigation was able to successfully differentiate and evaluate the various domains of parentification (i.e., childcare, household tasks, and emotional), the issue of ethicality, or fairness, was not directly calculated. Jurkovic, Thirkeild, & Morrell (2000) described the African Americans in their retrospective study of divorced families as scoring high on the fairness scale suggesting that they did not perceive their parentified roles to be a burden. In the present research project, it was assumed that the cultural expectation and acknowledgement by family and community served as the ethicality for adolescent parentification and the result was adaptive instrumental parentification in which adolescent self-regulation was increased. Nevertheless, a direct measure of ethicality could provide a more precise picture of the processes by which adolescents feel recognized for their contributions in rural African American single-mother families.

Another concern is that while the present study utilized previous research and theory to direct the measurement of parenting domains, a standardized measure of parenting which is appropriate for use with African American families is necessary to further distinguish the nature of parenting.

Next, two issues of the sample itself should be considered. First, it is well known that using secondary data provides both benefits as well as impediments. In terms of impediments, this analysis of secondary data was conducted several years after initial data collection thus limiting generalizability to the current context. Another drawback of this particular sample was the size, which proved too small for adequate structural equation modeling. As a result, findings are limited to predictive qualities versus confirmatory (hypothesis testing) and a means of evaluating entire models in addition to each equation.

Finally, the current dissertation research represents only a first step at discernment of a complex family pattern in a population that deserves further attention. While this project begins to establish some of the family factors that increase the variance in the development of specific parenting domains, the findings were relatively small and much of the variation remains unexplained. The moderate findings from the current endeavor may be accounted for by the limitations noted above including measurement and sample size issues; however the development of parenting in these families may lie in contextual and cultural factors which have yet to be evaluated. Additionally, as mentioned above, the current sample displayed evidence of overall high functioning which may offer reasons for the relatively small findings of dysfunctional family factors

which contribute to the explained variance in parentification. The challenge for researchers will be to consider how to capture these dynamics in future investigations. Despite these limitations, findings from the present study have both research and clinical implications.

Implications for Research

The present study has valuable implications for research examining not only parentification, but also rural African American single-mother families. The implications to be discussed include: 1) the deconstruction of parentification; 2) the importance of a contextual understanding of parentification; and 3) the need to identify specific processes operating in families which contribute to the development of adaptive parentification.

Deconstruction of Parentification

The primary aim of the current study was to initiate reconceptualization of the pejorative Western view that has prevailed in the literature on parentification. This was accomplished by first deconstructing the differential domains of parentification and then measuring them separately. Through the separate measurement of instrumental (tasks), instrumental (childcare), and emotional parentification, it was clear that not only are distinctive processes operating in families which contribute to the development of parentification, but instrumental parentification proved to augment the development of an important adolescent resource, self-regulation, for the adolescents in this study. Future studies therefore must take into account the fact that not all types of parentification should be considered injurious to child development. In focusing on each domain of parentification, researchers can further differentiate how parentification can operate to

advance the development of competence in children. Future studies may also undertake the development of research instruments that allow for the specific, categorical measurement of each domain of parentification. This would make available more precise information regarding etiology as well as outcome data for each domain. Finally, one factor that remains unclear but deserves the attention of researchers, is that of the ethicality or fairness of parentification and what role the perception of fairness plays in the development of adaptive parentification. Another issue of significance to the reconceptualization of parentification is that of a contextual understanding.

Contextual Understanding of Parentification

The preponderance of research on parentification focuses on Caucasian, two-parent families, thus leaving questions of generalizability to alternative cultures and family structures. The present study provides valuable data with which to begin to fill the contextual gap in the literature on parentification. It is clear that being a single-mother does not inexorably lead to over reliance on their oldest children despite increased demands on their time due to raising a family without a partner. Further, for the rural African Americans in this study, aspects of parentification were shown to be beneficial to adolescent development. This finding contrasts the negative depiction of parentification that has been put forward through research on Caucasian families. This may be due in part to the fact that the societal expectations for child rearing and prescribed social roles for family members of some African Americans are influenced by the belief that survival is enhanced by the group (Barnett, Kidwell, & Ho Leung, 1998; Young, 1974). Thus, accounting for the influence of culture on parenting processes and adolescent outcomes

remains a critical research undertaking. This study represents a first step; additional investigation using samples of alternative cultures will aid in increasing sensitivity towards a contextual view of parentification. Finally, research implications regarding specific family factors and processes will be addressed.

Family Factors and Processes Contributing to Parentification

Prior research has implicated the family in the development of parentification (Chase, 1999; Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Jacobvitz, Morgan, Kretchmar, & Morgan, 1991; Zahn-Waxler, Kochanska, Krupnick, & McKnew, 1990); however, the specific factors and processes involved in the development of parentification remains largely unexplored. The current study made clear that there are differing processes which reflect in the occurrence of each domain of parentification. For example, it was established that for the rural African American single-mother families in the current study, communication patterns influenced the development of instrumental (tasks) parentification while the interpersonal relationship between mother and adolescent was the main factor effecting emotional parentification. Further, maternal psychological functioning did not predict emotional parentification, but did influence instrumental (tasks) parentification. Finally, instrumental (childcare) parentification was only influenced by maternal resources and gender. It appears critical therefore that future research endeavors allow for the possibility that the etiology of parentification lies in multiple family processes and that each domain of parentification is not necessarily influenced by similar processes. Researchers who approach the study of parentification

in terms of domains will allow for the distinct influences and outcomes of such domains to come to light.

Additionally, much of the variance in the development of parentification was left unexplained in the current study. One reason for these inconclusive findings may be elucidated when considering the impact of individual developmental trajectories on parenting processes as well as family functioning. For example, there is a need to know more about the direct and indirect influence of the individual personality of the child on self-selection towards participating in instrumental or emotional tasks. Research has suggested that aspects of the child such as competence influence maternal psychological functioning and parenting processes, which in turn influence later competency outcomes of the child (Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2003). Therefore, future studies considering the interactive processes of child characteristics and parenting will be able to further capture the consequences of this interdependency on the development of parentification in families.

Implications for Practice

Given that the literature to date regarding parentification is replete with generalizations based on clinical practice, the current empirical investigation of parentification offers numerous suggestions for practical clinical interventions. First, clinicians approaching families using a structural model (Minuchin, 1974) must recognize that the traditional Western values that this theoretical framework is based on may not be appropriate for all families or appropriate for all domains of parentification. Specifically, it seems vital to recognize that enlisting the help of older siblings is a

cultural tradition that promotes resiliency and does not necessarily violate subsystem boundaries. Likewise, given the self-regulatory benefits for adolescents as well as the decreased sense of burden experienced by single-mothers, clinicians working with this population may encourage these families to increase older children's participation in household tasks and childcare responsibilities within the household. The structural model proposed by Minuchin (1974) does appear to be appropriate when considering emotional parentification, as evidenced by the detrimental outcomes associated with taking on the adult concerns within the household.

Another consideration is that while parents and adolescents may report poor communication, this was not found to be detrimental to adolescent outcomes. Rather, parent-adolescent communication issues actually predicted instrumental parentification, a constructive practice for the current sample. Thus, while adolescents may disagree with their mothers, shared values and norms are being passed down that appear to result in increased self-regulation.

A principal point for intervention, which did emerge in the current study, is that of fostering more mutual and respectful interactions in the parent-adolescent relationship. This is because reports of poor interaction between parent and adolescent contributed to the development of emotional parentification, which in turn was related to low self-esteem and increased depression for the adolescents in this sample. This seems particularly important in cases of greater economic challenges when the temptation to confide in adolescents about adult concerns may be stronger. One central aspect of the mother-adolescent relationship which clinicians can promote is that of acknowledgment

and appreciation for any of the contributions that the adolescent makes to the household. Having a sense of accomplishment can combat negative perceptions of self as well as depression. Also, it seems important that these mothers develop the skills with which to maintain boundaries around adult subjects such as finances or maternal well-being. This will alleviate the adolescent's sense of responsibility for concerns that are outside of their capability.

While the above discussed implications of this study are specific family processes have implications for practice, findings also suggest that it is vital for practitioners to distinguish between instrumental and emotional parentification as the outcomes are clearly contrasting, with instrumental parentification fostering self-regulation and emotional parentification increasing internal distress. Through developing an understanding of the contributions that the adolescent is making to the single-mother household, clinicians will avoid automatically discouraging *any* adult responsibilities taken on by the adolescent, thus increasing therapeutic effectiveness in a population facing increased obstacles, such as a lack of resources. Clearly adolescents can be a valuable source of support for single-mothers, without losing their own sense of self.

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