



Maturing Too Quickly: Exploring Parentification among Young Adults Who Experience Psychological Distress

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Abstract

Parentification, the process wherein children assume adult-like responsibilities within the family, remains an underexplored phenomenon in the Filipino context despite its cultural relevance. While literature has documented the outcomes of parentification as adaptive and maladaptive, there is limited knowledge regarding how young adults experiencing psychological distress navigate and understand this process. This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of nine Filipino young adults who assumed significant familial responsibilities early in their developmental years. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed to capture the participants' descriptive accounts and interpretative insights into how these experiences shaped their identities, emotions, and aspirations for the future. Four superordinate themes were identified: (1) When Childhood Vanishes into Duty, capturing Childhood Exchanged for Duty, and Becoming the Self Shaped by Parentification; (2) Carrying Invisible Wounds, highlighting Longing for Care While Giving It, The Weight that No One Sees, and Bound by Love, Bruised By Duty; (3) Weaving Fragments into Meaning, which revealed participants' Survival in Fragments, Turning Weight into Worth, and Drawing Meaning from Belief and Belonging; and (4) Dreaming Beyond the Inherited Script, reflecting Negotiating the In-Between: From Tension to Liberation, and Dreaming Towards a Different Future. The findings illuminate the dual nature of parentification as both disruptive and formative, with long-term implications for identity, emotional well-being, and agency. By situating these experiences within the Filipino cultural setting, this study emphasizes the need to acknowledge hidden caregiving labor and its psychological effects while recognizing resilience and meaning-making processes that emerge from such experiences. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of how parentification operates in Filipino families, offering insights that can inform counseling practices to validate these hidden struggles and guide family support systems to recognize invisible labor and shape culturally responsive interventions that balance familial responsibility with individual well-being.

Keywords: parentification, role reversal, parentified young adult, caregiving, coping, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)



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INTRODUCTION

Children from diverse family structures may assume parental and household responsibilities due to circumstances such as marital conflict, parental separation, bereavement, family illness, substance dependence, or financial instability (Borchet et al., 2016; Cho & Lee, 2019). When these responsibilities exceed what is developmentally appropriate and persist over time, the experience is referred to as parentification (Borchet et al., 2020). Parentification is often regarded as an adverse childhood experience, as it deprives children of age-appropriate

opportunities and may lead to lasting emotional and psychological consequences (Burton et al., 2018; Rabuya et al., 2023). Beyond childhood, parentification has also been associated to challenges in identity formation, autonomy, and interpersonal relationships, as well as an increased risk of internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression (Borchet et al., 2018; Grigsby et al., 2020; Hendricks et al., 2021). While research has predominantly focused on adolescents, some studies highlight the importance of understanding parentification in young adulthood (Polomski et al., 2021; Van Parys et al., 2015). This life period is characterized by identity exploration, self-

definition, and the formation of intimate and social relationships, processes that may be disrupted when parentification persist (Schwartz, 2016; De la Fuente et al., 2020).

Despite the predominantly negative outcomes associated with parentification, research has also highlighted potential adaptive outcomes (Yew et al., 2017). When the experience occurs in a supportive environment and when contributions are acknowledged, parentified individuals may develop resilience, empathy, and emotional maturity (Borchet et al., 2016; Boumans & Dorant, 2018; Petrowski & Stein, 2016; Van der Mijl et al., 2017). Moreover, cultural context plays a vital role in shaping how parentification is perceived. In collectivist cultures, caregiving and familial obligations are viewed more positively, as they align with values of interdependence and family solidarity (Cho & Lee, 2019; Masiran et al., 2023; Saha, 2016).

In the Philippine context, family interconnectedness and filial duty are highly valued (Teng et al., 2021). When parents are unable to fulfill their roles, responsibilities often shift to the eldest or female child, reflecting a broader Asian cultural orientation toward reciprocity and familial obligation (Masiran et al., 2023). Despite this cultural relevance, local research on parentification remains limited and has primarily focused on specific family roles, leaving other experiences underexplored (Perez, 2022; Teng et al., 2021). Given the deep-rooted cultural emphasis on family duty, it is important to understand how Filipino young adults navigate the emotional and psychological implications of early parentified roles and how these experiences shape their development and relationships.

Grounded in Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1988), this study views parentification as a relational process that arises from the systemic dynamics within the family unit. According to this perspective, families function as interdependent systems in which individual behaviors and roles maintain balance or compensate for dysfunction. When parents are unable to fulfill their responsibilities, children

may be compelled to step into adult roles to preserve family stability, resulting in blurred generational boundaries. Applying this framework allows for an in-depth understanding of how young adults internalize these roles, how they maintain or renegotiate family boundaries, and how such experiences influence their later development and relationships.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Filipino young adults who have experienced parentification, focusing on the meanings they attach to these experiences and their perceived emotional, psychological, and social effects. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the central question: What characterizes the lived experiences of young adults concerning parentification? To provide a more detailed understanding, the study also examines the following aspects: the specific roles and responsibilities that parentified young adults take on and how they perceive their significance; how they interpret the circumstances that led to their parentification and the emotions tied to these experiences; and how they describe the emotional, psychological, and social effects of their parentification experiences, including the ways they cope with these challenges. The findings are expected to inform mental health interventions and family support programs that promote healthier boundaries and foster greater awareness of the complex dynamics surrounding early instrumental and emotional roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parentification. Parentification occurs when a child adopts adult roles by prioritizing and providing for the needs of parents or other family members, often at the expense of their own well-being and developmental needs (Köyden & Uluç, 2018). Two primary forms of parentification are typically described: instrumental parentification, which involves practical tasks such as caregiving, household management, and financial contributions, and emotional parentification, which entails attending to the emotional or psychological needs of family members (Chen & Panebianco,

2020). When either form becomes a persistent family pattern, it can contribute to emotional dysregulation, low self-worth, and maladaptive coping (Brummelhuis et al., 2022; Hendricks et al., 2021; Tomeny et al., 2017; Van Loon et al., 2017; Van Parys et al., 2015).

These two forms result in a role reversal, where one of the children assumes the inherent responsibilities typically associated with parental roles. Such role assumption may be willingly or unwillingly done by one or both parents, depending on the reasons for their inability to fulfill parental functions (Köyden & Uluç, 2018). Family circumstances that may lead to parentification include exposure to marital conflict, the absence of a primary caregiver due to divorce or bereavement, single-parent households, parents' high expectations, large family size, dual-income families, substance dependence, or the presence of a family member with physical or mental illness (Cho & Lee, 2019).

Directions and Dynamics of Parentification. The effects of parentification also vary depending on the direction of caregiving responsibilities. Burton et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of identifying whether the recipient of care is a parent or sibling, as this distinction can influence psychological outcomes. Hooper et al. (2011, as cited in Tomeny et al., 2017) described two directions: sibling-focused, in which caregiving responsibilities are directed toward brothers or sisters, and parent-focused, where the caregiving is directed toward a parent. Existing evidence suggests that parent-focused responsibilities are more detrimental, as children who assume adult tasks for their parents may experience significant difficulties in adaptation and heightened feelings of inadequacy (Byng-Hall, 2008, as cited in Tomeny et al., 2017).

Relational and Emotional Dimensions. Parentification encompasses not only practical duties but also relational and emotional burdens. Haxhe (2016) highlighted that relational responsibility is an inherent element of parentification, marked by incongruence between the child's developmental capacities

and imposed familial expectations. Parentified children are rarely acknowledged by parents, partly due to the unspoken nature of the responsibilities placed upon them (Haxhe, 2016).

However, Seganti and Verde (2015) argued that children possess emotional sensitivity that allows them to absorb and reflect on their parents' vulnerabilities. As children mature, this sensitivity often leads them to participate more actively in maintaining family stability through instrumental and emotional forms of care (Joung & Kim, 2022). In families affected by illness, Morris et al. (2018) found that adolescents show affectionate care toward ill parents but may also experience communication gaps. Parents often misinterpret their children's withdrawal as indifference, whereas children expect parents to initiate dialogue, thereby creating emotional misunderstandings that intensify and increase distress.

Developmental Impacts and Psychosocial Outcomes. Parentification affects numerous aspects of development, including interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, academic engagement, and the capacity to individuate from one's family of origin (Saha, 2016). Schorr and Goldner (2023) described parentified responsibilities as physically and emotionally draining, involving constant vigilance and fear of breakdown. As such, parentification is considered a persistent source of stress and an adverse childhood experience (Schorr & Goldner, 2023).

Nevertheless, when responsibilities are age-appropriate and recognized, parentification may foster adaptive outcomes, such as enhanced coping skills, self-efficacy, and a sense of identity as a valued family member (Burton et al., 2018; Dariotis et al., 2023; Saha, 2016). Hooper et al. (2015) and Macfie et al. (2015) noted that early caregiving responsibilities can heighten maturity and independence but can also deprive children of carefree developmental experiences. Becker and Becker (2008, as cited in Saha, 2016) described this incongruity as the "burden of maturity," which limits the child's spontaneity and social connections.

The age of onset and duration of parentification further predict developmental outcomes. Cho and Lee (2018) found that earlier and longer caregiving experiences are associated with depressive symptoms and hinder the achievement of developmental milestones. When children bear responsibilities disproportionate to their developmental age, they are deprived of formative experiences essential for healthy growth (Hendricks et al., 2021; Yew et al., 2017).

Sociodemographic and Gender Influences.

Parentification is influenced by sociodemographic factors, including gender and familial roles. Parents may select the parentified child based on gender, temperament, or similarity (Potomski et al., 2021). Females are more frequently assigned caregiving and instrumental roles due to traditional gender norms and socialization processes that emphasize nurturance and responsibility (Boumans & Dorant, 2018; Schier et al., 2015). Males, while also engaged in caregiving, may minimize their roles due to perceived incompatibility with masculine ideals (Potomski et al., 2021). Gender also influences coping styles, as women are more likely to seek social support, while men often engage in maladaptive coping behaviors (Grigsby et al., 2020). These trends highlight the gendered nature of caregiving and its psychological effects.

Cultural Contexts of Parentification. Cultural values significantly influence the meanings and expressions of parentification. Wang et al. (2016) found that Chinese boys exhibited higher levels of parentification due to patriarchal expectations, while Raymo et al. (2015) and Kan et al. (2022) noted that traditional family obligations and gendered work patterns persist in many Asian societies. In collectivist cultures, caregiving is often perceived as a familial duty rather than an imposition. Jackson et al. (2016) found that Indian participants held more positive attitudes toward parentification compared to American counterparts, highlighting the role of cultural norms in shaping interpretations of caregiving.

In the Filipino context, Alcantara et al. (2022) describe children who take on the role of "tagatustos", or providers, as motivated by the urgent need for survival and a collective sense of resilience. This idea aligns with Carandang's (1987, as cited in Alcantara et al., 2022) concept of the "tagasalo", which refers to the one who "catches" family responsibilities. Udarbe (2001, as cited in Alcantara et al., 2022) outlined three key aspects of this role: a strong sense of obligation, unconscious motivation, and a tendency to go beyond expected limits. Notably, Udarbe (1998, as cited in Alvarez & Limbadan, 2016) discovered that the tagasalo role is not determined by gender or birth order; instead, it emerges from an emotional necessity to restore balance within the family. Parentified children with siblings who have special needs also exhibit this tagasalo tendency by showing both empathy and exhaustion. While they develop awareness of their siblings' conditions, they may also experience a silent need for support themselves (Pabatang & Naparan, 2023).

Parentification and Psychological Distress.

A consistent body of research demonstrates that parentification, when experienced in unsupportive family environments, contributes to internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression (Cho & Lee, 2018; Hendricks et al., 2021; Van Loon et al., 2017). Grigsby et al. (2020) linked early caregiving and maltreatment to poorer health outcomes in adulthood. Longitudinal data by Van Loon et al. (2017) indicated that parentification predicts internalizing symptoms over time. Furthermore, Dich et al. (2019) reported that caregiving responsibilities were strongly associated with depressive symptoms among women.

Joung and Kim (2022) found a consistent positive relationship between parentification and depression and emphasized the importance of addressing mental health concerns among young carers. They also observed that parentified individuals may develop compulsive caregiving tendencies, repeatedly assuming care roles in adulthood even when unnecessary (Nuttall et al., 2018). Such patterns suggest that

early caregiving experiences can shape relational behaviors and emotional vulnerabilities well into adulthood.

Parentification is a multifaceted and culturally situated phenomenon encompassing emotional, instrumental, and relational dimensions. While much research emphasizes its negative psychological consequences, emerging studies highlight contexts where caregiving fosters competence, identity development, and resilience. However, gaps remain in understanding how cultural norms, gender roles, and socioeconomic contexts shape the lived experiences of parentified individuals. Few studies have examined these dynamics within non-Western contexts, particularly among Filipino families, where caregiving or instrumental role is often intertwined with collective survival, familial obligation, and cultural expectations. Addressing these gaps will deepen the understanding of how parentification functions both as a burden and as a form of resilience within specific cultural frameworks.

METHODS

Design. The researcher employed a phenomenological research design, which focuses on describing and interpreting individuals' subjective experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived experiences of Filipino young adults who experienced parentification and to interpret the meanings they attached to these experiences. This design enabled an in-depth understanding of how participants perceived and made sense of their roles and responsibilities within their families, as well as how these experiences related to their psychological distress.

Population and Sampling. The study involved nine Filipino young adults residing in the National Capital Region (NCR) of the Philippines, all of whom had taken on significant family responsibilities at an early age (see Table 1). Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following

criteria: Filipino young adults aged 18 to 26, currently employed, having at least one sibling, having lived with one or both parents or siblings, and having at least one parent unable to provide for the family. They must have assumed substantial family roles before age 18 and scored 21 or higher on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), indicating moderate to extremely severe psychological distress. Individuals with diagnosed mental health disorders or those who scored below 21 on the DASS-21 were excluded. The screening ensured that participants' experiences of parentification were examined in relation to psychological distress.

Instrumentation. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences, roles, and emotions related to parentification. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed narratives about their family dynamics, perceived responsibilities, coping mechanisms, and personal reflections. The DASS-21 served as a screening instrument to determine eligibility for participation and was not used as a measure for quantitative analysis. The use of both tools ensured that the data captured participants' subjective experiences while maintaining alignment with the study's inclusion criteria.

Mode of Analysis. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following the framework of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) to capture the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences of parentification. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and organized in an Excel file to facilitate detailed analysis. The process began with repeated, immersive readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data, followed by initial noting that included descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. From these notes, emergent themes were identified for each participant and subsequently clustered into superordinate and subordinate themes through abstraction, connection, function, and contextualization, while preserving individual meanings. After

individual analyses were completed, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify shared patterns and variations across participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of the collective experience of parentification. Throughout the process, reflective engagement was maintained to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives and meaning-making processes.

Ensuring Trustworthiness. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the researcher employed triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and audit trail. Triangulation minimized bias during interpretation and strengthened the integrity of participants' accounts, while member checking allowed participants to review and validate the researcher's interpretations. Reflexivity was maintained through reflective memos and field notes, which documented insights, assumptions, and evolving interpretations to ensure awareness of potential biases. All data, including transcripts, notes, memos, and audit trails, were securely stored and systematically organized to support transparency and allow external evaluation. These strategies collectively enhanced the study's credibility and dependability.

RESULTS

The analysis, guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), revealed four interrelated superordinate themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences: (1) When Childhood Vanishes into Duty, captures how participants' early years were shaped by familial responsibilities, reflected in the subordinate themes Childhood Exchanged for Duty and Becoming the Self Shaped by Parentification; (2) Carrying Invisible Wounds, highlights the emotional and psychological toll of parentification, encompassing the subordinate themes Longing for Care While Giving It, The Weight that No One Sees, and Bound by Love, Bruised by Duty; (3) Weaving Fragments into Meaning, reflects participants' efforts to make sense of their experiences, represented in Survival in Fragments, Turning Weight into Worth, and Drawing Meaning from

Belief and Belonging; and (4) Dreaming Beyond the Inherited Script, reflects participants' efforts to make sense of their experiences, represented in Negotiating the In-Between: From Tension to Liberation and Dreaming Towards a Different Future.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Onset of Parentification

Participant's Code	Age	Sex	Birth Order	Onset of Parentification
N01	26	Female	Last-born	Began in childhood through household chores intensified in adolescence due to mother's emotional absence father working abroad and siblings' unavailability continued into young adulthood as primary caregiver for aging parents
N02	24	Female	Middle-born	Began at age 12 when younger sister was born took on caregiving and household roles while parents worked later managing finances and chores responsibilities intensified through adolescence and continued into adulthood despite moving out
N03	25	Female	Firstborn	Onset at age 15 after mother's death doing household chores intensified at 18 when father stopped working becoming provider for family and sister's education
N04	24	Female	Firstborn	Onset in high school as mother's confidante and emotional support intensified in college when she realized peers had parents as their emotional support while she carried parental conflicts and decision-making roles
N05	21	Female	Firstborn	Onset in childhood while living with grandmother-caring for sick grandmother and younger cousin's responsibilities continued through adolescence and college
N06	24	Female	Middle-born	Onset at age 9 when mother left to work abroad intensified at 11 after father's death when she became primary caregiver and emotional anchor for her brothers including one with autism
N07	26	Male	Last-born	Onset around age 10 when mother left and father became absent due to drinking intensified at 15 when he stopped schooling to take on full household and caregiving responsibilities for siblings
N08	23	Female	Last-born	Supports family financially after father's death pressured by conflicts with sister and burden of responsibilities
N09	21	Male	Middle-born	Assumed parental duties when father suffered a sudden stroke at home Responsibilities extended into adolescence and early adulthood overlapping with school and personal life

Table 2

Themes derived from IPA

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. When Childhood Vanishes into Duty	1.1 Childhood Exchanged for Duty 1.2 Becoming the Self Shaped by Parentification
2. Carrying Invisible Wounds	2.1 Longing for Care While Giving It 2.2 The Weight that No One Sees 2.3 Bound by love Bruised by Duty
3. Weaving Fragments into Meaning	3.1 Survival in Fragments 3.2 Turning Weight into Worth 3.3 Drawing Meaning from Belief and Belonging
4. Dreaming Beyond the Inherited Script	4.1 Negotiating the In-Between from Tension to Liberation 4.2 Dreaming Toward a Different Future

When Childhood Vanishes into Duty. This theme describes how participants experienced the disruption of a typical childhood due to the

premature assumption of adult roles and family responsibilities. The transition into caregiving and household management often occurred suddenly, leaving little opportunity for personal freedom or exploration. Instead of play and social development, participants' early years became characterized by functional obligations that shaped their developing sense of self.

Participants recalled taking responsibility for younger siblings, managing household chores, and responding to family crises such as parental illness, separation, or death, regardless of their birth order or gender. Many felt compelled to take on these roles even when they were not emotionally or developmentally ready. Over time, these responsibilities became internalized, influencing how they viewed themselves and their roles within the family. The loss of a carefree childhood was not always recognized at the time but was later reflected upon as a defining aspect of their development.

Childhood Exchanged for Duty

"I guess from an outside perspective, you'd say it was like time stolen from me, but I didn't really know what I was missing at the time. To me, it was like, oh, this is just what happens. It is natural. This is normal. So, even now, I still don't know what I missed out on" (N02)

"Minsan naiinggit ako sa mga ka-age ko. May freedom sila... Doon ko lang na-process na hindi pala normal lahat ng pinagdaanan ko" (N05)

Translation: "Sometimes I get envious of people my age. They have freedom... That's when I processed that not everything I went through was normal."

"Thinking about it, parang hindi ko nagawang makipaglaro sa ibang bata dati." (N06)

Translation: "Thinking about it, I realize I never really got to play with other children before."

"Uhhh yung role ko in the family, bale ako yung youngest, and currently ako na lang din yung wala pang sariling pamilya, so basically I am the one taking care of my parents and providing for

them at the moment, kumbaga parang sa akin sila naiwan kaya parang ako na yung umako ng mga responsibilidad..." (N01)

Translation: "Uhhh, my role in the family, well, I'm the youngest, and right now I'm the only one who doesn't have a family of my own. So basically, I'm the one taking care of my parents and providing for them at the moment. It's like they were left to me, so I ended up taking on all the responsibilities."

Becoming the Self Shaped by Parentification

"But for most part nung naghiwalay parents ko, I was the one who embraced the responsibilities at home" (N07)

Translation: "But for most part, when my parents separated, I was the one who embraced the responsibilities at home."

"Parang hindi ko kilala yung sarili ko pag wala akong inaasikaso" (N05)

Translation: "It feels like I don't know who I am when I don't have anyone to take care of."

"They assumed that I would do that. Right? Na kayang kong alagaan hindi lang yung sarili ko. I could take care of my kuya, I could take care of my sister. And then, naturally, pag wala yung parents ko, I would be the one to stand in for them. Kasi, it went to a point, I would replace my parents while they're not there" (N02)

Translation: "They assumed that I would do that, right? That I could take care not just of myself, but also my brother and sister. And then, naturally, when my parents weren't around, I would be the one to stand in for them. It even reached a point where I would replace my parents while they were gone."

Carrying Invisible Wounds. Participants' experiences of parentification carried emotional burdens that were often unacknowledged by others. The caregiving roles they assumed came with hidden costs such as suppressed resentment, guilt for unmet personal needs, and feelings of ambivalence

toward their families. While they considered their contributions necessary acts of love and duty, they also described emotional exhaustion and an enduring sense of being unseen.

This theme captures the paradox of parentification: although it fosters maturity, empathy, and a sense of responsibility, it simultaneously generates chronic stress and emotional strain. These invisible wounds often persisted into young adulthood, manifesting as difficulties in self-care, emotional regulation, and boundary-setting within relationships.

Longing for Care While Giving It

"May longing na maramdaman ko yung presence niya (mother)" (N03)

Translation: "There's this longing to feel her presence."

"Kasi in our family, hindi uso usap, hindi kami nagtatanong ng kamusta or 'anong nararamdaman mo?' Basta gagawin mo na lang" (N09)

Translation: "In our family, it's not common to talk. We don't really ask things like 'How are you?' or 'What are you feeling?' You just do what needs to be done."

The Weight that No One Sees

"There were nights na umiiyak lang ako silently. I couldn't tell anyone. Feeling ko, wala akong right magreklamo." (N06)

Translation: "There were nights when I would just cry silently. I couldn't tell anyone. I felt like I didn't have the right to complain."

"Kasi, ako pa rin yung need mag adjust..kasi nga younger sibling ako, kailangan kong umuintindi...parang kailangan nirerespeto ko si ate kasi mas matanda" (N08)

Translation: "Because I still have to be the one to adjust. Since I'm the younger sibling, I have to understand... it's like I always have to show respect to my older sister because she's older."

"Kaya masakit yun for me kasi di naman nila nakikita kung gaano ko yun pinaghihirapan. May mga bagay na sinasacrifice ko para lang maibigay ko yun sa kanila..." (N03)

Translation: "That's what hurts me, because they don't really see how hard I work for it. There are things I sacrifice just so I can give them what they need."

Bound by Love, Bruised by Duty

"Mixed feeling, I love my family and I love my sibling dearly. But there are moments when I feel resentful. It feels like I didn't choose this, but I am expected to carry it. (N06)

"Kahit na nagkulang sila sakin noong bata ako pero siguro hindi rin naman nila ginusto yun... again dala lang ng sitwasyon kasi nakita ko naman nagsisikap sila" (N01)

Translation: "Even though they fell short when I was a child, I guess they didn't really mean it... it was just the situation. I also saw how hard they were trying."

Weaving Fragments into Meaning. Despite the challenges associated with parentification, participants demonstrated resilience by constructing meaning from their experiences. They adopted practical and emotional coping strategies such as organizing tasks, prioritizing responsibilities, using humor, and seeking brief moments of solitude to manage the demands placed upon them.

Beyond these immediate coping mechanisms, participants also engaged in reflective meaning-making. They reinterpreted early hardships as opportunities for growth, maturity, and inner strength. Cultural and spiritual frameworks, including *utang na loob* and reverence for parents, helped them contextualize their experiences and derive validation from fulfilling their roles. These strategies reflect that participants were not passive victims of circumstance but active agents who shaped their understanding of parentification including their responses and reactions to it.

Surviving in Fragments

"...dahil maaga akong gumising, tinatapos ko na lahat ng gawain sa bahay para nakakapagbasa ako" (N07).

Translation: "Because I wake up early, I try to finish all the chores at home so I can still have time to study."

"Nung bata-bata pa ako, I focused heavily sa studies ko.... rewarding yung achievements ko sa school" (N04).

Translation: "When I was younger, I focused heavily on my studies... my achievements in school felt rewarding."

Turning Weight into Worth

"Good things came out of it. Bad things came out of it. There's nothing I can do. Make most of the good things" (N02)

"It made me stronger.. kahit na mahirap yung naranasan ko before and even now that I still hold most of those responsibilities, but I know it happened for a reason" (N01)

Translation: "It made me stronger... even though what I went through before was difficult, and even now I still hold most of those responsibilities, but I know it happened for a reason."

"Tsaka kahit ganito naman yung naranasan ko, I always try to look at the positive side..." (N03)

Translation: "And even with everything I've experienced, I always try to look at the positive side."

Drawing Meaning from Belief and Belonging

"I see it differently now. They needed help, and I was there for them. I am also grateful that they thought they could trust me" (N02).

"I guess I just don't want that to change how I view my family because I love them... "blessing ang mag-alaga ng magulang kasi hindi lahat ng tao nagagawa" (N01)

Translation: "It's a blessing to care for one's parents, because not everyone gets to do that."

"Dasal. Kasi wala akong makausap si Lord lang talaga" (N05)

Translation: "Prayer. Because I had no one else to talk to. It was only Lord."

Dreaming Beyond the Inherited Script. This theme captures how participants negotiated the tension between familial obligations and their aspirations for autonomy and the future. Their narratives revealed an ongoing effort to balance the responsibilities imposed by family expectations with their personal goals and values.

Although early parentification experiences sometimes constrained their life choices, many participants described using these experiences as motivation to create different futures for themselves. They envisioned lives in which boundaries could be established, self-care prioritized, and caregiving redefined according to their own needs rather than inherited duties. For several participants, their experiences also influenced their chosen career paths, particularly in helping professions, thereby transforming early responsibilities into sources of empathy and purpose.

This theme also reflects participants' conscious awareness and acknowledgment of their past experiences, particularly their resolve not to replicate the same patterns of parentification in their own future families. Their reflections revealed a deliberate effort to break intergenerational cycles of emotional burden and to provide their future children with the freedom, care, and support they once lacked.

Negotiating the In-Between: From Tension to Liberation

"I think I would want to focus on myself muna kasi I feel like I've been taking care of others, so parang this time gusto ko ako muna" (N01)

Translation: "I think I would want to focus on myself first, because I feel like I've been taking

care of others for so long. This time, I want to choose myself."

"Slowly, natututuhan kong irprioritize yung sarili ko... I'm starting to address the guilt that I feel" (N04)

Translation: "Slowly, I'm learning to prioritize myself... I'm starting to address the guilt that I feel."

"I feel like I'm running in place while others are building their lives... but there is also fulfillment. I feel like I have a purpose" (N05).

Dreaming Towards a Different Future

"I don't involve them (siblings) in my parents' problems because, after all, it's not their issue to begin with; As I grew older, I'm starting to set boundaries with my mom" (N04).

"Parang kung mag kakaroon ako ng sariling pamilya, gusto ko sobrang financially stable na ako... natatakot ako na maranasan niya yung hirap ng buhay" (N03).

Translation: "If ever I'll have my own family, I want to be financially stable first... I'm afraid my child might experience the same hardships I went through."

"Ayokong maranasan ng magiging anak ko yung ganong burden na sumsalo ng problema at emosyon ng magulang; I want to build a future where we can be emotionally expressive and sensitive" (N04).

Translation: "I don't want my future child to carry the burden of taking on their parents' problems and emotions."

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay of responsibility, emotional cost, and resilience in the experiences of parentified Filipino young adults. Early caregiving responsibilities were not merely circumstantial but became deeply embedded in participants' sense of self, shaping their identity, moral

development, and relational dynamics. While these roles fostered maturity, empathy, and a sense of purpose, they simultaneously imposed hidden emotional burdens, deferred personal aspirations, and cultivated patterns of self-silencing. In examining these experiences, it becomes evident that parentification is a nuanced phenomenon, characterized by both developmental gains and psychosocial costs.

Participants consistently described childhood as a period dominated by family obligations, with personal freedom and age-appropriate experiences often sacrificed to meet household and emotional needs. Many initially perceived these responsibilities as normative, lacking a comparative framework to recognize their atypical nature. Retrospective reflection, however, revealed the magnitude of these sacrifices, showing the tension between perceived duty and lost opportunity for self-exploration. This aligns with prior research suggesting that parentification may be normalized within familial and cultural contexts, masking the developmental impact of prematurely assumed adult responsibilities (Hendricks et al., 2024; Linde-Krieger & Yates, 2020). These findings also extend earlier work by demonstrating that the perception of caregiving as normative can persist into adulthood, complicating recognition of unmet needs and the potential for long-term emotional consequences (Teng et al., 2021).

Interestingly, participants' experiences challenge conventional assumptions about birth order and gender in caregiving dynamics. Although literature often emphasizes firstborn sensitivity to parental expectations, many middle or youngest children assumed substantial responsibilities, influenced by parental illness, sibling needs, or household circumstances rather than birth order alone (Polomski et al., 2021; Perez, 2022; Alcantara et al., 2022; Abrea and Vargas, 2024). Gender expectations were evident, with female participants often carrying more instrumental caregiving tasks; but male participants also assumed roles traditionally coded as feminine when necessity demanded. These findings show that parentified responsibilities are contingent

on contextual factors, with cultural and situational exigencies often overriding normative assumptions about birth order or gendered caregiving.

The emotional dimensions of parentification were captured in participants' accounts of invisible burdens, including suppressed resentment, ambivalence, and unmet needs. Many described environments where parents, although physically present, were emotionally unavailable, leaving children to internalize their longing for care. This dynamic aligns with research associating emotional neglect to poorer emotion regulation and increased loneliness later in life (Simão et al., 2025; Ho & Schermer, 2024). Participants also expressed deliberate suppression, withholding emotions and resentment to preserve family harmony, reflecting the tension between loyalty and personal well-being. While these strategies protected the family system in the short term, they contributed to self-silencing and the internalization of emotional costs, highlighting how resilience and vulnerability coexist within the parentification experience.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated adaptive coping and meaning-making processes. Practical strategies such as task organization, prioritization, and creative outlets enabled them to manage daily responsibilities while preserving a sense of individuality. Emotional coping strategies such as journaling, creative expression, academic achievement, and spiritual engagement, served as outlets for processing stress and reframing parentification experiences as meaningful. These findings support literature on post-traumatic growth and adaptive resilience, suggesting that structured coping and interpretive reframing can transform adversity into opportunities for identity development and personal growth (Yeung & Chow, 2024; Jurkovic et al., 2020).

Cultural and spiritual frameworks were central to participants' meaning-making. Values such as *utang na loob*, filial piety, and family loyalty provided interpretive lenses that validated their sacrifices and contributed to identity formation,

while religious faith offered emotional grounding and a sense of purpose. However, these same frameworks sometimes reinforced self-sacrificial tendencies, highlighting the role of cultural and spiritual narratives as both protective and potentially constraining. Participants also emphasized the importance of future-oriented self-authorship, actively renegotiating family roles, establishing boundaries, and pursuing personal goals. This forward-looking perspective reflects the movement from being defined by responsibilities toward creating a self-determined life trajectory, demonstrating the potential for generativity and healing even after prolonged familial demands.

Integrating these findings within the framework of Family Systems Theory, parentification can be understood as a systemic response to family imbalance, where children adapt to maintain family stability. In the Filipino context, cultural values such as *utang na loob*, filial piety, and collective family interdependence reinforce these adaptive responses while simultaneously masking the hidden emotional costs. Early caregiving and emotional roles often became internalized, influencing identity, self-worth, and relational patterns well into adulthood. However, participants' narratives underscore that parentification is not solely a story of loss; it is a developmental journey marked by resilience, agency, and the possibility of transforming inherited burdens into purposeful, generative lives.

The study's findings have practical implications for supporting parentified individuals. Interventions should recognize and validate the emotional costs of caregiving, including ambivalence, suppressed resentment, and deferred personal goals. Facilitating narrative reconstruction and reflective meaning-making can help integrate caregiving experiences into coherent identities while fostering resilience. Promoting boundary-setting and self-care skills is essential to mitigate the long-term effects of hyper-responsibility and self-neglect. In addition, incorporating cultural sensitivity, acknowledging Filipino values while helping individuals navigate the tension between

familial duty and personal well-being. Supporting vocational engagement and spiritual meaning-making can further transform caregiving experiences into sources of purpose and adaptive coping.

In conclusion, this study provides rich insights into the experiences of parentified Filipino young adults, showing the intricate balance of growth and cost inherent in early responsibilities and caregiving. Family responsibilities shaped participants' identities, moral development, and relational capacities, but also imposed emotional burdens, postponed aspirations, and reinforced self-silencing. Through adaptive coping, meaning-making, and culturally informed strategies, participants gradually differentiated themselves from enmeshed family patterns, reclaiming autonomy while honoring familial connection. Their forward-looking orientation through boundary-setting, self-authorship, and career choices demonstrates the potential to transform parentification from a source of obligation into one of resilience, purpose, and generativity.

Future research may benefit from examining specific subgroups of parentified individuals to capture the diversity of experiences within the Filipino context, such as children of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), those who cared for chronically ill parents, or individuals raised in single-parent households. Incorporating parents' perspectives would also provide a holistic understanding of parentification by exploring their intentions, awareness of role reversals, and the influence of cultural expectations on family dynamics. Since the present findings reveal that parentification were assumed regardless of gender or birth order, subsequent studies could investigate how these variables shape emotional outcomes, family expectations, and coping mechanisms. In addition, quantitative research could assess the levels and types of coping and protective factors, including faith or spirituality, cultural values, sibling relationships, and evaluate how these factors buffer against the adverse and antagonistic psychological effects of parentification.

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