

Validation for Italian Context of Jurkovic and Session's "Parentification Questionnaire"

Validazione per l'Italia di una scala per la misura della genitorializzazione

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Riassunto: Il fenomeno della genitorializzazione viene studiato mediante una scala proposta per la realtà statunitense. Lo strumento è testato per l'Italia sui figli di alcolisti della provincia di Padova. La validazione dello strumento è realizzata in varie fasi tra cui l'analisi fattoriale e la somministrazione ad un gruppo di controllo. La scala ha prodotto (previa eliminazione di alcuni item originari) ottimi valori degli indici di affidabilità. Tra i risultati principali: l'individuazione di una regione soglia tra genitorializzazione adattiva e distruttiva (patologica); la conferma della significativa prevalenza della genitorializzazione tra le figlie femmine; l'evidenza di un processo di identificazione di genere che porta anche i figli maschi a sostituirsi ad un padre carente.

Keywords: Parentification, Scale

1. Object of the study

The term "parentification", introduced only recently (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Spark, 1973), defines a phenomenon already met and described under other names: "role inversion", "lack of role". It describes a situation within the family in which the relationships are altered and the boundaries confused. It can take on different forms, "child-as-parent" or "child-as-mate". Parentified children can carry out tasks such as preparing meals, looking after younger brothers or sisters, doing housework, managing the family budget, and in this way can meet the emotional needs of their parents. Jurkovich (1997) identifies two fundamental types of parentification; adaptive and destructive. In the "adaptive" form the child is prematurely asked to take on responsibilities, although he or she receives help in this role and it is only for a limited period of time. Destructive parentification, on the other hand, refers to a process, over a period of time, in which children take on responsibilities inappropriate to their age and without support from the family: this violation of intergenerational boundaries breaks the naturalness of roles which differentiate parents and children. However, the destructiveness is connected, above all, to the sort of interaction created between parents and children; whether or not the child's help is recognised. The route of the phenomenon of pathological parentification can be various family situations: the presence of a single parent; the existence of marital problems; alcohol or drug abuse. Jurkovic and Session (1986) proposed the "Parentification Questionnaire", a scale to measure the phenomenon among children of alcoholics. Sev-

eral studies concerning the American reality, above all Georgia, have been carried out since the introduction of the instrument into the Department of Clinical Psychology there.

2. The creation of the Italian version

The items presented in the original questionnaire were translated into Italian and questions about the respondent's personal and family characteristics were introduced into the new version. The original scale comprised of 25 statements concerning perceptions and habitual behaviour in the past (without clearly specifying when). The subjects are asked to give a closed, alternative answer of the true/false type. Adding up the positive answers obtained from the various items gives a synthetic index, presented as a measure of the degree of parentification.

The study's reference universe is adult children of alcoholics in Padua and province, whose parents have been in contact with social-health care and rehabilitation services, as well as adult children of alcoholics who participate, as relatives, in self-mutual-help groups. 98 questionnaires were gathered from subjects (40 males and 58 females) between the ages of 18 and 35. Moreover, the same instrument was administered to a controlling group of 60 subjects similar to the interviewees in terms of demographic characteristics.

The fine tuning of the instrument, from a linguistic and structural point of view, took place thanks to a pre-test phase which led to the reformulation of one of the items of the scale. A later retest verified the stability of the results after two weeks: the average reliability of the instrument gave results (in this meaning of "stability" of the answers) of 95%. The reliability of the scale has therefore been tested from the internal coherence point of view by calculating Cronbach's α , the index which evaluates the correlation between each item and the complete scale.

$$\alpha = \frac{\bar{nr}}{1 + \bar{r}(n-1)}, \quad \text{with } n \text{ number of the items and } \bar{r} \text{ their mean correlation.}$$

The values of α can vary between 0, in absence of coherence, and 1, when coherence is maximum. Applying the 25-item scale to the group of adult children of alcoholics gives an index $\alpha=0.837$ which could however have been increased by eliminating 4 items that showed an unsatisfactory element-scale correlation. This modification therefore produces a scale made up of 21 items, with a reliability index of $\alpha=0.844$. The verification of the equivalence of the parts using the split-half reliability indexes also gave comforting results (Spearman-Brown =0,875; Guttman=0,874).

The analysis of the scale's validity was conducted in three phases. The verification of the content's validity requires the breaking down of the concept of parentification into the dimensions which psychological theory has indicated as constituent of the phenomenon, and then the attributions of the various items of the scale at various dimensions. The application of a procedure of factorial extraction has highlighted the existence of a principal factor to which all the items are positively correlated, a sign that all the considered items participate in the construction of a latent variable labelled as *parentification*. Of the six extracted factors another two, besides the first, show a great ability to

differentiate between the behaviour of the group formed of children of alcoholics and that of the controlling group: the second factor is correlated to items that express *awareness* of the adult role performed by the child; the third factor seems to express *satisfaction* with respect to the role.

Figure 2: Matrix of the extracted components (only more notable correlations for factors 2-6)

Items	1°	2°	3°	4°	5°	6°
It seemed like family members were always bringing me their problems	0,79					
In my family I often felt called upon to do more than my share	0,72					
I often felt more like an adult than a child in my family	0,65					
In my family I often felt like a referee	0,65					
In my family I often made sacrifices that went unnoticed by other family members	0,60					
At times I felt I was the only one my mother/father could turn to	0,57					
I often found myself feeling down for no particular reason that I could think of	0,51					
In my family there were certain family members I could handle better than anyone else	0,48					
I was very active in the management of my family's financial affairs	0,47					
My parents had enough to do without worrying about housework as well	0,42					
I was very uncomfortable when things weren't going well at home	0,36					
It often seemed that my feelings weren't taken into account in my family	0,38	-0,59				
In my family I initiated most free time activities	0,31	0,58				
I was at my best in times of crisis	0,40	0,54				
It seemed like there were enough problems at home without my causing more	0,39	-0,45				
If a member of my family were upset, I would almost always become involved in some way	0,43	0,45				
I often resented being asked to do certain kinds of job	0,56		-0,60			
I often preferred the company of people older than me	0,42		0,56			
I was frequently responsible for the physical care of some members of my family (washing, feedings, etc)	0,25			0,70		
As a child I was often described as mature for my age	0,42				0,60	
In my family it seemed that I was usually the one who ended up being responsible for most of what happened	0,43					0,58
% of explained variance	25,4	9,6	7,0	6,9	5,8	5,3

Finally, the administering of the scale to a group of subjects extraneous to experiences of alcoholism, has meant that a substantially different positioning of the two groups in the range of possible scores can be observed; between 0 and 15 in the controlling group ($\mu= 5,2$; $\sigma=3,2$), between 1 and 21 in the group of children of alcoholics ($\mu= 10,6$; $\sigma=4,8$). Therefore, in the range of possible results it seems possible to identify a “threshold” region, which separates the condition of “adaptive” parentification from the pathological condition of “destructive” parentification.

Figure 1: Distribution of the parentification scale scores

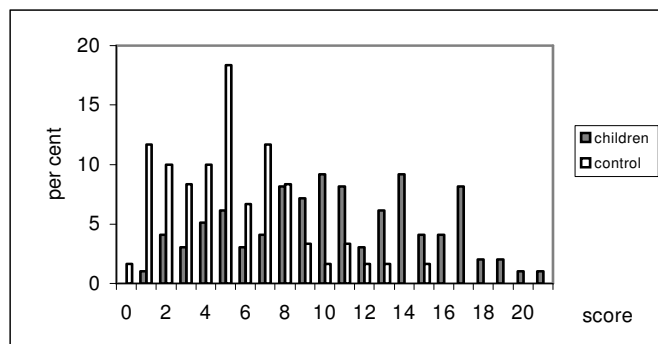


Figure 1 confronts the distribution of the subjects of the two groups based on the score obtained in the scale. Scores over 15, outside the controlling group's score range, can be considered, with a high level of probability, indicators of destructive parentification; it is also possible that values between 9 and 15 characterise subjects with a certain propensity to destructive parentification.

3. Some results

Some questions, left unresolved by the American authors and the reason for this study, concern the link between the process of parentification and personal and family characteristics of children of alcoholics: the child's sex and that of the parent with the alcohol-correlated problems; the existence of brothers and/or sisters and the order of birth of the analysed subject; the possible extradomestic activity of the alcoholic parent. The application of the unvaried analysis of the variance produced the following results: daughters present a significantly ($p=0.045$) higher propensity to parentification tendentially destructive (11.4) than sons (9.4). The propensity increases for daughters with younger brothers (12.6) but, above all, with both younger and older brothers (15.5). Vice versa, having other sisters, and especially both younger and older, reduces the risk. Daughters with non-working alcoholic mothers are significantly ($p=0.005$) more subject to parentification than sons with an analogous maternal condition. Children (both males and females) prove to be more prone to destructive parentification if the alcoholic father does not work (14.8). Therefore gender correspondence is observed in the phenomenon of destructive parentification: while daughters are more prone to parentification if the mother is an alcoholic (and does not work), sons are more likely to be parentified with a non-working alcoholic father. The common element for the two genders is the fact that if the alcoholic parent does not work, propensity to parentification increases. We can therefore conclude that children who find themselves having to substitute the parent in the family home, do so by means of a process of identification of gender.

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