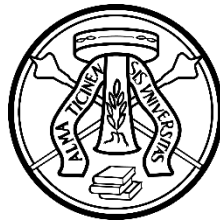


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THESIS TITLE

Lived Experiences of Parentification Among Eldest Daughters in the Post-Soviet Context: Impact on Adult Emotion Regulation Strategies

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Abstract

Parentification is a developmental violation of a child that leads to a distortion of emotional regulation techniques and severe issues in adulthood. This study explores the lived experiences of eldest daughters in CIS countries during both childhood and adulthood, examining the influence of historical trauma and emotional regulation strategies. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), qualitative interviews were conducted to investigate their past experiences and current lives. The findings show that eldest daughters recognized their experience only after reaching adulthood, as parentification was heavily normalized in society, alongside an acknowledgment of historical legacies. Concerning emotional regulation strategies, participants displayed distorted techniques focused on soothing others rather than themselves; for self-soothing, they rely mostly on co-regulation. Eldest daughters also exhibited signs of extensive guilt, shame, an inability to relax, and hypervigilance, while frequently sharing a constant feeling of injustice. Finally, the study supports the concept of three-generation trauma recovery, as participants demonstrated a deep understanding of their past and a strong willingness to change for their future children.

Key words: parentification, emotional regulation, CIS countries, the eldest daughters, trauma

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Literature Review	5
1. Conceptual Foundations	5
1.1. Definition of parental emotional instability and emotional immaturity.	5
1.2. Emotional Regulation as a developmental outcome.....	8
1.3. Gross's emotional Regulation Model	10
2. Family Systems Theory	14
3. Transgenerational transmissions and transgenerational trauma	16
3.1 Transgenerational transmissions.....	16
3.2 Transgenerational trauma	17
4. The Cultural and Historical context of the transgenerational trauma in the post-Soviet Countries.....	19
4.1 Historical Context.....	19
4.2 Cultural Representation of Family and Family Models in Post-Soviet Countries	22
5. Instrumental and Emotional Parentification	23
5.1 Parentification.....	23
5.2 Instrumental parentification.....	28
5.3 Emotional Parentification	29
6. Cultural Normalization of parentification in the post-soviet countries	31
7. Gap in the research	33
Chapter 2. Methods	34
Population and Locale of the Study.....	34
Data Collection	34
Interview procedure.....	34
Interview Guide	35
Data Analysis.....	37
Chapter 3: Findings	38
3.1. Overview	38
Participants	38
Results	39
3.2 Themes.....	40
3.2.1 Instrumental Parentification as an obligatory part of the eldest daughter's routine	41
3.2.2. Emotional Parentification: The Role of the Psychological Regulator.....	46
3.2.3. Emotional climate and systematic invalidation	53

3.2.4. Emotional Regulation in Childhood and Adulthood: From Suppression to Relational Coping	59
3. 2. 5 Transgenerational Transmission of Patterns and the Post-Soviet Context	63
3.2.6. The Distinctiveness of Post-Soviet Experience: Cultural Norms Over Economic Determinism	67
3. 2.7. Cultural Normalization: The Mechanism of Social Comparison	69
3.3. Summary of Findings	71
Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion	73
4.1. Discussion of Research Question	73
Domain 1: Childhood family environment and role.....	74
Domain 2: Emotional climate and parental responses.....	77
Domain 3: Emotion regulation strategies in childhood.....	78
Domain 4: Current emotion regulation and coping	81
Domain 5: Reflection and transgenerational patterns.....	85
4.2. Integration of Findings with Theoretical Frameworks	87
Gross’s Process Model of Emotion Regulation: Distortion Across the Stages	88
Family Systems, Bowenian Triangulation, and Parental Emotional Immaturity	90
Transgenerational Trauma, Post Soviet History, and the Genesis of Parental Immaturity....	92
4.3. Practical Implications	93
De-normalization and Re-framing of the “Helper Daughter” Script.....	94
Somatic Re-Regulation and Restructuring Gross’s Emotion Regulation Model	94
Restructuring Conditional Self-Worth and De-linking Utility from Identity	95
Navigating Bowenian Differentiation and Parental Denial	96
Intergenerational Cycle Breaking and Parenting Preparation	97
4.4. “Silver lining” of parentification	98
Chapter 5: Conclusion	100
5.1. Overview	100
5.2. Limitations of the study	100
Last reflection	101
Reference List:.....	103

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1. Conceptual Foundations

1.1. Definition of parental emotional instability and emotional immaturity.

Parental emotional instability (PEI) is a relatively new concept that has recently gained popularity among emerging adults. While often used interchangeably in colloquial speech, this work focuses on the broader construct of parental emotional immaturity, of which emotional instability (e.g., mood swings, anxiety) is a key symptomatic component. Emotional maturity is the ability of a human being to understand, identify, and regulate emotions (Jibson, 2020). An adult's capability to manage their own emotions is essential for having a healthy individual and social life. Emotionally mature adults can stabilize emotions (emotional progression, independence, social adjustment, emotional stability, personality integration) (Jibson, 2020). Emotionally immature parenting refers to unhealthy behavioral, emotional, and attitudinal characteristics where parents' express egocentricity, lack of empathy, and excessive orientation towards self. Additionally, emotionally immature parents are unable to recognize and appropriately respond to the needs of their offspring (Dobric & Patric, 2024).

Being emotionally mature is being able to handle stress in daily life, experience, recognize, and control one's own sensations and emotions, and recognize and accurately interpret the emotional states of others within the broad spectrum of possible emotions. The emotionally mature person is less impulsive, has a wider range of reactions to different situations, and can control their emotions (B. Knight, 2008). Additionally, emotional maturity is defined by the ability of an adult to be responsible for their psychological state of mind and the development of emotional self-regulation (Marcinkovskaya, 2014).

Evlampieva (2017) identifies the main characteristics of child-parent relationships in her work: emotional sensitivity, responsiveness, cooperation, acceptance, and awareness. She also highlights the ability to differentiate one's emotions, child-parent affection, and the attitude of a parent to a child and child illness. The emotional sensitivity of a parent is important in the

psycho-social development of a child. The parent should understand the slightest changes and the signals of a child in their behavior, identify the needs and their emotional state without self-centered distortions, and show empathy toward the child. Responsiveness of a parent is characterized by adequate and timely responses to the needs and requests of a child, with a clear understanding of age-related characteristics and needs. Cooperation is characterized as emotional communication, respect for the boundaries of a child, and respect for the autonomy of a child. Acceptance of a parent includes the ability to accept the difficulties related to the upbringing of a child, to regulate the negative emotions associated with upbringing, and to tolerate and accept the individual characteristics of a child. Furthermore, awareness and the ability to differentiate between one's own emotions and a child's emotions are essential. In cases of negative emotions at work or outside the household, an emotionally mature parent does not lash out at a child and does not transfer responsibility for their emotional state onto a child.

Evlampieva (2017) described also a distinctive behavioral pattern of parents towards children in case of any illnesses. The attitude towards a child during illness has a cultural context, since the only situation when a child's illness was taken seriously was when the condition was severe. It is supported by stories of children when they had to go to school or university in any case. The only excuse was having a very severe illness where it is hardly impossible for a child to get to school.

In Russian psychology, emotional immaturity and emotional infantilism are used synonymously or are considered synonyms. Additionally, emotional infantilism is a part of general infantilism, with distinct characteristics such as difficulties making decisions, lower self-criticism, a feeling of vulnerability, and various destructive emotional reactions (Kulagina, 2001).

Kiley (1983) identifies two main syndromes, or phenomena, of infantilism: the Peter Pan phenomenon and the Wendy syndrome. The Peter Pan phenomenon is described by a lack of a sense of responsibility and failure to control impulses in men. The Wendy syndrome describes

women who take on the social role of a parent or a superior authority, particularly with their spouses. Usually, a woman with the Wendy syndrome and a man with the Peter Pan syndrome become a couple, and “a woman deals with the things Peter Pan does not do, so that Peter Pan can exist (Kiley, 1983).

Tamara Dobric and Aleksandra Patric (2024), in their study *The Hidden Face of Parenting – Emotional Immaturity*, identify four archetypes of emotionally immature parents. The first type is the emotionally driven parent who relies on own personal feelings and has a predisposition to anxiety and overthinking behavior. Those parents create a chaotic atmosphere in the family where there is no room for children’s emotions. The second archetype is the control-oriented parent who is characterized by extensive control over their children’s lives. These types of parents exert control over everything: grades, hobbies, personal time, feelings, private social media, etc. The third type is the passive parent who is mainly self-engaged and shows no tendency to spend time with their children or to understand, support, and protect them. This parent leaves the child to understand emotions and suffer alone, internally. The last archetype of the immature parent is the rejecting parent. Rejecting parents are physically present in the child's life, but they do not serve as an emotional figure. (Dobric & Patric, 2024).

Emotional maturity in parents is therefore not merely an individual personality trait but a central developmental resource that shapes the emotional climate of the family system (Dobric & Patric, 2024). When caregivers demonstrate emotional awareness, responsiveness, and regulation, they provide a stable foundation for a child’s psychological development. In contrast, parental emotional immaturity - manifested through egocentricity, emotional instability, poor empathy, and role confusion creates an environment in which the child’s emotional needs may be minimized, ignored, or reversed. Within such contexts, children are often required to adapt to inconsistent caregiving patterns, assume emotional responsibilities, and suppress their own affective experiences. These early relational conditions are critical for understanding how

emotional competencies develop across the lifespan and highlight the importance of examining emotion regulation as a developmental outcome of the parent-child relationship.

Emotional immaturity of a parent is not a personality trait, but an important factor that triggers disruption in the child's emotional regulation mechanisms. This happens because the role of a parent is to serve as an extrinsic regulator for the child, helping to develop and regulate emotions (Dobric & Patric, 2024).

1.2. Emotional Regulation as a developmental outcome

The conceptualization of Emotion Regulation (ER) is multifaceted, encompassing both psychological phenomena and critical developmental outcomes. According to Thompson (1994), ER involves the intrinsic and extrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to achieve situational goals. Rather than a static trait, emotion regulation exists on a continuum, where individuals develop their capacity for self-regulation throughout their lifespan.

ER can be either automatic or conscious (Gross, 1998). The frequency with which emotions are experienced explains the importance of emotion regulation capabilities in everyday life, or simply "The frequency of emotional experiences underscores the importance of emotion regulation capabilities in everyday life" (Trentini, 2024). There are different reasons to use emotional regulation strategies: from enhancing positive emotions and decreasing negative ones to achieving context-specific goals (Kobylinska & Kusev, 2019). The emotional regulation strategies are divided into two main groups: maladaptive and adaptive strategies (Trentini, 2024).

Maladaptive strategies are ways of regulating emotions that may reduce stress in the short term but are ineffective or harmful in the long term. They often prevent a person from processing emotions properly or solving the underlying problem. The examples of maladaptive strategies include avoidance, suppression, denial, rumination, self-blame, or emotional outbursts. These strategies can maintain or enhance the level of stress, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties instead of helping a person adapt to the situation (Trentini, 2024).

On the contrary, adaptive strategies are ways of regulating emotions that help a person cope with situations effectively while supporting long-term psychological well-being and daily functioning. They allow individuals to understand, process, and express emotions in a constructive way rather than avoiding or suppressing them. Examples include cognitive reappraisal, problem-solving, acceptance, seeking social support, and mindful awareness of emotions. These strategies are associated with better stress management, healthier relationships, and greater emotional resilience (Trentini, 2024).

Parents play an immense role in the development of a child's emotional regulation. When caregivers experience difficulties with self-regulation, they may react impulsively, creating emotional instability for the child; avoid complex or inconvenient emotions; or rely on the child for emotional support. Their responses are often inconsistent, unpredictable, or self-focused rather than focused on the child's needs. The emotional climate in such families may feel unstable or invalidating for a child, interfering with the development of secure attachment and emotional safety, both of which are foundational for healthy regulation. Longitudinal research confirms that mothers who experience difficulties self-regulating their emotions are inclined to use maladaptive parenting strategies (Ehrensaft, Knous-Westfall, Cohen, & Chen, 2015; Smith, Cross, Winkler, Jovanovic, & Bradley, 2014).

Since children acquire emotional regulation skills primarily through co-regulation with caregivers, limited capabilities of parents reduce opportunities for achieving adaptive strategies. Consequently, children may develop maladaptive patterns such as avoidance, suppression, or heightened emotional reactivity. Over time, these patterns are likely to persist into adulthood and be transmitted intergenerationally through modeled behaviors, emotional climate, and lack of emotional coaching, reinforcing a cycle in which maladaptive emotion regulation strategies or, in other words, emotional dysregulation, are reproduced across generations (Price, Baumgartner, & Kiel, 2025). This process of intergenerational transmission shows how parents' own emotion

regulation challenges are significantly related to the development of emotional difficulties in their children (Price, Baumgartner, & Kiel, 2025).

To analyze how these transmitted dysregulated patterns operate step-by-step in everyday life, this study focuses on Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation. While other emotion regulation frameworks exist in psychology, Gross's model was chosen specifically because it divides emotional regulation into a clear sequence unfolding over time (situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation). This process framework makes it possible to analyze exactly where and how early parentification distorts a child's emotional regulation at each specific stage of emotional processing.

1.3. Gross's emotional Regulation Model

Emotional regulation as a main component was studied across major sub-areas within psychology by different researchers from social to clinical, from developmental to biological. Gross's emotional regulation model starts with the differentiation of emotional regulation term since in the sphere of psychology the term of emotional regulation is in conceptual and definitional chaos (Buck, 1990; Gross, 2015).

For clear understanding of emotional regulation models, we need to address what emotions are. Gross (2015) points out that it is easier to describe what emotions are not (e.g., not stress responses, not moods) than what they are, due to the different approaches psychologists take to describe emotions from basic emotions to appraisal, or emotions as psychological constructs or social constructs.

Gross (2015) defines three key components of emotions. First, emotions involve loosely coupled changes in the domains of subjective experiences, behavior and peripheral physiology (Mauss, Levenson, McCarter, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2005). However, this definition is not complete, as emotions involve more than subjective experiences; they also include tendencies to act in certain ways, emotion-related behaviors, and autonomic and neuroendocrine changes (Gross, 2015). The second key component of emotions is the ability of emotions to

unfold over time. Most researchers believe that emotions unfold over seconds to minutes, but Gross argues that complex emotions may take even longer to unfold. The last key component of emotions described in the model is that emotions can be either helpful or harmful depending on the context (Gross, 2015). With an understanding of the key components of emotions in the emotion regulation model, we can now turn to the model itself.

The process model of emotion regulation is based on the three key components mentioned above, but most importantly on the component of how emotions unfold over time in a predictable sequence. The model is used successfully to analyze the age differences when people acquire different types of emotional regulation strategies. Gross divided emotional regulation strategies into five groups: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 1986; Gross 2015). The process model of emotion regulation treats each step in the modal model as a potential target for regulation and makes a prediction that different strategies should have different consequences on how a person feels, thinks, and acts, both immediately and over time (Gross, 2015).

Situation selection refers to a proactive stage in emotional regulation where a person chooses whether to enter or avoid certain people, places, or activities that influence someone's feelings (Gross, 2015). Examples of situation selection can be simple: if a person knows how they react to scary movies, they decide to withdraw from social activities with friends and not go to the cinema. The other example is avoiding a mean co-worker or a boss, so no negative situations or conflicts happen in the workspace. In fact, the situation selection is the most forwards looking of the regulation strategies (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). The situation selection is also useful for cognitive-behavioral therapy where people are encouraged to seek helpful situations to work with fears, psychological triggers or to build confidence (Gross, 2015). Therefore, situation selection is the most effective tool that a person might have since by shaping the social world we are in, the negative emotional responses can be avoided and positive ones optimized (Carstensen,

Gross & Fung, 1997). Some research show that people with “learned helplessness syndrome” might be unable to use the situation selection as a tool for emotional regulation (Jurkovic, 1997).

Situation modification as an emotion regulation strategy refers to a person's ability to alter an ongoing situation to change its emotional impact. For example, a teacher can assign different groups during the group activity to raise their interest (extrinsic regulation) and to decrease the teacher’s frustration in the futile attempt to help each student with a limited class time. The drawback of situation modification is that modification of one situation creates a new situation where it is impossible to guess the emotional reaction of a person and other people in this situation (Gross, 2015). Previously, situation modification was referred to as a primary control or problem-focusing coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) Later Heckhausen et al. (2010) extended these ideas within the Life-span Theory of Control, positioning situation modification as a primary control strategy essential for adaptive development across the lifespan. Despite these theoretical frameworks, there is not enough empirical research on the immediate and long-term outcomes of using this emotions regulation strategy (Gross, 2015).

Attention deployment refers to redirecting one’s attention with the goal of influencing one’s emotional response. The distinct characteristic of these strategies of emotional regulations lies in the age of onset. The deployment of attention is used from early childhood and is used throughout later life (Rothbart, Ziaie & O’Boyle, 1992). One of the most common types of attentional deployment is distraction or shift (Gross, 2015). For example, a person who is experiencing negative emotions will distract herself or himself with an activity that helps to calm down or relax the first intense wave of emotions. The key idea behind distraction is to shift the attention from one trigger in the scene to another (Gross, 2015). Initial research found out that children who early acquire attentional deployment as an emotional regulation technique are better able to delay gratification or feelings of joy (Mischel, Ebbesen & Zeiss, 1972). With the negative emotions, the attentional deployment technique diminishes the emotional responses to painful and negative emotion-eliciting material (Rusting, 1998).

Cognitive change refers to modifying one's appraisal of a situation to alter its emotional impact. Interestingly, cognitive change can be applied both to intrinsic and extrinsic modification. In intrinsic situations, it involves self-talk where we change perception of negative stimuli (e.g. "my heart is beating so fast not because I am scared, but because my body releases adrenaline to prepare me before the important speech"). The extrinsic situation is close to cognitive restructuring (e.g. "this test is not do-or-die, but a chance to see where I can work more to do better"). The most studied technique of cognitive change is emotional reappraisal which targets either the meaning of emotional stimuli (the impact too) or the relevance of the emotional stimuli to a person (e.g., if it is not that important, there is less emotional responsiveness). Cognitive change is very useful for downregulating negative emotions, leading to a decreased experience of them (Gross, 2015).

The last type of emotional regulation techniques is response modulation which refers to directly influencing experiential, behavioral, or physiological components of the emotional response after the emotion. Response modulation is used when the emotional response develops a full force. It allows a person to directly influence experiential, behavioral, or physiological response. For example, a person who experiences anxiety can use alcohol or food to make himself feel better, or an anxiety exercise with deep breathing to calm down the nervous system. One of the most studied examples of response modulation strategies is expressive suppression where people hide or suppress their emotional reaction. This regulation when compared to no regulation strategies showed decreased positive but not negative emotions (Gross, 2015).

According to some studies the whole process of emotion regulation is distorted in children who experience parentification defined as a dynamic role reversal within the family system, wherein a child assumes adult functional or emotional responsibilities to meet the needs of their caregivers. Situation selection becomes impossible because a parentified child would choose the situation where he or she would be the most useful or helpful meanwhile ignoring their personal feelings. Situation modification leads to external control where a child "fixes" the

mood of parents and controls the emotions of other people, rather than internal control.

Attentional deployment is critically distorted because the focus of adultified children cannot be refocused on other resources but only on other people's needs or comfort zone. Cognitive reappraisal becomes an embedded center for the constant blame in adulthood and adolescence because cognitive reappraisal takes a side taking care of the emotions of other people. Response modulation is also heavily distorted. Children learn how to suppress their emotions like anger or frustration in order not to make anyone sad or disappointed.

As we can see, parentification itself brings a very negative impact on the development of emotional regulation and mental well-being. The children who experienced parentification struggle with up-regulating positive emotions and down-regulating negative emotions. In the end, an adult who experienced parentification in childhood is hypervigilant for other's mood, emotions and feelings, experience detachment of personal feelings, a chronic feeling of blame, the difficulties of establishment of boundaries, hyper control (external and internal), suppressed negative emotions such as a feeling of injustice and anger.

2. Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory is a psychological framework used to examine the interactions among family members (Bowen, 1978). Early formulations of family systems theory focused on interactions among family members during childhood, but contemporary research (Fingerman et.al, 2000; Cepukiene, V., 2020).

increasingly investigates the influence of family systems in adulthood and old age, particularly when aging parents require various forms of support.

Family system theory views a family as an interconnected system where every member's emotion and behavior influence the others. Murray Bowen (1978) perceived a family unit as a living organism as an emotional unit that functions according to its own internal patterns. The key components of the family system include interdependence, the emotional system, differentiation of self, triangles, and intergenerational transmission of patterns. Interdependence stands for the concept that no family member exists in isolation: changes in one person

inevitably affect the others. The emotional system component suggests that families develop stable patterns of responding to events such as ways of coping with stress, behaving in conflicts, personal intimacy, etc. Differentiation of self is the ability to maintain one's identity and emotional while staying connected and engaged in relationships. Triangles refer to the inevitable involvement of a third person in a conflict. For example, if two parents are in a disagreement, the child will be involved in the conflict. Intergenerational transmission of patterns suggests that emotional and behavioral patterns tend to repeat across generations. Examples of such patterns include a need for control, avoidant behavior, over-responsibility, emotional distance, and enmeshed or disorganized boundaries.

According to Bowen's work, the family system is built on the emotional system. The emotional system exists in two main domains: emotional reactivity and interpersonal exchange of emotional reactivity. The first domain concerns internal emotional processes, from brain to behavior. Bowen described emotional reactivity as an emotional reflex which resembles a spinal reflex that everyone possesses. An individual can express the emotional reflex subtly, overtly, and intensely. In tense relationships, an individual can read the other's reaction rapidly and unconsciously and respond to it. The second domain concerns interpersonal exchange of emotional reactivity. Bowen's theory shows how the emotional reflex of one and the emotional response of another creates a relationship pattern. In his theory, he proposed four basic family emotional patterns: conflict, distance, over-functioning pattern and under-functioning patterns. These family emotional patterns correspond to the four types of emotional immature parents (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Family systems theory provides an important framework for understanding how emotion regulation patterns develop from childhood and how they relate to family patterns across adulthood. In families with emotionally mature parents, children tend to learn healthy emotional reflexes and emotional responses.

3. Transgenerational transmissions and transgenerational trauma

3.1 Transgenerational transmissions

Transgenerational transmission refers to the process through which psychological patterns, emotional responses, relational dynamics, and unresolved experiences are passed from one generation to the next. This process may occur both consciously, through parenting practices and family narratives, and unconsciously, through emotional climate, attachment patterns, and modeled coping strategies (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Békés et al., 2025) suggests that the family system carries not only adaptive beliefs and coping mechanisms but also unresolved trauma, maladaptive relational patterns, and emotional dysregulation, which may be transmitted from parents to children.

Transgenerational transmission research shows a growing body of evidence suggesting the inheritance of behaviors such as behavioral despair, risk-taking behaviors, altered sociability, and atypical responses to stressful stimuli. For example, children and grandchildren of genocide survivors show increased psychopathology and emotional disturbances (Jawaid & Mansuy, 2019). Furthermore, the social learning theory supports transgenerational transmission by acknowledging that children who grew up without an acceptable role model might struggle with their own parenting styles when raising children (Bert et al., 2009; Pears & Capaldi, 2001).

Parenting styles are also a subject of transgenerational transmission. Conger (2009) stated that the harsh parenting of the first generation predicts the parenting model of the second generation. Another study reveals that not only were parenting styles transmitted directly, but father's personality traits also played a mediating role, while mother's personality traits did not (Dey et al., 2024). In contrast, positive parenting styles and adaptive coping strategies can also be transmitted across generations, shaping a child's personality.

Transgenerational transmission can create a cycle of parentification, in which a child who experienced parentification becomes an adult who subjects their own child to parentification. This occurs because parentification becomes not only a survival strategy but also a model of family functioning.

3.2 Transgenerational trauma

Transgenerational trauma transmission is often discussed in terms of historical impact, but the psychological effects on generations who experienced trauma are often neglected. Epigenetics, which is the study of cellular variations that are caused by external, environmental causes that switches genes “on” and “off”, explains the importance of addressing psychological effects of family traumatic experience (Krippner & Barrett, 2019). Transgenerational trauma refers to the process by which the psychological and emotional effects of a traumatic experience are passed from one generation to the next (Hall, 2025). Hall (2025) reveals how individuals who did not directly experience the original event can still exhibit trauma-related symptoms because of their parents' and grandparents' exposure to it.

Transgenerational trauma can be transmitted across generations via psychological and behavioral transmission, biological and epigenetic changes, and family dynamics and narratives. This means that if trauma occurs in each generation, transgenerational trauma transmission becomes an accumulative traumatic experience across generations.

Psychological and behavioral transmission of transgenerational trauma includes parenting styles and family communication patterns. Parents affected by trauma may unconsciously pass on maladaptive coping strategies, fears, and worldviews to their children. The children who grew up in families with transgenerational trauma might express emotional restraint, hypervigilance, or difficulties with trust and attachment (Bekes, 2025). A study conducted in Hungary (2025) with second- and third-generation Holocaust offspring showed that parents used more intense parenting styles transmitted across generations and highlighted how collective trauma impacted the third generation in the same way it impacted the second (Bekes, 2025). Another study showed similar results regarding influence on the third generation, where children were affected by their grandmother's experience (Hall, 2025).

Research on Holocaust survivors has found chemical alterations in a gene involved in stress regulation, and these same effects were observed in their children (Yehuda et al., 2016).

Studies have also shown that adults who experienced abuse, war, and other forms of trauma in childhood reported heritability effects: the offspring of these children were more likely to develop PTSD through adverse maternal epigenetic experiences during pregnancy (Yahyavi, Zarghami, & Marwah, 2014). Another study also showed that trauma-experienced children had higher susceptibility to PTSD and lower levels of cortisol which is essential for trauma recovery (Yehuda et.al., 2005). Thus, biological and epigenetic changes are central to discussion of transgenerational trauma. Trauma can lead to epigenic changes where the genes in the body are read differently, and that may be inherited.

Family dynamics and narratives as a component of trauma transmission refer to the 'transgenerational atmosphere' which refers to shared psychological field in which trauma-related experiences are preserved and transmitted without verbal communication. Family secrets, untold stories of loss, and unspoken grief create an emotional legacy that subsequent generations unconsciously carry and live out in unresolved ways. A study showed that the victims of unresolved attribute mental states to themselves and others. Consequently, in adulthood, when they have their own children, this failure makes it difficult for them to modulate and regulate their children's emotions and their own (Lieberman, Chu, Van Horn, & Harris, 2011). This again points to the same pattern: parental dysregulation leads to emotionally chaotic atmosphere for the child who is required to recreate a parent model.

Transgenerational transmission and transgenerational trauma reveal how traumatic experiences may lead to the transmission of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, parenting styles, beliefs, and worldviews from one generation to the next. The ability to pass it from one generation to another creates a traumatic experience where each generation faces the same problem. Another study showed that children who experienced traumatic events also tend to divide the world into black and white, failing to accept their mistakes, as doing so would make them a 'bad person.'

4. The Cultural and Historical context of the transgenerational trauma in the post-Soviet Countries

4.1 Historical Context

Transgenerational trauma is characterized by the transmission of traumatic events from one generation to the next. When examining post-Soviet countries, we can identify a century of traumatic events in which people were not given a chance to recover. Each new generation has been not only exposed to new traumatic events but also forced to adopt new generational problems and a new environment of living. According to Bowen's theory (1978), recovering from collective traumatic events requires three generations. Usually, it is the second generation that suffers the most. However, most of the post-Soviet countries experience a never-ending cycle of traumatization.

The Emancipation Reform of 1861, which abolished serfdom in the Russian Empire (extending to Belarus in 1864), can be understood as a collective trauma that engendered a pervasive sense of "learned helplessness" in post-Soviet societies (Moon, 2001). While the reform granted personal liberty, its terms systematically dismantled peasant expectations, creating conditions of extreme economic hardship. Promised freedom and land, the peasantry instead received inadequate allotments and were burdened with crippling redemption taxes, effectively becoming economic slaves (Blum, 1961; Pipes, 1974). Forced to work harder than before to repay debts, they experienced the reform as a profound deception. As historian David Moon (2001) notes, "many felt that they had been duped" (p. 75).

This systemic betrayal created fertile ground for learned helplessness in which subjects, after enduring repeated uncontrollable adversity, ceased attempting to change their circumstances (Seligman & Maier, 1967; Maier & Seligman, 1976). The post-emancipation experience taught generations that authority could not be trusted and that individual effort was futile. This ingrained skepticism and passive resignation, hallmarks of learned helplessness, persisted through the unofficial continuation of serfdom-like conditions until the October Revolution.

The next generational trauma has been experienced by the October Revolution and th the

subsequent Soviet governance. The immense socioeconomic crises and widening gap between the impoverished masses and the privileged elite created conditions that made the Revolution possible (Blum, 1961; Pipes, 1974). While the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 was relatively swift, the consequences were prolonged and devastating. These events unfolded against the backdrop of the First World War, which had produced profound war-weariness and exhaustion among soldiers and civilians alike. As Bushkovitch (2012) explains, "The Russian revolution of 1917 was one of the many consequences of the First World War. The war placed strains on the Russian state and society that neither could withstand" (p. 1). The combination of revolutionary upheaval and ongoing war created what scholars term a "continuum of crisis" from 1914 through 1922, marked by civil war, economic collapse, and profound social transformation.

After the Revolution, the Soviet Union embarked on an expansionist project across neighboring territories. By the outbreak of the Second World War, the USSR had expanded to encompass approximately sixteen republics, including the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Moldova, and various Caucasus and Central Asian nations (Pipes, 1997). Many of these territories were incorporated through coercion and military force, with significant loss of life among those attempting to defend their sovereignty (Suny, 1993). Beyond the loss of national independence, these populations were systematically stripped of fundamental aspects of their cultural identity: religious beliefs were suppressed, freedom of speech was abolished, and traditional customs were dismantled (Martin, 2001). A central pillar of this consolidation was the forced imposition of the Russian language; mandatory Russian-language instruction was introduced in 1938, gradually supplanting native languages in education, government, and public life (Pavlenko, 2008). This period marked the beginning of the formation of the "New Soviet Person" (*Homo Sovieticus*) which refers to an ideological construct representing an idealized communist citizen, defined by unwavering loyalty to the state, atheism, and a complete break from pre-revolutionary cultural identities (Cheng, 2009; Klymenko, 2016).

World War II constituted the next profound collective trauma, during which the Soviet Union suffered catastrophic human losses (Merridale, 2006). Belarus bore the brunt of this devastation disproportionately: the republic lost approximately every third resident, with more than three million people perishing (Snyder, 2010). These were not only combatants, but civilians also constituted most of the dead (Snyder, 2010). Entire villages, towns, and cities were systematically burned and razed to the ground (Rein, 2011). Over 9,200 villages were destroyed across Belarus, including 628 burned together with their inhabitants; 186 of these settlements were never rebuilt (Adamushko et al., 2004). The scale of genocidal violence during the occupation was immense, with more than 260 forced detention sites operating on Belarusian territory, including the Trostenets death camp, one of the largest in Europe after Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka (Gerlach, 1999). The Holocaust claimed the lives of approximately 750,000 Belarusian Jews, with 80% of the republic's Jewish population annihilated (Snyder, 2010). While Belarus exemplifies the extremity of this destruction, every Soviet republic endured profound suffering and loss during the war, with millions of civilians killed, thousands of settlements destroyed, and entire communities displaced across Ukraine, Russia, the Baltic states, and other regions (Plokhyy, 2014; Snyder, 2010). The consequences were inexorable. War, by its very nature, extinguishes countless lives and leaves deep scars that persist across generations (Herman, 1992). However, the conclusion of World War II did not mark the end of terror. Political repression continued, with countless prisoners held in Gulag camps across the Soviet Union (Bubnys et al., 2004; Ukrainian Canadian Research & Documentation Centre, n.d.). The population lived in constant fear, afraid to tell the truth. Ukraine endured the Holodomor of 1932–1933, a state-engineered famine that claimed an estimated 3.9 million lives and systematically destroyed the Ukrainian peasantry as a political force (Kasianov, 2012; Yekelchik, 2022). Belarus bears its own memorial scar: Kurapaty, a mass burial site near Minsk where tens of thousands of victims of Stalinist repressions lie buried, their memory preserved through grassroots memorialization efforts (Klymenko, 2024).

In those difficult and disturbing times, a new generation was created with the idealistic view that they represented the ideal future of the USSR (Kestere, 2018 forged the 'New Soviet Person,' a noble, perfected communist citizen defined by loyalty, collectivism, and a complete break with pre-revolutionary cultural identities (Kestere, 2018; Hohokhiya, 2015). Having internalized this identity and adapted to the system's demands, this generation then experienced the shattering collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Their promised future disintegrated, leaving them, often at a young age, to build new nations from the ruins (Engel, 2012). The 1990s constituted yet another traumatic period: economic shock therapy plunged millions into poverty, unemployment soared, life expectancy dropped, and entire societies were left to navigate the chaotic transition to capitalism (Ghodsee, 2022; Engel, 2012). This decade was also marked by unprecedented criminalization and violence. Between 1990 and 2000, homicide rates rose sharply across post-Soviet territories, driven by high levels of poverty, alcohol consumption, and the collapse of state institutions (Razvodovsky et al., 2009; Stamatel, 2009). Organized crime flourished as traditional criminal groups, including the *vory-v-zakone* (thieves-in-law) originating from the Soviet Gulag system, expanded their influence, often becoming more powerful than the state itself (Slade, 2021; Semenov, 2025)

The distinctive aesthetic of post-Soviet countries, often romanticized in retrospect, emerged directly from this crucible, serving not as mere cultural flavor but as the visible consequence of sustained, multigenerational traumatization. Research has shown that it takes three generations to fully recover from collective trauma. However, in the case of post-Soviet countries, each generation suffered from war, repression, and violence, leaving no space for people to recover from these horrendous traumatic events. What is even worse is that countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland are entering a new cycle of collective trauma

4.2 Cultural Representation of Family and Family Models in Post-Soviet Countries

To understand the post-Soviet representation of the family, it is important to understand the hierarchy within both the family system and the broader social system. During the Soviet era, the

idea of equality between men and women was promoted. However, this equality was not reflected in household dynamics. In households, women were expected to serve as both homemakers and full-time workers, while men were perceived as the nominal heads of the family. This contradictory belief created a system in which social life and private life diverged significantly. Research has shown that Soviet media actively constructed these norms and reproduced gendered family roles despite the rhetoric of equality (Gubanova, 2023; Runcis, 2012).

5. Instrumental and Emotional Parentification

5.1 Parentification

As highlighted in the introduction of this chapter, the concept of parentification is central to understanding the lived experiences of young adult women in the post-Soviet context. Given its foundational role in shaping family dynamics, a detailed examination of its mechanisms, cultural manifestations, and developmental consequences is necessary. Parents have the responsibility to fulfill their children's physical and psychological needs (Masiran et al., 2022). However, when psychological and physical needs are not fulfilled, a role-reversal in the family might occur. If role reversal occurs, the child is obliged to fulfill the psychological and physiological needs of the parents or, if the child is not an only child, to act in place of the parents for younger siblings. Parentification happens when one or both parents are unavailable or do not have resources to do so (Masiran et al., 2022). The term of a role reversal in the family is also referred to as “spousification” or childhood “adultification”. For example, in divorced families with a mother and a son, the mother might impose spousal roles on her son, expecting him to fulfill roles typically performed by a father (Schleider & Weisz, 2017). Childhood “adultification” means the same as “parentification” where a child is obliged to perform the role of one of the parents.

Parentification is culturally dependent and can take different forms and faces (Masiran et al., 2022). For example, parents in Southern Asia delegate responsibilities such as child-care functions to older siblings since usually their families have a lot of children (Md-Yunus, 2005). Another example of cultural parentification is Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,

Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, etc) where the youngest son is taught to take care of the parents as they will stay and live with their parents until the end of their lives. The tradition requires the youngest boy to stay with parents and when he gets married, a whole new family unit will stay with them too (Ismailbekova, 2017).

Parentification in the slavic post-soviet countries has a different dynamic. A first-born child is often expected to become a caregiver for the younger one. The phrase “we gave birth to a nanny, now it’s time to get a dolly” came from the 1990s and still is common to hear among the emerging adulthoods. In 1990s this phrase meant that a first-born should be a girl who would eventually become a mother-helper and the next child would be a boy who would become a gift of joy. One forum (2024) summarized the obligations of an older child: by age twelve, they were expected to know how to cook, clean the house, take care of the entire household, raise a baby, sew, and be a 'small adult.'. In the post-Soviet countries where gender roles were rigid, the idea of a girl being a helper is essential to understand the dynamics in such a family.

Parentification as a phenomenon means poor or lost boundaries between family members which influences a child’s ability to develop as a sense of self (Masiran et al., 2022). Some studies showed that parentification is linked with child psychopathology (Herbin, 2008). The child “adultification” interferes with the development of a child's concrete and clear sense of self (Buhl, 2008). For example, the older child cannot perceive themselves as anything other but helper of the parents or a caregiver for the younger siblings. Furthermore, the inability to develop coherent sense of self and set the right boundaries in their parent-child relationships prevents separation (Teng et al., 2021).

In psychotherapy literature (Hooper, 2011), parentification is also viewed as a form of trauma due to the fact it meets three out of four characteristics of trauma. Those characteristics include: “1) traumatic events are usually sudden and unexpected, the person confronted with them is unprepared (2) a traumatic event or environment leaves an individual feeling like he or she has no control, (3) trauma is often an unknown event, so that a person does not know how to

cope with it and (4) traumatic events lead to long-lasting consequences for an individual's ability to function" (Tadeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Adultified children are left with an intense feeling that they have no control over their lives. Second, when parentification happens to a child, a child is not well-equipped to cope with the overbearing responsibilities or emotional overload he or she receives from the family. Third, the experience of prolonged parentification leads to long-lasting effects in their adulthood (Hooper, 2007).

The rates of parentification are higher in families if parents experience high levels of stress or psychological dysfunctions like depression (Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, Richardson, Susman, & Martinez, 1994), substance abuse (Kassai S. et al., 2026), and illness (Sang, Cederbaum, & Hurlburt, 2013; Stein, Riedel, & Rotheram-Borus, 1999). Additionally, single-parent families create a specific environment where the children might assume the role of the absent parents. For example, a significant phenomenon in post-Soviet countries is men who, as children, took on the role of their absent fathers for their mothers, as single-parent families are predominantly single-mother families.

The high level of stress and psychological dysfunction in post-Soviet countries stems from an inability to truly process negative emotions and from dysfunctional mechanisms for coping with traumatic events and their consequences. Asper (1986) mentions an important idea which is relevant for the post-soviet countries to this day: negative emotions are often suppressed which leads to personal distress, physical discomfort and latent depressive disorders. Other research of the post-soviet countries showed the suppressed emotions which became maladaptive mechanisms of emotional regulation (Garanyan, Kholmogorova, 1994; 1996; Kholmogorova, Garanyan, 1996; 1996). The same research described the circulation of suppressed negative emotions which leads to escalation of more negative emotions inside the families and the frequent recurrence of negative situations. They also described two types of families (anxious and depressive) where children become victims of the parental distress and so-called "small perfectionists" who divide the world into black and white. The imitation of emotional well-being

among citizens became a state value in the former USSR. As a result, the psychology of emotional disorders was not covered in medical psychology textbooks, and the causes of emotional disorders like depression were reduced to purely biological factors. Suicidal conduct was likewise thought to be caused by biological issues; social and psychological aspects were not even brought (Garanyan, Kholmogorova, 1994; 1996; Kholmogorova, Garanyan, 1996; 1996).

Beyond economic pressures, psychological distress in post-Soviet families operated through subtler mechanisms. Emotions that could not be expressed openly such as anger toward parents, frustration with poverty did not disappear but transformed into psychosomatic symptoms.

Ipochondria became a socially acceptable language for pain that could not be spoken aloud, particularly in a culture where psychological discourse was underdeveloped and therapy carried stigma. More critically, these physical complaints were weaponized within family dynamics. Research describes implicit "Family Rules" that maintain closed, paternalistic structures where parental authority cannot be challenged (Miroshnichenko & Yakovleva, 2023). When children express negative emotions, parents could redirect conflict by invoking health complaints (chest pain, pressure spikes, migraines) transforming arguments about the child's feelings into crises of parental survival. This created what researchers term the "No/My" rule structure: the parent claims no control over their physiological state while demanding the child control their emotional expression (Miroshnichenko & Yakovleva, 2023). For children, the implicit message was clear: their emotions were dangerous, quite literally capable of making a parent sick. This dynamic constitutes emotional parentification, where children learn to suppress their inner world to protect the fragile parent.

Substance abuse represents a second mechanism for driving parentification, though it requires culturally specific framing. In post-Soviet families, problematic drinking rarely resembled the public, episodic bingeing associated with "alcoholism" as a clinical category.

Instead, it took the form of a daily, domestic consumption: glass of wine with dinner, beer in the evening, something stronger on weekends. This was not about visible poison but about low-grade, continuous numbing. Parents were physically present yet emotionally absent, their attention dissolved into a daily ritual of coping with stress, boredom, or despair. Children learned that parents could not be relied upon for presence, engagement, or emotional attune, not because they were violent or absent, but because they were consistently, quietly unavailable. This pattern reflects broader post-Soviet drinking culture, where alcohol functioned as an embedded coping strategy in response to decades of upheaval and collective trauma (Saburova et al., 2011).

Crucially, this form of drinking carried little public stigma precisely because it was domestic and normalized. Yet its consequences for children were profound: they assumed responsibility for their own emotional regulation, navigated household tasks without guidance, and learned to expect nothing from parents who were always present but never quite there. A Belarusian study found measurable effects: children of moderate or heavy drinkers showed IQ scores 1.5–2.5 points lower and significantly greater behavioral problems (Yang & Kramer, 2012). These deficits likely reflect not direct physiological damage but the disruption of family functioning, the daily absence of parents too absorbed in their coping to be truly available to their children.

Parentification leads to long-lasting effects on everyday life in the adulthood of parentified children. The parentified children experience an unbalanced relationship with their peers, often taking the role of caregiver and/or controlling one (Leon & Rudy, 2005). Additionally, parentification leads to defensive mechanisms such as suppressed anger and a lack of affect regulation strategies, which eventually result in chronic stress and tension. The parentified children in their adolescence often experience a high level of self-blame and guilt feelings (Byng-Hall, 2002). Many of them later suffer from depression, suicidal feelings, shame, excessive guilt, social isolation, psychosomatic problems and other internalizing and/or externalizing symptoms (Jurkovic, 1997).

To further understand how parentification influences a child's development, it is necessary to examine how both instrumental and emotional parentification operate within the family system. Additionally, while the negative effects of parentification are significant, there are also positive side effects. The “silver-lining” of the parentification includes increased competence and self-efficacy (Jurkovic, 1997), enhanced empathy and social skills (Borchet et.al, 2020), increased responsibility and reliability (Byng-Hall, 2002), interpersonal sensitivity (Borchet et.al, 2020). In the adulthood, such children become “the rocks” of the teams since they are very reliable, organized and comfortable taking the lead because they learned how to perform from the childhood.

5.2 Instrumental parentification

Instrumental parentification is a type of parentification in which a child is assigned adult responsibilities, such as running errands, cleaning the house, cooking, paying bills, and managing household chores (Jurkovic, 1997). Instrumental parentification happens when one or both parents are impaired and cannot perform their duties. This impairment may arise from various circumstances, such as parental illness or the need to work longer hours to provide for the family (Jurkovic, 1997). Instrumental parentification is considered less harmful to a child since a child might develop a sense of achievement and fulfilment, but that might be the positive outcome when the emotional parentification is not present (Jurkovic, 1997).

As mentioned earlier, the cultural and historical context of post-Soviet countries meant that instrumental parentification was culturally accepted, as parents were unavailable due to the crises occurring in their countries (such as the economic upheaval of the 1990s). Some researchers do not perceive instrumental parentification as a developmental pathology since in times of crisis or stress a child might develop important adult-like skills which might benefit them in adult life.

Instrumental parentification might have roots in social-economic status. Poverty may play the primary role in instrumental parentification. For example, during the Great Depression in the USA, researchers observed in families a downgrade of parental responsibilities to their children

(Elder, 1974). The downgrade of parental responsibilities occurs when there is a low-economic status in the family system implying the need of adults to work harder and more to support the basic needs of the family (Elder, 1974). However, the children in poor families might not experience pathological parentification since they are more likely to highlight their contributions to the family well-being and gain a sense of self-achievement (Khafi et al., 2014).

Stereotypical roles were the reason behind the instrumental adultification of women. The vivid example was a phrase that existed for a long time shaping a demanding role for women as a mother's helper. Many people consider it to be a young girl's obligation to cook, to clean, to take care of everyone and everything when a mother is absent or helping her when she is tired. Compounded by poverty and parents having to work long hours, it was often the oldest daughter who had to stay home, clean, cook, and take care of younger siblings, all without sufficient resources of her own.

Some researchers indeed highlight the positive effects of instrumental parentification (Hooper, 2007, 2011; Jurkovic, 1997). It is strongly believed that instrumental parentification develops autonomy of a child and high levels of reliability in the future. However, often the important nuance is overlooked in the research of parentification - emotional.

5.3 Emotional Parentification

Emotional parentification is a subtype of parentification which is associated with the different consequences for child development and, ultimately, adult outcomes (Aldridge, 2006). The child with emotional parentification is required to fulfill specific social and emotional needs of an adult in the family. Often emotional parentification is more destructive and has more severe aftereffects on a child's development and adult life (Hooper, 2007). Emotional parentification is mostly found in the families where a parent suffers from a mental illness, psychological distress or destructive attachment styles (Aldridge, 2006). A parent dealing with emotional deficit, which often arise from their own childhood, relies on a child for emotional and psychological support

without reciprocation (Hooper, 2007). This creates an endless cycle where emotional parentification becomes a transmitted family pattern.

In the process of emotional parentification, a child often becomes a facilitator, an anchor or a bridge between parents in a time of conflict. For example, if parents often are found in the argument, a child might be required to calm both parents down and find a way to make peace between them. This type of situation creates a need for a child to become an adult who takes care of his or her parents. Another example is a divorce where a child becomes a facilitator again or is required to take one side and support one of the parents during a devastating situation in their lives. The incongruence between the expectations towards a child and their emotional maturity, age, and development creates an overbearing distress inside of a parentified child.

Emotional parentification is rooted in the family conflict or arises from it. One of the factors that defines a family conflict is the ability of parents to self-regulate their own emotions. Failing to self-regulate their own emotions, they prevent a child from learning an effective coping mechanism and lead to prolonged consequences in their adolescence (Goeke-Morey, Cummings & Papp, 2007). Cummings and Davies identified two ways that children react to the family conflict: “the loud and silent scream” (2010). The loud scream is defined by hyperactivity (or behavioral dysregulation where a child is losing control over their behavior. A good example of such behavioral dysregulation is interference of a child with the family confrontation. The silent scream is defined of emotional reactivity or avoidance where a child experiences a prolonged state of emotional tension and anxiety (Cumming & Davis, 2010). The parental conflict creates an unsafe space of a child where he or she must take a place of older person to protect themselves or their younger siblings, meanwhile regulating the conflict of his or her parents (Cumming & Davis).

Emotional parentification is also prevalent over instrumental parentification (Żarczyńska-Hyla et al., 2016). A study of high school students in Poland showed that 70% of participants experienced parentification, with a high prevalence of emotional parentification. Therefore,

emotional parentification was associated with a high level of perceived unfairness. Jurkovic (2004) believed that the feeling of unfairness might prolong and exacerbate negative outcomes of parentification.

6. Cultural Normalization of parentification in the post-soviet countries

A clear understanding of prolonged collective and transgenerational trauma highlights parentification as a coping mechanism of an entire nation rather than an isolated phenomenon in rare households. In these regions, the “role reversal” between parents and children has been normalized over generations due to chronic socio-economic instability, wars, and the breakdown of traditional social structures. When survival becomes the primary goal of the family unit, the child’s emotional needs are often sacrificed, and their premature transition into adulthood is not only expected but socially praised. Consequently, what clinical psychology defines as a developmental violation (parentification) is often perceived in the post-Soviet cultural narrative as a sign of "maturity," "responsibility," and "filial piety," masking the underlying trauma of the "adult child" (Tomek et.al, 2026).

Theoretical evidence of the normalization of the parentified child as a socially accepted norm, and even something to aspire to, can be found in the works of Soviet psychologists, pedagogues, and sociologists for example, in *The Pedagogical Poem* by Anton Makarenko (1933) children were conditioned to become industrious 'cogs' in the social machine; their lives were focused on work and on doing tasks on behalf of adults. Therefore, they had to take care of younger people and teach them the same rules. Another example from the pedagogical writings of Soviet researchers showed that a well-brought-up child should be a keeper of the house, help their father or mother, take care of younger siblings, not cause trouble for parents, and be obedient and quiet. Otherwise, the family was heavily judged (Lavrinovich, 2022). What was presented as autonomy for children and teenagers was, in fact, forced and controlling, rather than supportive within family systems (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001).

The normalization of parentification was reinforced by social approval. Children who behaved as the situation demanded often heard phrases such as “You are so grown-up,” “You are my support,” “You are the only one I can rely on,” “You must be strong for our happiness.” Often, these phrases exacerbated and reinforced the behavior supported by parentification. Additionally, older people created socially acceptable behavior where children could not express their emotions, needs or feelings. Socially acceptable behavior includes a high level of suppression, obedience and quietness. As a good example of such behavior, children could not express if a teacher hurts them because challenging an adult was seen as a violation of social hierarchy and a sign of 'bad upbringing.' Disclosing emotional distress was often dismissed as 'whining', further reinforcing the strategy of emotional suppression" (Jurkovic, 1997).

The cult of sacrifice became another factor influencing the normalization of parentification. Soviet propaganda promoted the idea of sacrifice, presenting it as the key to becoming a valiant and respectable person. A good example of such propaganda was Pavlik Morozov, who sacrificed everything he had, even his life, to be a right person and help others. He was twelve when he did it. This state-sponsored narrative of the 'Child-Hero' was widely disseminated through compulsory school curricula, state-controlled children's literature, pioneer organization rituals, and ubiquitous media outlets such as Pionerskaya Pravda. It effectively divulged and glorified institutionalized the abandonment of childhood innocence in favor of ideological loyalty. By elevating a child who acted against his own family to the status of a national martyr, the Soviet system sent a clear message: a child's value was measured by their ability to perform adult-like, self-sacrificial functions. In this environment, personal emotional needs and the instinct for familial safety were rebranded as 'bourgeois egoism' or 'weakness.' Consequently, for generations, the capacity to ignore one's own vulnerability and prioritize the 'collective' or the 'parental' became a survival strategy, laying the psychological groundwork for chronic emotional suppression and the loss of the 'Self' in the service of others. The same idea was promoted in the aforementioned *The Pedagogical Poem* by Makarenko, where he advocated

treating children as equals and as part of society, reinforcing parentification as socially acceptable and prized behavior."

All these factors and normalization techniques led to the creation of highly dysfunctional family systems, in which children acquired predominantly either a suppression coping mechanism or an aggression coping mechanism to protect themselves and their families at a very young age.

7. Gap in the research

The influence of parentification on family systems and child development, encompassing both adaptive and destructive effects, is well-documented as shown in the previous paragraphs. However, when parentification becomes a prolonged, rigid dynamic, it fosters an unstable environment that precipitates maladaptive behavioral patterns and significant mental health challenges in adulthood.

Despite these known risks, parentification remains under-researched within the post-Soviet context. The lack of empirical data may stem from the normalization of these dynamics, rooted in a century of transgenerational trauma. In these societies, successive generations were often denied psychological resources to process side-effects or break cycles of dysfunction.

This study aims to investigate the long-term sequelae of parentification in adults, with a specific emphasis on emotional regulation strategies and daily coping mechanisms. By synthesizing an overview of these lived experiences, this research intends to establish the foundational data required for future targeted clinical intervention programs.

It is hypothesized that the third generation, now entering full adulthood, possesses a unique level of psychological awareness and "emotional distance" from the original trauma source, making them the first cohort with the potential to break the transgenerational cycle.

However, this potential is currently threatened by the tense geopolitical environment in post-Soviet countries. The prevailing instability creates a high risk of secondary traumatization, which may force individuals back into "survival mode." In such environments, there is a

significant danger of reverting to inherited parenting models and the further normalization of parentification as a functional necessity rather than a dysfunction. Consequently, this research is not merely observational and may serve as foundation for future intervention to prevent the re-continuation of a destructive cycle.

Chapter 2. Methods

Population and Locale of the Study

Participants are women aged 20 to 30 from post-Soviet countries. They were not required to come from a two-parent family or to have siblings, as parentification can occur in any family structure. A total of seven participants were interviewed. All participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Threads, Instagram, and Telegram. Exclusion criteria included current severe psychological distress that could be exacerbated by participation in the study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information. Depending on participants' preferences and locations, interviews took place online using video conferencing platforms. Interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and in some cases longer (150). Interviews were conducted in Russian. Following each interview, field notes were taken immediately to document reflexive impressions, emotional tone, and observations.

Interview procedure

Participants were recruited through social media platforms, including Threads, Instagram, and Telegram. Interested individuals were provided with a brief explanation of the study's purpose and the nature of their involvement. Those who expressed interest were screened for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Eligible participants received a detailed information sheet outlining the study objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview. To ensure anonymity, each participant were assigned a number, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for each participant. The interviews were conducted online. At the outset of each interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and had the opportunity to ask any questions. Each interview followed a semi-structured format guided by a pre-developed interview guide, allowing for flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participants.

Interviews were expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes, though the duration was varied because many participants showed interest in telling more as well to share their stories. With the participant's consent, interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription. Throughout the interview, the researcher remained attentive to the participant's emotional state, and participants were reminded that they may pause or withdraw at any time.

Immediately following each interview, the researcher recorded field notes capturing reflexive impressions, emotional tone, and any observations relevant to the context of the interview. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis. Data is stored securely, with access limited to the research team.

Interview Guide

To explore participants lived experiences of parentification and its long-term impact on emotion regulation strategies, a semi-structured interview guide was developed. This format was selected as it aligns with the epistemological commitments of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to elicit rich, detailed, first-person accounts while allowing flexibility to pursue emergent themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Unlike fully structured

interviews, a semi-structured approach enables the researcher to follow the participant's narrative trajectory while ensuring that key areas of theoretical interest are systematically covered.

The interview guide was developed through a multi-step process informed by the study's theoretical framework. First, the research was created into five thematic domains derived from the theoretical frameworks discussed in chapter 1. The research topic is focused on the analyzes how the parentified women cope with emotions, thus, highlighting the problem and creating a solid ground for interventions.

The topics covered in the interview are divided into several main domains which are mentioned below with the examples of questions.

Domain: Childhood family environment and roles

1. Can you describe what a typical day was like for you growing up?
2. Were there things you were expected to do that felt like “adult” responsibilities?
3. Can you tell how the household life looks like?
4. How did your family look like?

Domain: Emotional climate and parental responses

1. When you were a child and felt sad, how did your parents usually react?
2. When you were a child and felt scared, how did your parent respond?
3. When you were a child and felt angry, how did your parents respond?
4. What about your parents' own emotions? How did they express how they were feeling?
5. What did you learn from your parents regarding your emotions and emotional state?

Domain: Emotion regulation strategies in childhood

1. When you are growing up and felt overwhelmed by a strong emotion, what would you usually do?
2. Were there things you learned not to do with your emotions?

Domain: Current emotion regulation and coping

1. Looking at your life now, how do you handle difficult emotions when they come up?

2. How do you think your childhood experiences shaped the way you handle emotions today?

Domain: Reflection and transgenerational patterns

1. What do you know about your parents' own childhoods? How do you think their experiences shaped how they raised you?
2. Do you feel that growing up in a post-Soviet country influenced your family?

The guide was designed to follow a logical and emotionally sensitive progression, beginning with descriptive accounts of family structure and gradually moving toward more reflective and potentially sensitive material. Each main question was accompanied by probes to invite elaboration (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?") and to ground reflections in specific experiences (e.g., "Can you think of a specific time when that happened?"). The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in sequencing and emphasis, ensuring that participants could direct the conversation toward experiences most salient to them while maintaining consistency across interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data. Each transcript was analyzed multiple times, with notes taken during the process. Each participant's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) were developed by clustering these notes into experiential statements or themes. This process was repeated for each participant. Lastly, Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were identified through cross-case analysis.

Chapter 3: Findings

3.1. Overview

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological investigation was to give to the lived experiences of the eldest daughters in the CIS countries who experienced emotional and instrumental parentification in their families. In addition, the study was also designed to examine how they perceived their childhood experience and if they had a clear comprehension of what they lived through. For analysis of this study the interpretation of the researcher used using the process written and designed by Smith et al. (2009).

This chapter describes the results of the data collecting and analysis procedure after concentrating on the information obtained from the semi-structured interviews. To help the reader better grasp each woman's distinct viewpoint and to give each of their voices and experiences a place to be recognized and honored as contributions to this research as intended in phenomenological work, Chapter 3 provides a brief description of each of the seven participants. The emergent themes are thoroughly examined after the participant descriptions, with each theme's rationale supported by quotes from the participant interviews. The chapter ends with a synopsis of the key ideas.

The Participants

The phenomenological approach employed in this study required the participation of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). Since Smith et al. "suggests that between three and six

participants can be a reasonable sample size" for an IPA project (2009), a sample of seven eldest daughters from the post-Soviet homes was used for this study. The following summary was written to provide background information about each of the participants to give a reader a greater understanding of the individual's experience.

Table 1 provides demographic information for the seven participants. To protect their privacy, the participants' actual names are replaced by numbers throughout the study.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Name*	Age	Country	Children in Family
1	25	Kazakhstan	3
2	25	Belarus	3
3	26	Russia	5
4	24	Poland	2
5	27	Ukraine	2
6	24	Kazakhstan	2
7	26	Russia	2

*Numbers were used for the real names of the participants to protect their identity and privacy

Results

This investigation was guided by the main research question which was designed to cultivate in-depth responses from the participants. As the researcher, I performed all the data analysis to include the development of emergent themes. After the interviews, I imported the audio into decoding of audio into transcripts to help me thoroughly analyze the interviews after it has been conducted and develop the emerging themes. Following Smith et al.'s (2009) outline for data analysis, the emerging themes were developed via thorough and repeated review and noting of each participant's transcripts. This process enabled a deeper interpretation of the meanings and nuanced sentiments within each participant's account. This idiographic procedure was repeated

for each individual data source, followed by a cross-case synthesis to identify shared codes and recurring patterns across participants. Of all the codes excreted from the analysis process, five major themes emerged as the most telling of the participants' experiences, while addressing the research questions.

3.2 Themes

To provide a comprehensive overview of the qualitative findings, Table 3.2 outlines the primary master themes and corresponding subthemes derived from the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The table summarizes the conceptual definition of each theme, along with the specific participants who endorsed each domain and the overall prevalence across the sample ($N = 7$).

Master Theme	Subtheme	Participants (n=7)	Prevalence (%)
1. Instrumental Parentification	1.1 Caretaking of Younger Siblings	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%
	1.2 Domestic & Household Management	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%
	1.3 Gendered Disparity & Identity Displacement	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7	85.7%
2. Emotional Parentification	2.1 Serving as Emotional "Container"	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	85.7%
	2.2 The "Peacemaker" and "Bridge" Role	P1, P3, P5, P7	57.1%
	2.3 Psychological Burden & Conditional Worth	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%

3. Emotional Climate & Invalidation	3.1 "Tiptoeing" & Unpredictability	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6	71.4%
	3.2 Prohibition & Systematic Invalidation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%
4. Emotion Regulation Strategies	4.1 Childhood Suppression & Dissociation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%
	4.2 Adult Regulation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%
5. Transgenerational Context	5.1 Post-Soviet Cultural Normalization	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%
	5.2 Intergenerational Denial & Lock	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	100%

3.2.1 Instrumental Parentification as an obligatory part of the eldest daughter's routine

All study participants reported that they assumed parental responsibilities during their childhood at various degrees, which is consistent with the phenomenon of instrumental parentification. The most prominent pattern was caring for younger siblings, which often began at an early age and was perceived as normal due to the regularity of phenomenon in their social groups.

Caring for younger siblings

Caring for younger siblings is perceived as a regular helping task for parents. However, there is quite a difference between helping the parents and assuming the primary caretaking role of a parent. This caretaking was not experienced as an occasional favor, but as an inescapable, developmentally inappropriate obligation that fundamentally altered their self-concept.

Respondent 4 reflected on the gradual, confusing shift from wanting a sibling to becoming overwhelmed by parental duties:

“As soon as K was born, I was basically like a nanny or something. They’d push me out there with her to go for walks with her. At first, you know, sometimes it was okay for me. I really wanted a little brother or sister of my own; I just loved the whole thing so much. At first, I was fine with it, but then, when I realized that I was kind of getting totally overwhelmed being this kid’s “mom,” I kind of stopped liking it, but I couldn’t really do anything about it because it was all framed as: “You’re helping out, you’re an assistant, such a grown-up little helper.”

Participant 4 further explained that by twelve years old, she taught her sister to crawl and walk, changed her diapers, and fed her with a bottle. She described her experience with love and pain at the same time. For her, the familial framing of her labor as being a "grown-up helper" created an emotional trap. It masked the reality of her overburdening under the guise of praise, stripping away her ability to set boundaries or express fatigue without feeling guilt.

Respondent 1 also mentions similar dynamics where she and her sister had to take care of the younger brother because their mother maintained a very active social life. She mentions that before the birth of brother, she had to take care of younger sister, and then of younger brother. However, she mentions that it did not last long because her mother sent her to live with the grandmother, and her younger sister started caring for their younger brother. Recalling her emotional state, Participant 1 highlighted persistent feelings of anger and irritation stemming from an inability to say "no."

The participants also pointed out that the responsibility was perceived not as a request, but as a demand. The respondent 2 described her mother’s reaction to refusal:

“If we don’t keep an eye on him, Mom will scold us. Or she’ll start yelling at us, start throwing a tantrum.”

This reflection underscores a core phenomenological reality of instrumental parentification: the psychological dissonance of being expected to manage another human life before developing a stable sense of one's own identity. This phenomenon changes the framework of future life of the children: two respondents mentioned that such childhood made them

childfree because they brought one child up and it was enough for them, and the respondent 7 mentions that she wants only one child because she already has one – her younger sister.

Household Chores

In addition to caring for younger siblings, all participants reported taking on extensive household responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning, and managing daily domestic routines. Similar to sibling care, engaging in household chores was not experienced as a helpful contribution, but as an inescapable duty. The inability to say “no” or establish boundaries was driven by the desire to avoid open conflict, verbal abuse, or punishment from parents.

Participant 5 described her daily routine when she was in the eighth grade:

“I come home. I change my clothes, quickly make dinner for everyone, clean the house... My little brother comes home, I feed him, and I always help him with his homework. I make sure his school uniform is all ironed. I would wake up at 5 a.m. to iron his uniform.”

This rigid routine reflects a full shift into an adult organizational role. Beyond execution, Participant 5 carried the cognitive burden of managing the household: ensuring her brother was fed, his homework was completed, and his clothing was prepared before leaving for school. She noted that this caretaking role persisted into later life, as being the eldest meant she was continually expected to look after other extended family members.

Similarly, Participant 2 provided a comprehensive list of tasks that mirrored adult domestic labor:

“Well, a full cleanup: vacuuming up the dust, mopping the floors, washing the dishes, putting a load of laundry in, taking it out, doing my homework, helping my younger sibling with their homework, cooking something to eat for a whole family — give or take. Well, roughly speaking, the burden of responsibility that adults carry.”

When asked about space for refusal or negotiation, Participant 2 became distant and concise, highlighting the threat of threat and physical enforcement underlying these expectations:

“Always a conflict. Well, they could yell, or they might have even raised a hand or a belt.”

A critical dimension of this experience was the generational transfer of household responsibilities. As the eldest daughters matured or left the household, the expectation of labor was systematically passed down to the next oldest female child. Participant 2 recalled:

“While I was growing up, my little one grew up too; I would sit with her, play with her, and take her for walks. By the time I had grown up, the youngest of us had already arrived. And the same responsibilities I’d had with K were now passed on to K and L... Besides, I left home and moved in with my boyfriend.”

This identical shift was reported by Participant 1, illustrating a continuous cycle of displaced caretaking within families of three or more children.

When participants attempted to process or question these childhood burdens as adults, they were met with immediate minimization from older generations. Participant 4 recalled a confrontation with her grandmother regarding the care of her younger sister:

“‘Damn, they dumped this kid on me, like, M. actually had parents at the time, why was I sitting with her and doing everything?’ And her grandma said to her, ‘Oh, you were already 12 years old — you were already such a grown-up mare.’ She was thinking, ‘Did you hear that? Twelve fucking years old. What the fuck does “grown-up mare” even mean?’”

Interestingly, participants 1, 4, and 7, coming from three different post-Soviet countries, reported the exact same idiom (“grown-up mare” / “взрослая кобыла”) used by their grandmothers to justify parentification. This shared linguistic framing serves a key psychological function: it redefines an overburdened child as an adult, thereby erasing their developmental needs and rationalizing the exploitation of their labor. When seeking validation in adulthood, participants consistently encountered this intergenerational normalization, leaving them to process feelings of shame, helplessness, and systemic injustice in isolation.

Gender Disparity in Responsibility and Social Roles

The accounts revealed a distinct gender-specific pattern in how tasks were assigned, with male siblings largely exempt from comparable domestic workloads. Participants routinely

observed that their brothers — whether younger, older, or same-age peers — were not expected to carry similar caretaking or organizational burdens. Participant 5 remarked on this double standard when reflecting on her brother: *“It seems to me that he wasn’t burdened like that when he grew up.”*

This disparity generated a profound sense of injustice, particularly when traditional gender roles were explicitly used to justify the division of labor. Participant 7 recalled the emotional strain of being tasked with domestic duties while her slightly older brother was granted autonomy:

“He was older than me by one year, but yet — I had to take care of my younger sister, clean the house, and cook. When I felt injustice and anger because of that, all I heard was that I am a girl and he is a boy, he needs his space and time. And what about me? Didn’t I need the same space and time?”

Here, the participant's developmental needs for rest and personal space were treated as secondary to her brother's, framed entirely through gender expectations. Similarly, Participant 3 noted how domestic labor was explicitly tied to future marital expectations rather than personal willingness:

“‘You need to know how to cook because you’re going to be a housewife and a wife someday,’ whereas my brother never heard such demands.”

When asked to reflect on their identity and social position within the family structure, the results were alarming: only one of the seven participants identified herself primarily as a "daughter." The remaining six described themselves as "mother's little helpers," alongside labels such as the "eldest sister," "the wise one," "the keeper," or "the housemaid." This psychological framing demonstrates how instrumental parental constricted their identity, leaving no psychological space to simply experience being a child or a daughter.

A recurring, troubling dynamic emerged when participants attempted to discuss these childhood burdens with their parents in adulthood. Every participant reported encountering

immediate defensiveness, minimization, or flat refusal to acknowledge the overload of their childhood responsibilities. Participants 2 and 4 noted that this denial operates across multiple generations: when their parents brought up similar childhood memories to the grandparents, they faced the same romanticized response, insisting the childhood had been "beautiful" and trouble-free.

This systematic intergenerational refusal to validate the past burdens creates a painful psychological deadlock. Instead of receiving recognition or closure, participants were left carrying unresolved feelings of shame, chronic irritation, helplessness, and a persistent sense of injustice.

In summary, instrumental parentification laid a structural foundation where participants were deprived of age-appropriate autonomy and forced into adult operational roles. However, as the interviews revealed, this physical workload was rarely isolated; it served as a gateway to emotional parentification, where the eldest daughters were further tasked with managing the psychological stability and emotional climate of their households.

3.2.2. Emotional Parentification: The Role of the Psychological Regulator

Beyond instrumental duties, all participants reported experiences of emotional parentification, which manifested in two primary forms: a) becoming an emotional “container” for parent’s psychological distress, and b) functioning as a “peacemaker” or “bridge” in family conflicts. Unlike instrumental tasks, emotional parentification was consistently described as more psychologically burdensome and carried longer lasting into adulthood. Thus, emotional parentification continuous throughout the lifespan of a child.

Serving as an Emotional “Container” for Parental Distress

Participants described situations in which they become the primary recipients of their parents’ emotional struggles, particularly their mothers’. This role reversal, where the parent needed emotional support from the child rather than providing it, created a profound psychological burden that the respondents struggled to process both then and now. The reasons

for role reversal with mother can be that most of the respondents described the same family model, and respondent 3 articulated the most on-point definition of the typical CIS-country:

"We had this typical CIS family with an absent father and a strange mother who was trying to handle everything on her own."

Within the participants' perception of the world, the term "strange" referred not merely to eccentric behavior, but to a mother figure characterized by emotional unpredictability, chronic psychological distress, and boundary ambiguity. Overwhelmed by single-handed parental responsibilities, these mothers lacked the emotional resources to self-regulate, leading them to project their distress onto their eldest daughters.

A deeper analysis of participants' background reveals that there are always two recurring familial scenarios: the father is absent in a physical and mental way, the father is present only physical, but the figure of mother is always trying to handle everything on her own. The respondents also added that the identical family structure and role placement was in their parents' childhood. This family model explains why the eldest daughters had to assume the role of the absent parent and become an emotional "container" or "psychological balancer" in the family.

Respondent 5 articulated the concept of being an emotional container with striking clarity:

"Mom decided at some point that I could be some kind of container for her emotions or a listener for her worries... listening to her problems with Dad, or in her relationships with her parents. But I didn't really want to know about any of that. And honestly, it didn't really improve my life, more like it made things worse."

The word "container" here is particularly significant. It reflects the participant's intuitive understanding that she was expected to hold and process emotions that her mother could not manage independently. This metaphorical containment was not a one-time occurrence when the family was facing family crises or temporary problems but a continuous pattern that fundamentally altered the parent-child hierarchy.

Respondent 4 described a similar pattern with her mother, who treated her as a friend rather than a daughter:

"My mom... all my life she communicated with me like I was her friend... she'd tell me all kinds of unnecessary information, like about their life with dad, their fights, all of it."

Respondent 1 shared a bit different circumstances but a very clear role alteration:

"Well, my mom just couldn't handle me as a teenager, so she sent me to live with my grandma. And it turns out that once I was physically separated from her and we started talking like friends, our relationship improved—but I just can't complain to her about anything."

She also added her experience with her grandmother:

"Well, my grandma is always grumbling about life and constantly sharing all her financial problems, but we don't have any problems like that: we own several apartments and run a business. She texts me all her expenses on messenger. I think she's just doing it to make me feel guilty. I can't tell her anything because she immediately shifts the topic to herself."

Participant 1 clearly articulated that there was no space for her nor to be a daughter for her mother, nor is there no space for her to seek emotional support from the older generations. This framing of the relationship as "friendship" rather than "mother-daughter" represent a subtle but significant form of emotional parentification. While on the surface it may appear positive, it systematically deprives the child of the protective boundary that allows them to remain a child. The participants were exposed to adult problems, marital conflicts, and emotional burdens that they were not developmentally equipped to process. The respondent 7 summarizes her experience as following:

"I was her support. She only had me and her grandmother; her grandmother helped and worked, while I looked after my little sister and listened to all her problems in the evenings. I remember that feeling of helplessness that there was nothing I could do to help her. I remember crying a couple of times at night because I didn't have that ability."

The persistent feeling of helplessness is present not only in instrumental parentification but also in emotional parentification. Respondent 1 described how her grandmother used her as an emotional dumping ground, particularly regarding financial stress:

"My grandmother, she keeps me under financial control... she tells me: 'I gave you everything, I provide for your life, you went to Europe for your bachelor's, your master's... so you should behave properly and be grateful to me every day.'"

The same exact phrasing of emotional dumping was described by all the participants. They were called out egoistically if they tried to talk about their feelings. Shaming was a powerful tool to insert a consent feeling of not paying back enough.

Here, emotional and instrumental parentification converge: the participants are not only expected to manage the household or take care of younger siblings, but also to perform gratitude as emotional labor. This creates a vicious cycle where material support becomes a tool of psychological control, reinforcing the participant's sense of helplessness and obligation.

The "Peacemaker" and "Bridge" Role

Participants consistently described themselves as mediators in conflicts between family members, a role that required emotional maturity far beyond their developmental capacity. This function was particularly pronounced in household characterized by high levels of marital conflict or intergenerational tension.

Respondent 1 provided the most vivid account of this role, describing herself as a "bridge" between family members:

"I'm their bridge... it was important for me to maintain good relationships with everyone... If I'm not there, they, for example, don't communicate well with each other... They always trigger each other... when they need to resolve problems between each other, I'm their bridge."

This "bridge" metaphor is powerful. It suggests that without the participant's active intervention, the family system would fall apart. The responsibility for maintaining family

emotional balance and harmony, a task that properly belongs to the parents, has been transferred onto the child's shoulders. This creates a psychological position that endures the feeling of helplessness and psychological burden: the participant cannot leave or withdraw without the family collapsing. With the constant feeling of shame there is no chance a child could withdraw herself from this cycle.

Respondent 5 described how she was enlisted to resolve conflicts between her mother and younger sister:

"Mom asked me to have a serious talk with her... that I would put her on the right path, even though that's her responsibility, not mine. I felt like I was her parent, not her sister."

The same situation applies to the respondent 7:

"I am always asked to talk with my younger sister because I am the only one that she listens to and obeys to. Also, sometimes I need to facilitate the conflicts between my mother and my grandmother."

This structural role inversion of being asked to discipline and guide a younger sibling represents complete erasure of the participants' own developmental needs. They are simultaneously expected to be peers to her sister while assuming authority and responsibility of a parent. This impossible double bind creates chronic psychological strain. Additionally, when parents do not feel confident or the decision of the elder daughter does not please their ideas, they switch the definition of the elder and the daughter creating chaos in child's mind with no understanding their exact role.

Respondent 3 reported a similar pattern of being placed in the role of mediator during marital conflicts:

"They had a huge fight. And I was the one who sat there and tried to make peace between them... like, I was trying to reconcile them. Now, I have to navigate the conversation between parents and my sister because they cannot decide where she should live, so I need to balance their conflicts."

What makes this particularly point-out is the participant's implication that she was the only one attempting reconciliation. The parents themselves were unable to de-escalate and left the child to perform the emotional regulation work that adults should be capable of because they were too caught in their conflict to self-regulate and take responsibility for their children.

The Psychological Weight of Emotional Parentification

Participants consistently describe emotional parentification as more demanding than their instrumental duties. Cooking and cleaning could be completed and set aside. However, emotional responsibilities were ongoing, ambiguous, and carried a persistent sense of vigilance.

Respondent 1 described the constant emotional monitoring required in her household:

"I had to constantly regulate everyone... because, for example, Mom wants to complain about my sister, she'll tell me; my sister will complain about Mom, she'll tell me; my grandmother wants to complain about Mom and my sister, she'll tell me. But at the same time, everyone has problems with me too."

This passage reveals the exhausting multiplicity of the role: the participant is not just "container" for one's person's emotions but the central hub for the entire family's psychological distress. She receives complaints from all directions while receiving little support in return.

Additionally, the respondent described the exhausting multiplicity of her role as the family's central emotional hub:

"I have to constantly regulate everyone... because, for example, Mom wants to complain about my sister, she'll tell me; my sister will complain about Mom, she'll tell me; my grandmother wants to complain about Mom and my sister, she'll tell me. But at the same time, everyone has problems with me too."

The participant's language reveals the impossibility of her position. She is simultaneously the container for everyone's complaints and the target of their frustration. She cannot win: if she takes sides, she loses the other; if she stays neutral, she is criticized for not being supportive

enough. This psychological deadlock creates chronic emotional exhaustion that persists in adulthood.

Respondent 7 described the ongoing burden of this role, even as an adult living away from home:

"When I visit, I feel like I'm the one trying to make sure everyone is okay. I organize family outings, holiday celebrations, all the concerts, decorations..."

And it feels like if I don't do it, no one will."

This participant's account reveals how emotional parentification extends into adulthood: even when physically separated from the family, she remains psychologically responsible for family harmony. The sense of obligation has become internalized, persisting long after she left the household.

Respondent 5 described the physical and emotional pay of this regulatory role:

"When my mother would call me and start talking about her problems, I would feel this physical tightness in my chest... and I'd feel my mood just drop completely. And then she'd say, 'Oh, I ruined your mood, didn't I? I'm sorry, I just have no one else to talk to.' And I'd say, 'It's okay, it's fine.' But it wasn't fine. I'd be drained for hours afterward."

This passage captures the double burden of emotional parentification: not only must the participant absorb her mother's distress, but she must also manage her mother's guilt about burdening her. The participant's response ("It's okay, it's fine") is not honest but protective: she is regulating her mother's emotions about being emotionally demanding, even while being emotionally drained herself.

Respondent 6 described the weight of being her mother's only confidante about serious health concerns:

"My mom would share things with me that even my grandmother didn't know about—health issues, family problems... And I was the only person who knew, besides her. It was a really

heavy load to carry. I felt like I had this secret that I couldn't tell anyone, and it made me feel anxious and worried all the time."

The participant's experience reflects a profound role reversal: she becomes the person her mother turns to for support with adult problems, while she herself is still a child. The information she carries is adult information, laden with potential consequences. She cannot share it with anyone (it is not her secret to tell), but she also cannot process it effectively because she lacks the adult perspective and emotional resources to do so.

The other burden of emotional parentification is consistent guilt. Respondent 4 described the guilt she feels when she has free time:

"Yesterday I had a day where I did absolutely nothing, and in the evening, I sat there thinking, 'God, I'm such a useless piece of shit, like, I can't do anything.' And I tell my boyfriend this, and he's like, 'It's fine, you had a long week.' But I can't accept that. I end up getting up at 11:30 p.m. to iron clothes or do something, anything, just to feel like I deserve to be alive."

This passage is striking in its rawness: the participant equates inactivity with worthlessness. The guilt is not intellectual; she knows intellectually that she deserves rest, but visceral. She cannot rest without doing something to "earn" it. This is the internalization of the conditional worth she learned in childhood: her value is determined by her utility to others.

In conclusion, all the participants described the burden of being emotionally parentified by their parents.

3.2.3. Emotional climate and systematic invalidation

Analyses of the interviews revealed a specific emotional climate in participants' families characterized by instability, prohibition on expressing negative emotions, and systematic invalidation of children's feelings. This climate operated through clear behavioral patterns that participants learned and responded to with hyper vigilance. Furthermore, the climate framed the emotional state of the children in their adulthood.

The "Tiptoeing" Atmosphere: Navigating Emotional Instability

Participants described their home climate as tense and unpredictable, requiring constant monitoring of adult moods and careful self-regulation to avoid triggering negative reactions. This “walking on eggshells” dynamic became so normalized that participants often did not recognize it as problematic until much later in life.

Respondent 3 described this atmosphere with clarity:

"It was an atmosphere of constant tension and fear... if Dad was around... everyone would become quiet... we wouldn't want to make any extra sounds, because you never knew what might set him off or what he'd start a scandal about."

This passage illustrates the core mechanism of dynamic tiptoeing: the child must continuously scan the environment for potential threats (the parent’s mood) and adjust their behavior accordingly. While this hyper vigilance is adaptive for immediate safety within a chaotic household, it fails as a long-term emotion regulation strategy, imposing severe cognitive and physical costs on developmental growth. Respondent 4 described

described how she managed this dynamic by creating the appearance of constant busyness:

"I constantly created the appearance of being busy so no one would bother me. I did homework until ten o'clock because I didn't want to leave my room... I'd eat quickly and run back to my room, saying 'Oh, I have so much homework, so much homework'—even though my homework was already done at school."

Demonstrating visible evidence of “good” behavior is the tiptoeing behavior which was used by the respondent throughout her childhood experience. This strategy reveals the sophisticated survival mechanisms children develop in unstable environments. She learned to perform productivity to create a personal space and gain some personal time, sacrificing genuine rest and authentic self-expression for safety.

Respondent 5 described how her father’s mood could determine the emotional trajectory of the entire evening:

"In the evening, I'd put a plate on the table. And his opinion would determine my entire mood for the night. It had to be not too salty, not too burnt, not too dry, not too wet, everything had to be perfect. He didn't even have to say anything; I could see it on his face if something was wrong, and I'd know I'd messed up."

The participant's hyper vigilance here is striking: she doesn't need explicit criticism to feel the weight of judgement; she reads it in micro-expressions and subtle cues. This constant monitoring of adult emotional states becomes a full-time job, consuming psychological energy that should be available for age-appropriate and growth.

Participant 6 described her experience with hyper vigilance a bit differently:

I mean, if he didn't see me coloring my eyebrows, then for him it's like—well, he just turns a blind eye to everything except what he sees directly. Right. So, he saw that I was calling him from a rental apartment, not from a dorm. And it's like he... He probably realized that I didn't live in a dorm, but he kept thinking that I did. So, I had to just hide the process because then he wanted to control."

This passage shows that here the father was very controlling not given enough space for a child to develop emotional stability. Respondent 6 had to do everything quietly, so the father would not notice. Besides that, she mentioned constant control over her grades, career choices and actions around him.

Prohibition on Negative Emotions and Emotional Invalidation

A consistent theme across all interviews was the prohibition on expression negative emotions, particularly sadness, fear, and anger. All seven respondents said those three emotions were prohibited to express in the household. Emotions that made adults uncomfortable or required emotional labor were systematically suppressed, leaving children without healthy environment to process distress.

The most frequently reported parental response to crying was a dismissive phrase that appeared in every interview. This phrase is quite common among children of CIS countries as if

one of motto's used in households:

"Cry, cry. More you cry, less you piss."

This common phrase functions as a form of emotional invalidation that carries multiple layers of meaning: it minimizes the child's distress, frames emotional expression as weakness, and offers no comfort or guidance for processing the underlying pain. However, besides ironic phrases to dismiss emotional vulnerability of a child, the aggression was a second type of approach.

Respondent 5 described her parents' aggressive reactions to sadness:

"You idiot, what are you crying for? ... What, did someone die or something? ... There was always this aggression toward crying. I never understood why. I mean, I'm crying, so what? What's it to you?"

Here the participant phrases the fundamental confusion that characterizes emotional invalidation: the child's emotional experience is not simply ignored but actively attacked, creating a double bind where the child is punished for expressing emotions they cannot control.

Respondent 1 recalled that she could not even cry in front of her mother:

"I can't cry because she'd say: 'What are you crying about? Stop it, don't be weak.' I couldn't tell my grandmother either because she'd have the exact same reaction."

The participant's isolation is complete: both primary caregivers respond to her distress with the same invalidation, leaving her with no safe space to process emotions. This pattern forces the child to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, often involving hiding emotional expression altogether. Additionally, she points out the similar reaction of her grandmother that implies the transgenerational transmission of coping mechanisms and reactions to the normal emotions, and, thus, inability to process them.

Anger was similarly used as a reaction to prohibit emotions. Respondent 6 noted that:

"Dad would get even angrier. He'd get all red, raging like a bull... like if I showed anger, he'd explode."

Respondent 4 described the consequences of expressing anger in her household:

"If I showed any kind of anger as a kid, I'd get hit right away, of course."

The same reaction was noted by the respondent 7:

"Whenever I cried, my mother would get even angrier as if she saw that it triggers me. My grandmother behaved the same towards my mother. However, she played a good policeman when conflict was between three of us and a bad policeman when I had a disagreement with her."

This equation of anger with punishment creates a powerful inhibition against assertiveness that continues into adulthood. Participants learned that expressing legitimate frustration or trying to protect boundary violations would result not in resolution but in escalation of conflict where they will be blamed.

The absence of Validation and Physical Affection

Beyond specific prohibitions on negative emotions, participants described a broader absence of emotional validation. Parents failed to acknowledge, name or normalize their children's feelings. This created severe emotional hunger that participants often did not recognize until they encountered alternative models of family functioning.

Respondent 5 articulated what she had missed most:

"I lacked compassion, I think... I really needed them to put themselves in my shoes... to be a little more understanding. And some tenderness, too... some understanding from them."

The participant was longing for "tenderness" and "understanding" reveals the emotional deprivation that characterized her childhood. She wanted not material provision but emotional presence that would recognize her humanity and her utility.

This longing was described by Respondent 1 in recollection of her reaction to parental care during illness:

"I remember one time when I got up in the morning, and I was all red, I had a fever. They called an ambulance; I was lying there with an IV, and Mom was right there over me... 'How are

you? Is everything okay?' And I was like, 'Yeah, yeah.' And I was lying there, and I remember thinking, 'Yes, this is it... she's actually focusing on me right now.' I got sick because it was the only time I felt like she was really present."

The participant's realization that sickness provided the only reliable route to maternal attention reveals a devastating relational pattern. Her mother was capable of care, but only under conditions of crisis. Health and normal functioning, ironically, deprived the participant of the emotional connection she craved.

The respondent 2 described a similar pattern of conditional love, where gifts substituted for genuine affection:

"They bought me new things, and it sort of drowned out the feeling of being unloved the fact that they bought me everything made me feel like I was a loved child."

This substitution of parental love indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of children's needs. While participants were materially provided for, they were emotionally starved. The gifts functioned less as expressions of love and more as compensation for absence.

The Emergence of Conditional Self-Worth

The cumulative effect of these invalidating experiences was a deep-seated conviction that participants' worth was contingent on their usefulness. This internalization of conditional love persisted into adulthood and became a central challenge in their emotional lives.

Participant 4 articulated this conviction with painful clarity:

"I still can't get rid of this... yesterday I had a day where I did absolutely nothing, and in the evening, I sat there thinking, 'God, I'm such a useless piece of shit, like, I can't do anything.' And I tell my boyfriend this, and he's like, 'It's fine, you had a long week.' But I can't accept that."

The participant's inability to rest without guilt reflects the deeply set belief that her value is tied to her productivity. This is the psychological legacy of instrumental parentification, where her childhood was defined by what she did for others rather than who she was.

Participant 1 described the physical sensation of this conditional self-worth:

“If I don't feel like I've earned my rest, I don't give it to myself without guilt... Yesterday I didn't have that feeling, that I had been productive enough to rest, so I felt like I didn't deserve a day off.”

The participant 7 described similar experience:

“I look at my friend and really envy her — in the sense that she can easily relax without feeling guilty, whereas if I spend the whole day doing nothing, I immediately feel terrible. And the next day, I just do everything I can to avoid relaxing.”

This inability to rest without earned permission reflects the internalization of parental expectations. The participants have become their own strict controller, perpetuating the cycle of self-judgement even when no external authority is present.

3.2.4. Emotional Regulation in Childhood and Adulthood: From Suppression to Relational Coping

All participants demonstrated significant shifts in emotion regulation strategies between childhood and adulthood, reflecting both the developmental consequences of parentification and the conscious effort many have made to develop more adaptive approaches. The trajectory from maladaptive childhood strategies to more adaptive adult approaches reveal both the persistence of early patterns and the possibility of change through awareness and alternative relationships.

Emotion Regulation Strategies in Childhood

In childhood, participants primarily relied on maladaptive strategies, reflecting the impossibility of expressing emotions openly and the absence of emotional support. The strategies they developed were adaptations to an environment in which their own feelings were seen as problematic or burdensome.

The most common childhood strategy was suppression and concealment of emotions. The active hiding of emotional expression was used to avoid negative parental reactions. Respondent 2 describes it in a very clear way:

"I never talked about it when I was sad. Because there was no point. I knew what my mother would say, and it wouldn't help."

Respondent 1 described the physical experience of this suppression:

"I always cried secretly into my pillow at home."

This hiding of emotions indicates an adaptive response to an environment where emotional expression is dangerous. The child learns that certain feelings are only safe to express when no one is watching. Respondent 2 reveals that she learnt that showing her mother's emotions would not soothe her pain, so she had to learn by herself how to soothe her pain.

Several participants described forms of self-harm or somatic release as additional childhood coping mechanisms. Respondent 1 described a pattern of directing anger inward:

"I would hit things in my room. I would scream into my pillow. Sometimes I would hit myself. I wanted to hurt myself, just to get the emotions out somehow."

Respondent 3 described the instinct to physically remove herself from conflict:

"When I heard someone starting to scream, I just had to get out of there somehow... I'd go hide somewhere, anywhere, just to not be in the line of fire."

Respondent 2 described the accident with self-harm coping mechanism:

"I was so angry, I was in so much pain, that I couldn't think of anything better to do than to slam my hand against the door. But I missed and hit the glass instead. Then they had to stitch up a huge cut. Now, every time I'm in pain, it's as if I'm deliberately pressing on it."

Respondent 7 described her self-harm coping mechanism because of prolonged suppression of emotions:

"I was like a vase. I held everything in, kept it all inside, and then I'd explode when no one was around. I'd cry, punch the wall, scratch my legs, and then lie there staring at the ceiling. My emotions would freeze for a day or two, and then it would start all over again. These outbursts happened about once every six months."

These physical responses represent attempts to regulate overwhelming emotions in the absence of external support. The body becomes the site of coping, whether through self-inflicted pain or physical withdrawal. The hidden danger of this type of behavior is a life risk as was described by respondent 2 and respondent 7.

For some respondents, retreating into fantasy provided an escape from emotional distress. Respondent 5 described childhood fantasies of being injured or gravely ill:

"I would lie in bed at night, staring at the wall, and I'd imagine getting hit by a car... having a terrible accident... and then everyone would love me."

This fantasy that only catastrophe would bring love and attention she craved reveals the profound emotional deprivation underlying her childhood experience. The participant learned to equate care with crisis.

Additionally, all seven respondents reported the following escaping strategy: going for a very long walk and listening to music while daydreaming about different life or different scenarios.

Emotion Regulation Strategies in Adulthood

In adulthood, participants described a transition toward more adaptive emotion regulation strategies, though childhood patterns often persisted. The most prominent shift, reported by all seven participants ($N = 7$), was a transition from total emotional suppression toward relational processing - seeking emotional validation and acceptance from romantic partners and close friends that were absent in childhood.

While all participants ($P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7$) emphasized that sharing their internal states with trusted individuals served as a primary mechanism for emotional regulation, they illustrated this shared pattern through distinct relational contexts. Participant 2 described this shift within her marital relationship:

"Now I talk to my husband... he listens to me... he says, 'Don't worry, we'll figure it out together, everything will be fine.'"

Participant 4 reflected on overcoming the shame associated with expressing negative emotions to friends:

“When I have some kind of negative emotion, I can at least talk to people about it now. I have people I can tell without feeling any shame at all. And not worrying that they're going to think I'm crazy.”

Similarly, Participant 7 echoed the sentiments of the rest of the sample (P1, P3, P5, P6), highlighting the necessity of verbalizing distress to prevent internal shutdown:

“It's important for me to talk to my close friends about how I feel so I can respond appropriately; otherwise, I start to shut myself off and seethe inside.”

This shift from suffering in silence to relational sharing is perhaps the most significant developmental change participants reported. Having someone who listens without judgement, who validates rather than dismisses is a corrective emotional experience that begins to repair the deficits of childhood.

Two participants reported consciously working to shift their perspective on situations, using cognitive strategies to manage emotional responses.

Participant 4 detailed using reframing to de-escalate emotional triggers:

“I try to give an explanation for why she's acting this way, and try to be the better person... try to be calmer... I think, 'Okay, she says things in the heat of the moment, she doesn't really mean it.'”

Participant 5 similarly described rationalizing another person's motives to regulate her own reaction:

“Sometimes I realize I'm taking something too personally, and I tell myself, 'Okay, they're not actually reacting to you, this is about something else.’”

Additionally, multiple participants identified physical movement as an intuitive method for discharging emotional tension. Participant 6 described using running to process anger:

“When I'm really angry, I go for a run... it helps me process the emotions better.”

Participant 5 described a visceral, somatic release of built-up frustration:

“I go to the bathroom, and I shake it out... I dance, I punch the air; I scream out the emotions... and that helps me get the physical tension out.”

Participants 1 and 7 likewise noted that engaging in regular sports or taking long walks served as essential routine strategies for restoring emotional baseline.

Despite these adaptive shifts, all seven participants ($N = 7$) acknowledged the persistent nature of childhood survival responses when triggered by boundary threats or interpersonal confrontation. Specifically, participants reported immediate somatic distress—such as tremors, rapid heart rate, and acute anxiety - whenever attempting to assert personal boundaries or address disagreements.

Participant 3 described the involuntary physical impact of setting boundaries:

“Whenever I even think about saying 'no' or defending my boundary, my heart starts pounding like crazy and my hands literally shake. My body reacts before my mind even processes what I'm saying.”

Furthermore, when exposed to raised voices or verbal aggression, participants described experiencing an involuntary "freeze" response followed by temporary withdrawal. Participant 5 detailed this reaction:

“If someone starts screaming at me, I just completely freeze. I shut down, I can't respond in the moment at all. I have to go into complete silence for hours just to process what happened and calm my body down.”

3. 2. 5 Transgenerational Transmission of Patterns and the Post-Soviet Context

Analysis of the data showed the presence of repeating behavioral patterns transmitted across generations, as well as the significant role of the post-Soviet cultural-historical context in shaping experiences of parentification. Participants described their own experience as a part of a larger intergenerational cycle that they are only beginning to recognize and challenge.

Repeating Family Patterns

Participants (N=4) noted that the patterns they experienced in childhood were present in their parents' and grandparents' generations. These patterns include being overburdened, having their emotions dismissed, or being treated as "small adults". Additionally, the grandparents' family models were quite the same as their parents' model, and their grandmothers tend to recreate the same family model that they had in their mind. The grandmothers were usually the eldest daughters themselves.

Respondent 1 reflected on her mother's childhood:

"She was a caretaker for her younger siblings... she had to grow up too fast... My grandmother had three apartments in Almaty, but she was completely absent emotionally. And my mom learned from her that you just don't show weakness."

The participant recognizes a pattern that repeats across three generations: emotional distance, overburdening of eldest daughters, and the suppression of emotional expression.

Respondent 5 described observing the same pattern in her younger sister who has to take care of younger siblings since she left:

"Now I see it happening with my sister... she's becoming more withdrawn; she won't talk about her problems... she thinks nobody will support her with her problems. It's like watching myself go through it again."

This observation is particularly painful because the participant recognizes her sister's distress as similar to her own yet feels powerless to intervene. The cycle repeats even with awareness.

As a transgenerational family model, it was described also by participant 7:

"My mom was the oldest in the family; she always had to keep an eye on the younger ones to make sure nothing happened to them, and even now: my sister got into trouble and had immediately turned to her sister instead of her mother. My grandmother was also the oldest; she had nothing but demands. Her mother made her drop out of school after ninth grade so she

could look after her younger siblings. But my grandmother loved to learn—and she read a lot in secret, making sure her grandmother didn't find out."

The respondent 7 clearly articulates that this type of family model is the only type of family model they saw in their life. It echoes the idea that only third generation has enough resources to break the cycle because they are capable to look for answers and information.

The most striking example of intergenerational repetition is the exact same phrase ("grown-up mare (cow)/ «взрослая кобыла») used by grandmothers in different post-Soviet countries to rationalize the overburdening of their granddaughters. This shared linguistic framing suggests a common cultural script, not isolated family dysfunction.

The role of the Post-Soviet Context

All seven participants ($N = 7$) explicitly linked their childhood experiences of parentification to the broader post-Soviet context, identifying a shared cultural and historical legacy that shaped their family dynamics.

Participants highlighted how societal instability following the collapse of the Soviet Union impacted household functioning and parental emotional availability. Participant 3 reflected on this systemic influence:

"I think the political situation also affected how everything was... like how our parents reacted to things, how they parented."

Economic precarity during the 1990s emerged as a recurring narrative in participants' accounts of their family histories. Participant 6 described her mother's recollection of severe financial distress:

"In the 1990s, my mother was the sole breadwinner for her whole family... they all lived on her university stipend... there was just no money, and everyone was stressed."

Furthermore, participants noted that the cultural standards of the 1990s reinforced unequal expectations among siblings, where eldest daughters were routinely expected to sacrifice

their personal desires for the family unit. Participant 7 recounted a story shared by her mother, which illustrated how transgenerational patterns of sacrifice were passed down:

“My mom told me this story: We weren’t poor—just an ordinary family. Mom and Dad both worked, and we had an apartment and a car. But even so, we had just enough money to get nothing more. I remember starting to work when I was sixteen because I wanted to be fashionable and beautiful. I bought myself my first pair of leather shoes with the money I’d earned through hard work. And my younger sister was about to have her high school graduation. My mom took the shoes away and gave them to my sister, saying that I would earn enough to buy new ones. And when I cried about it, she called me selfish. My sister always got everything, while I had to sacrifice myself.”

As illustrated in this account, participants perceived that their mothers had internalized a culture of female self-sacrifice, which was subsequently transmitted to the participants themselves.

Normalization and Denial as Intergenerational Mechanisms

A crucial mechanism sustaining the transgenerational cycle was the normalization of parentification across generations. Because these dynamics were widespread within their social surroundings, all seven participants ($N = 7$) reported that they did not recognize their childhood responsibilities as problematic until encountering alternative family models in adulthood.

Participant 2 described this pervasive normalization:

“I didn't realize it wasn't normal because everyone around me was doing the same thing... all my friends' families were like this... so I thought, 'This is just how it is.'”

According to participants, this normalization was maintained in adulthood through parental denial or minimization of past events. When participants attempted to discuss their childhood experiences with their parents, they reported encountering defensive reactions or explicit rejection of their memories.

Participant 5 described a representative exchange with her mother:

"I told her, 'You used to hit us.' And she says, 'That never happened.' And I'm thinking, 'Okay.'"

Participants reported that encountering maternal denial prevented emotional resolution, leaving them to navigate the reality of their childhood experiences independently.

Transgenerational Transmission and Breaking the Cycle

Participants described a strong sense of intergenerational continuity, recognizing that their parents' emotional limitations were rooted in their own childhood emotional deprivation.

Participant 1 articulated this intergenerational pattern:

"My mother didn't have her mother around when she needed her... so she didn't know how to be a mother herself. She never had that experience of being loved by a mother, so she couldn't give it to me. It just passes down from one generation to the next."

Despite acknowledging this lineage of emotional deprivation, participants expressed a conscious commitment to interrupting the cycle in their adult lives. Rather than passively repeating past family dynamics, participants described utilizing their awareness to establish different relational patterns with partners and future children.

As Participant 2 noted regarding her family planning:

"I see now what I want to do differently. I know what I don't want to repeat. Me and my husband are planning to have a child, so we subscribed for psychological parental courses."

3.2.6. The Distinctiveness of Post-Soviet Experience: Cultural Norms Over Economic Determinism

Previous literature on parentification has frequently emphasized economic hardship as a primary structural driver of role reversal (e.g., Macfie et al., 2005). However, the qualitative accounts derived from the present interviews challenge this assumption, demonstrating that material deprivation was not the primary driver of parentification within this sample of eldest daughters.

Economic Stability Across Households

Four participants (P1, P2, P4, P7) explicitly reported that their families were not living in poverty during their childhood. Instead, they described their household financial standing as stable, comfortable, or above average relative to their local contexts.

For these participants, parentification occurred despite financial security. Participant 4 reflected on her childhood material conditions versus her emotional environment:

“I had money, I had gifts, I had everything I wanted, but I didn’t have parents who were emotionally available.”

As Participant 4 elaborated, material provision was maintained, yet emotional neglect and caretaking expectations remained high. Participant 7 similarly described a household where financial resources were sufficient to provide luxury experiences, yet structural caretaking expectations persisted:

“My father wasn't around, but my mother worked a lot. Not because we didn't have enough to live on, but to give my sister and me the very best—like a trip to Switzerland when I was 13.”

Even when describing earlier periods of lower income, participants noted that material scarcity itself did not dictate their caretaking duties; rather, gendered expectations regarding the role of the eldest daughter were the primary influence.

Material Provision as a Tool of Enforced Compliance

Rather than mitigating parental demands, material support was experienced by three participants (P1, P2, P7) as a mechanism of emotional leverage and control.

Participant 1 detailed how financial provision by her grandmother was utilized to enforce behavioral compliance:

“She constantly reminds me that she gives me everything, that she provides for my life, that I studied in Europe... so I should behave properly and be grateful to her every day... I feel real financial pressure because it's brought up every single time.”

Participant 2 described a similar dynamic regarding maternal gifts:

“My mother would give us gifts and then use it against us later. ‘I bought you that dress, I paid for that trip, and this is how you treat me?’ It wasn’t a gift—it was a down payment on future compliance.”

For these participants, material provision functioned not as a buffer against strain, but as an obligation that intensified emotional parentification.

Cultural Normalization Over Economic Necessity

Participants highlighted that their caretaking roles were driven by cultural expectations surrounding the eldest daughter rather than economic necessity. The shared perception that "everyone did it" framed these obligations as normative cultural duties.

Participant 2 articulated this pervasive norm:

“It was normal because everyone around me had the same experience... all the families I knew had the same pattern... the eldest daughter was the ‘little mother.’”

Participant 1 similarly attributed these expectations to post-Soviet cultural socialization:

“It’s just the post-Soviet culture, it’s the mentality... you know you’re the eldest daughter, you’re the helper, you don’t complain, you just do what’s expected of you.”

3. 2.7. Cultural Normalization: The Mechanism of Social Comparison

A prominent pattern identified across all seven interviews (N = 7) was the mechanism of cultural normalization through social comparison. Participants reported perceiving their family dynamics as normative during childhood because similar structural roles and disciplinary practices were observed in peer households.

Normalization Through Social Comparison

Participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5) noted that comparing their home lives to peer families reinforced the belief that their burden was universal. Participant 2 described this comparative process:

“I didn’t understand it was abnormal because everyone I knew was doing the same thing... all my friends’ families were like this... so I figured, ‘This is just how it is.’”

Participant 3 expressed a similar sense of resignation derived from observing peers:

“In the families I knew, all the families with lots of children had the same pattern—the eldest was the most important person to the mom, the helper, the one who did everything. And I saw it happening in those families, and I thought, 'Okay, this is my fate.'”

This normalization extended to severe disciplinary measures. Participant 4 described normalizing physical punishment through peer interaction:

“I remember being in the bathroom with my best friend, and I pulled down my pants to show her my blue ass from the belt. And she said, 'What?' And I said, 'Yeah...' I thought it was normal because everyone got hit.”

Delayed Recognition and Alternative Family Models

Recognition of family dysfunction was consistently delayed until adulthood, occurring only when participants were exposed to alternative, non-dysfunctional family structures.

Participant 1 detailed the emotional shock of discovering non-violent family dynamics in adulthood:

“I discovered it wasn't a normal experience when I discovered that not everyone grew up like that... I was shocked when I saw people who had normal families. I'd say, 'Wait, you didn't get hit as a kid? You could actually express your emotions without getting told to shut up?’”

Participant 3 recalled a virtually identical moment of realization:

“I was in shock when I saw other families... like, wait, you didn't get hit as a kid? Could you express your feelings? You could say no? What the hell?”

Participant 5 described how exposure to a partner's secure family background highlighted her own internalized expectations:

“My boyfriend comes from a completely different family. He was never hit. He's calm. We took those attachment style tests, and he always comes out as 'secure.' And I'm just like, 'How is that possible?’”

3.3. Summary of Findings

The phenomenological analysis of the accounts provided by eldest daughters in the post-Soviet context reveals a structural model of parentification, emotional regulation, and relational dynamics. Across all seven participants (N=7, 100%), the experience of childhood parentification was not a one-time occurred event, but a chronic, culturally normalized framework that fundamentally shaped their psychological development, emotional identity, and adult functioning.

Rather than being driven by concrete socioeconomic deprivation, the parentification experienced by these women was primarily structural and sociocultural. It was enforced through strict, gendered expectations placed on the eldest daughter and reinforced by pervasive emotional invalidation (e.g., culturally embedded idioms and emotional dismissiveness). In response to dysfunctional parental dynamics, participants adapted by adopting a "child-hero" framework taking on both instrumental and emotional responsibilities, such as mediating parental conflicts and regulating their parents' emotional states. This early hyper-responsibility resulted in a profound loss of authentic childhood and forced maturation.

The psychological impact of this upbringing might have distorted the participants' adult emotional regulation profiles. Having learned that their own emotional expressions were either dangerous or felt as burden, participants tended to rely on maladaptive strategies such as emotional suppression, somatic containment, and compensatory mechanisms of excessive cognitive and behavioral control. In adulthood, these internalized dynamics manifest as a persistent conflict between a need for deep relational connection and a strong fear of vulnerability, often driving participants toward hyper-autonomy, parent-child relational reenactments with romantic partners, or hyper-vigilant caretaking.

Finally, the findings highlight a growing phenomenological awareness of transgenerational transmission among participants. While participants recognize that their parents reproduced emotional neglect and parentification due to their own unaddressed childhood trauma and historical stressors, they demonstrate a critical psychological boundary-

setting process. By processing these patterns through therapy and self-reflection, the participants express a clear, deliberate intention to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of emotional burden.

Together, these findings depict parentification in the post-Soviet context as a powerful developmental catalyst that forces early emotional self-sufficiency at the cost of emotional suppression, setting the stage for the theoretical synthesis and contextual analysis provided in the following Discussion chapter.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter focuses on a discussion of the research study and the conclusions made from the findings that were presented in Chapter 3. To be precise, it presents a synopsis of the research question, discussion of the domains explored and identified in the interview, connections to the theoretical framework, reflection and transgenerational patterns, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

In Western psychological literature, parentification is perceived as a developmental violation that interferes with the child's ability to develop a clear sense of self and to maintain healthy boundaries in adulthood (Jurkovic, 1997; Hooper, 2007; Byng-Hall, 2002). However, there is a significant gap in understanding how this phenomenon operates within the unique socio-historical context of CIS countries. Historically, following generations in this region faced chronic collective trauma, economic instability, and rigid cultural schema that systematically normalized role reversal between caregivers and children (Danieli, 2015; Hall, 2025; Yehuda et al., 2016). By exploring the unique experiences of eldest daughters from this region, this study focused on exploring the long-term emotional and relational consequences of both the cultural and the family dynamic.

The participants in this study were given a unique opportunity to use their voices to share their true and lived experiences of being a parentified child at a young age when it is clearly normalized in society. They were able to express their feelings, share stories and finally acknowledge their vulnerability and the feelings of injustice of becoming a parent for everyone while being a child. The research also explored the participants' experiences of being a part of Soviet legacy and their understanding of intergenerational trauma.

4.1. Discussion of Research Question

The primary focus of this study was to explore the lived experience of young adult women and the emotional dynamics of their families, growing up in post-Soviet countries as eldest daughters. The underlying hypothesis was that these young women might have

experienced parentification, which subsequently led to changes in their emotion regulation capacities.

The participants expressed the ways in which they experienced their lives across five main domains: *childhood family environment and role, emotional climate and parental responses, emotion regulation in childhood, current emotion regulation and coping, and reflection on transgenerational patterns.*

The eldest daughters shared their unique experiences with great willingness to revisit their childhood stories and feelings. Although not all participants experienced instrumental parentification, all seven eldest daughters were subjects of pervasive emotional parentification, which highlighted a consistent pattern of altered emotion regulation strategies. They experienced roles as family mediators, emotional containers for their mothers, or emotional facilitators managing their fathers' anger; in several cases, they essentially became parental figures for their younger siblings. Being chronically overburdened by their parents' emotional needs, the participants were left with limited psychological resources for themselves, deprived of a supportive parental figure in return.

Furthermore, the participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their lived experiences, particularly as they had faced continuous invalidation due to the societal normalization of parentification. They shared a consistent feeling of injustice, which transformed into a heightened need to pursue fairness in adulthood. Experiencing systemic unfairness during childhood appears to have developed a heightened internal “fairness compass”. Additionally, in adulthood, they indicated a clear pattern of emotion regulation that was adaptive for survival in childhood but became maladaptive in adult life.

Domain 1: Childhood family environment and role

The childhood family environment was quite typical for post-Soviet countries and was described by the participants across the interviews. Mostly, the typical post-Soviet family consisted of a mother who single-handedly managed the whole family and household, and a

father who was either physically absent or didn't help the mother in any way, except for instilling fear in the children. This type of family usually consists of two or more children, where the eldest children had to take care of younger siblings. Usually, the eldest daughters become helpers because of gender expectations and cultural frames of what girls are supposed to be.

The childhood family emotional environment was also persistent across the interviews. The participants shared that the environment was chaotic, unpredictable, and felt like walking on shattered glass. In some cases, the reaction to a mistake was physical violence.

The instrumental role of the eldest daughters was being "a little helper" for their mothers, which included taking on her role when she was at work or helping her when she was at home. Usually, the responsibilities do not match the age of the girls, ranging from cleaning the house and cooking food for the whole family to taking care of younger siblings (feeding, changing diapers, walking outside). These kinds of responsibilities were not used as occasional help in times of need, but as persistent child responsibilities. The number of non-age-appropriate responsibilities took away the time and resources of eldest daughters to just be children. Additionally, the eldest daughters had to keep up with their studies and school as well as attend specific clubs. The overbearing responsibilities in childhood made them question their parents when they saw how their siblings were brought up. The difference in upbringing was the foundation of a persistent feeling of injustice.

The emotional parentified role of the eldest daughters was being an emotional container for their parents' problems, difficulties, and emotional chaos in times of need. Usually, they were a safe place for their mothers, who had too much on their plates, leading to their need for someone who would listen to them, support them, and navigate their emotions. However, the emotions of the daughters were prohibited and invalidated. Additionally, whenever a child tried to share her personal problems and difficulties, the reaction was negative, and they quickly understood that they had only themselves to rely on.

An interesting role in the household belonged to the grandmother. Four of the seven participants shared that their grandmothers are still present in their lives by controlling them or playing an impactful role. This added an additional role of emotional mediator, where the eldest daughters had to develop a special strategy to mediate the relationship between the grandmother and mother, which highlighted the emotional infantilism.

Connection to Literature Review.

The findings of this domain correlate with the previous research on parentification conducted in Western Europe, while it adds a specific layer of the post-Soviet socio-cultural context. Jurkovic (1997) and Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) described parentification as structural distortion of family boundaries, where a child is forced to adopt caretaking roles which are beyond their developmental abilities. In line with Byng-Hall's (2002) framework, the participants experienced both instrumental and emotional role reversal. However, in case of the participants studied the role of parentification took a destructive tone where it imposed chronic, age-inappropriate burdens that led to low self-esteem, loss of childhood and depression (or depressive moods).

Additionally, Byng-Hall's (2002) framework described replicative and corrective scripts. While the parents of parentified children decided to replicate the scripts and imposed the roles that they were assigned as they were younger, the participants gave a vow to do the exact opposite of what they experienced (corrective scripts). The participants went to psychological practices or self-reflection to raise their awareness and avoid repeating their experience with their children.

The feeling of injustice described by the participants aligns with Jurkovic's (2004) model of moral development and relational fairness. The number of responsibilities assigned to children did not equal to the level of parental care or recognition from their sight. Additionally, a lack of recognition of childhood loss at later age enhanced the feeling of injustice as well as a perceived

contrast observed by the eldest daughters between their younger siblings and their upbringing which aligns with the theory of Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark (1973).

The role of father as physically absent or emotionally terrifying with overburdened mothers aligns with research on family functioning during macro-historical crises (Conger & Elder, 1994). In post-soviet literature, socio-economic crises and traditional gender roles typically transmitted all domestic responsibilities onto women who then partially transmitted on their eldest daughters as if they were supplementary parents (Kibitina, 2018).

Domain 2: Emotional climate and parental responses

The participants of the study described the emotional climate in their families as a hostile emotional climate in which they had to learn how to navigate their emotional responses and emotional reactions. Although they were expected to be emotional containers for other members of the family, they could not express their emotions in their families, and some emotions were even prohibited.

For the eldest daughters, such an atmosphere did not meet their need to have a trusted adult for their feelings. For them, it was impossible to share anything that could possibly trigger a negative reaction from their parents. Fear of being treated poorly or facing invalidation of their experience added to the overall emotional climate. It was not only about the events happening in the eldest daughters' lives, but also about their intrinsic feelings, fears, and thoughts, even if they were bordering on depressive thoughts. Negative feelings were prohibited since the reaction was negative. The eldest daughters preferred to share their vulnerabilities with their close friends or to hide them inside themselves, so no one would know.

The emotional climate in the participants' families was heavily dependent on their parents' moods, especially on their mothers'. Particularly, they described that if their mother was angry, frustrated, or felt unwell, everyone in the household suffered or had to develop adaptive strategies to soothe their parents or avoid them until the emotional chaos was gone. Therefore, the participants described that the emotional climate could change when one of the parents was

present, as if it were getting more tense. It depended on who was more emotionally unstable in the family — father or mother. Sometimes it was both.

The eldest daughters were prohibited from expressing anger freely because it was followed by a confrontation between them and their parents where anger faced even more anger. Such disagreements could end with physical abuse from their parents. Thus, the eldest daughters had to hide their anger and process it differently.

Connection to Literature Review

The lived experiences described in this domain strongly align with Linehan's (1993) concept of the invalidating environment. It was described as an environment in which an individual's internal emotional experiences are constantly dismissed, invalidated or met with punishment. In such environments, children fail to learn how to identify, communicate, or modulate their emotions effectively which we will see in the part of emotional regulation domain. Morris et al. (2017) described the consequences of invalidating environment for a child: development of hyper vigilance rather than secure attachment in future.

The participants' need to constantly monitor parental moods (walking on shattered glass) aligns with psychological literature of traumatized children who tend to develop hyper-attunement, or, in other words, emotional scanning (Van der Kolk, 2014). When parents fail to act as external emotion regulators for their children, the child becomes responsible for regulating the adult's emotional state to keep the emotional safety for themselves (Jurkovic, 1997; Hooper, 2007). The fear of severe consequences such as physical abuse or anger outbursts is described by Gross (2015) as a normal reaction to emotional chaos that leads to emotional suppression as primary survival mechanism.

Domain 3: Emotion regulation strategies in childhood

Emotion regulation strategies in childhood were used to regulate the chaotic emotional environment in the family. The participants described how different types were used during their childhood to soothe their parents, de-escalate conflicts, or avoid them. These strategies were

rarely used to soothe or navigate their own emotions. Thus, in adulthood, they experienced trouble with the recognition of their personal feelings, but really mastered the understanding of other people's needs, which was essential in childhood to survive.

During conflicts, the participants mostly chose to hide in their rooms and wait until the conflict was over. This type of avoidance helped them avoid aggressive reactions from their parents if they tried to defend their boundaries, needs, or thoughts. Hidden in their rooms, they used strategies to calm themselves down through hitting something, listening to music loudly in their headphones, or in desperate attempts to suppress their emotions and feelings. The participants shared that they listened to music in their headphones specifically not to hear what their parents were saying during the conflict. This type of story strongly indicates avoidance and suppression strategies.

The participants shared their sorrow over being unable to find a safe place to share their feelings until later — with their friends. Particularly, they did not have anyone who could help soothe them or help them navigate their emotions. Eventually, the suppression of emotions and insufficient self-regulation (since suppression and avoidance did not help in the long term) led to emotional breakdowns or conditions where they were crying and crying until they felt numb. The participants noted that even during these breakdowns, they had to hide to avoid the escalation of the existing conflict. However, for some, these crises were the only way to reach out to their parents.

As we can see, the most common emotion regulation strategy was attentional deployment. The eldest daughters chose to deploy their attention to something that brought them joy or kept their minds busy for a period, which created a foundation for later suppression. After the end of a conflict, the participants took on the role of mediator or facilitator to soothe their mother or father and bring harmony to their household.

The eldest daughters shared which emotions were prohibited in the household and which they had to suppress firmly: anger, fear, frustration, and being tired. Intrinsic emotion regulation

strategies were used mostly to regulate those four emotions. Happiness or positive emotions were not prohibited and were even expected. Especially here, expressive suppression was widely used where they needed to hide their real feelings and play the role of being satisfied and happy. If expressiveness was not suppressed, they met a negative reaction from their parents, ranging from shouting to being beaten with a belt. The switch from intrinsic emotion regulation to extrinsic happened in this case, since they had to regulate the emotions of their parents to calm down the conflict.

Connection to Literature Review

The findings in this domain align strongly with James Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation (Gross, 1998; 2015). The findings illustrate how constant emotional invalidation shapes specific development of emotion regulations which echo across participants. According to Gross (1998, 2015), emotion regulation strategies range from the antecedent-focused strategies such as situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change to response-focused such as expressive suppression.

The participants' experience illustrates their reliance on attentional deployment (e.g., hiding in their rooms, listening to loud music in their headphones to drown out parental arguments, or doing distractive tasks) as an antecedent strategy to cope with household chaos. When physical or situational modification was impossible due to child status, shifting attention away from the argument served as a primary short-term solution against acute distress (Gross, 2015).

Furthermore, the findings showed an overuse of expressive suppression to inhibit such emotions as anger, fear, frustration, and exhaustion. In Linehan's (1993) framework the negative reaction of the parents towards their children in time of distress quickly teaches a child that expressive negative emotions escalate the conflict rather than bring comfort and understanding. In line with findings by Morris et al. (2007) on parental influences in emotion regulation, when

parents react to a child's emotional expressions with physical abuse, hostility or anger, expressive suppression becomes a necessary survival mechanism.

However, while expressive suppression and cognitive avoidance are effective tools to prevent immediate conflict and acute stress, it brings negative outcomes to a child's developments (Gross, 2002; Aldao et al., 2010). Chronic suppression leads to psychological overload, emotional numbness, and emotional breakdowns (crises), as reported by the participants in the personal emotional experience of childhood (Gross, 2002; Aldao et al., 2010).

Finally, the observed transition from intrinsic to extrinsic emotion regulation to manage parental conflict aligns with recent literature on interpersonal and extrinsic emotion regulation (Zaki & Williams, 2013; Reeck et al., 2016). In healthy family environment, the extrinsic regulation is used by the parent for the child. In parentified family dynamics, extrinsic regulation is used by the child for the parent by using intrinsic self-regulation to stabilize the adult's emotional state to secure household safety which aligns with the study conducted by Jurkovic (1997) and Hooper (2007).

Domain 4: Current emotion regulation and coping

Current experience of the eldest daughters echoes their experience in childhood, especially with their coping mechanisms and emotion regulation strategies during conflicts in young adulthood. They described not only negative outcomes of their childhood emotional environment but also the obstacles they must overcome nowadays. Additionally, the participants showed a desire to have a child later or a wish to be childfree, since they sacrificed their childhood to their younger siblings. The participants also shared that when they sought validation from their parents about their childhood, they were denied it and told that their childhood was perfect.

The eldest daughters mostly rely on co-regulation in their adulthood. It is the most effective strategy that emerged from their childhood as they slowly develop their own strength to approach their personal emotions. Co-regulation is described as their need to talk over a conflict

or negative emotions with friends or with a partner when they are sure they will not face invalidation from their side. Additionally, they need to talk it over again, and sometimes with several people about the same situation, to be able to self-regulate after that. With passing time without facing invalidation, the participants are able to self-regulate some emotions alone or describe the process of self-regulation as easier—at least they understand what they feel.

Furthermore, the participants still stick to expressive suppression before they are able to co-regulate their emotions with trusted people. At the time of conflict, their reaction is usually freezing or pretending that everything is fine until they are able to reach their trusted adult. It seems intrinsic regulation shifts to extrinsic regulation where a friend or a partner helps the participant to navigate their emotions.

The participants experience difficulties with disagreement, which echoes their parents' negative reactions. Their nervous system reacts heavily even to a small disagreement, which they try to avoid even if their comfort and personal needs/boundaries are in question. Their body reacts the same way: their hands are shaking, the body is trembling, and the heart is pounding loudly, which reminds them of a panic attack when they need to defend themselves. However, they do not experience the same reaction when they need to defend someone else. Additionally, they have trouble expressing their anger, and when they express their anger, they feel guilty for expressing it.

Hypervigilance in the participants is rooted deeply in their fear of being vulnerable, since in their childhood there was no safe place to be vulnerable. It creates a model of being responsible for other people's emotions but being unavailable to serve their own emotions. Additionally, the eldest daughters shared that being distant from their parents did not free them from being a harmony coordinator. Parents call them to ask for advice, to talk with younger siblings, or to talk over their own problems, once again ignoring their problems.

The aftermath of a need for control and hypervigilance is the inability to relax and a constant need for self-improvement. The participants described their need to do something

productive even during a long week of work because they need to feel as if they deserved their relaxation time. If they just spend time without doing anything, they feel guilt and as if they are useless. Self-worth is connected to how useful they are in their perception and the perception of others. It leads to a constant need for approval, achievements, and an overproductive style of living.

The coping mechanism or emotion regulation that is also used as attentional deployment is watching TikTok/Reels, which helps to suppress anxiety or negative emotions. In this case, short dopamine-inducing videos are used as a safe place to calm down primary emotions. However, such emotion regulation leads to a sense of guilt and self-blame because watching short-videos is not considered to be a productive way of spending time, and the eldest daughters have to self-regulate their guilt. Usually, it is self-regulated by doing something that is productive.

Lastly, the participants shared their fear of repeating the same scenario. The hyper awareness of their traumatic experience led some of the participants to psychotherapy or counselling sessions. The other participants do not have resources to raise another child since they are still involved in their sibling's life and their sacrifice of childhood that led them to become childfree. Others shared that they are going to have children later, and after psychotherapy to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Connection to Literature Review

The lived experiences of young adult participants in Domain 4 demonstrate the long-term consequences of childhood parentification and chronic emotional invalidation. Linehan's (1993) theory about invalidating environment explained that individuals raised in such environment tend to experience constant self-doubt, emotional dysregulation, and heightened dependency on external validation in childhood which aligns with the participants' need to receive validation from their partners/friends.

Furthermore, the participant's reliance on co-regulation with trusted partners or friends illustrates the consequences of not having an extrinsic regulation in their childhood. As Schore (2003) and Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) describe the consequences of parents not providing a child with safe co-regulation are the need of that child to seek compensatory attachment figures in adulthood to develop internal safety. The need to process the same situation repeatedly with several trusted individuals illustrates their struggles to create a secure base inside them to gradually shift from extrinsic co-regulation to intrinsic and independent self-regulation (Gross, 2015).

According to Van der Kolk (2014), the somatic panic reactions of the participants such as handshaking, trembling, tachycardia and freezing response triggered by mild interpersonal disagreements are rooted in physiological reactions of developmental trauma and hypervigilance. They learnt in childhood that when they tried to express themselves, unpredicted severe reaction was an answer. Additionally, in agreement with study of Jurkovic (1997, 2004) and his description of parentified individuals, the participants are able to defend others and unable to defend themselves. Their capacity for external caretaking is highly developed, whereas self-directed defense triggers expectations of being abandoned, scolded or punished (Jurkovic, 1997; 2004).

The persistent need to be productive, chronic guilt during relaxation, and conditional self-worth based on utility is strongly supported by works of Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1973) on their concept of destructive entitlement and Jurkovic's (1997) compulsive over-functioning. When in the environment of a child their value is conditioned towards their performance, help and service to the family, relaxation is a deserved achievement and not a need for a body. The reliance on short-form digital media (TikTok/Reels) as an antecedent strategy for attentional deployment (Gross, 2015) provides temporary relief from somatic reaction. However, it triggers secondary self-invalidation (guilt and self-blame) due to internalized pressure to stay constantly utile and productive.

Finally, the participants' decision to seek psychotherapy, postpone parenthood, or adopt a childfree lifestyle illustrates an active effort to stop the transgenerational transmission of trauma (Conger & Elder, 1994). Their awareness of childhood sacrifices directly influences their reproductive decisions, illustrating how the legacy of emotional parentification changes adult life decisions and creation of family.

Domain 5: Reflection and transgenerational patterns

The last domain explores the transgenerational patterns in the lived experiences of young adult women in post-Soviet countries, as well as their reflection on the past of their parents and grandparents. The participants were deeply aware of the hardships their parents faced in childhood, as well as the struggles their grandparents lived through. Additionally, they noted their awareness of the exact same behavior patterns and family dynamics being passed down and applied by their grandparents onto their parents.

Furthermore, the participants described their experience as culturally normalized. During their childhood, when they tried to understand whether what they were experiencing was normal, they looked around and saw that everyone in their environment was living through the same invalidating experiences in their households. The participants shared that their awareness began to grow as they got older, moved out, and entered new environments. In this context, cultural normalization acts as a facilitator, transmitting identical expectations, responsibilities, and roles to children across generations.

Additionally, four participants (N=4) explicitly shared that their mothers were also firstborn daughters. This points to the legacy of parentification being passed down from one generation to the next as an acceptable model of parenting, where it is culturally expected that the first daughter will act as a helper and the younger siblings are allowed to just be children.

The participants shared their reflections and their parents' stories about the rigid expectations imposed by the state, families, and society. They noted that systemic societal structures promoted the concept of a "little adult" to ensure women would start families earlier.

Societal expectations demanded that women work full-time, manage the household, and raise children simultaneously, while the eldest children — especially daughters — were expected to step in, help, obey, and show absolute compliance.

Connection to Literature Review.

The findings in Domain 5 illustrate the intersection between individual developmental psychology, systemic family theory, and historical-cultural contest. The participants' awareness of transmission of family dynamics across three generations is strongly supported by Bowen's (1978) Multigenerational Transmission Process which explains how emotional functioning, parentification, and boundary of roles diffusion are transmitted from one generation to another.

The findings that four participants' mothers were also firstborn daughters illustrate Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1973) concept of transgenerational transmission of behavioral patterns. In parentified family systems, parentification is an inherited relational script where one generation learns the parental roles from the other generation and transmits it to the next generation. As Jurkovic (1997) and Hooper (2007) noted, parents who were parentified in their own childhood often lack internalized models of protective parenting. Thus, they delegate unconsciously duties to their own eldest daughters since they view it as an acceptable and normal family dynamic. In the book of Makarenko (1978), he constantly repeats the same phrase: "we all grew up like that and look at us – we grew up normal people." This quote translates the mechanisms of transmission of acceptable family dynamics across the post-Soviet countries supported by the Soviet Government.

Furthermore, the participants' experience of widespread cultural normalization reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. The influence of the macrosystem (cultural values, political ideologies, and historical legacies) on the microsystem (the immediate family unit) is the foundation of normalizing parentification in the households. The systemic concept of the "little adult" served a functional purpose for state productivity and, thus, establishing a culture of parentification. As a result, when emotional invalidation and parentification are

normalized within a socio-cultural environment, children lack alternatives and points to compare and mistakenly perceive the norms of the family as acceptable until they leave home environment (Linehan, 1993; Conger & Elder, 1994).

4.2. Integration of Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

The findings of this study are supported by the theoretical frameworks of parental emotional immaturity and parentification proposed by Dobric and Patric (2024), Jurkovic (1997, 2004), and Hooper (2007). In line with Dobric and Patric (2024), participants' experience revealed parents who showed a consistent egocentricity, lack of empathy, and an inability to serve as extrinsic emotion regulators for their children which led to their need to have extrinsic emotion regulators in their adulthood (e.g., talking with friends about each distressful situation to soothe one's emotions).

In the literature review, the four archetypes of emotionally immature parents were mentioned: the driven/anxious parent, the control-oriented parent and the rejecting or passive parent. In the respondents' family systems, all four archetypes were observed. The driven/anxious parent was usually a mother who had to take care of everything in the household. Sometimes a driven/anxious mother was a control-oriented parent too. The first role created family chaos and demanded emotional support from the child. The second role showed rigid authority over choices and boundaries. The rejecting or passive parent was usually a father figure who remained physically present (for example, after work time) but emotionally absent, often numbed by daily domestic alcohol consumption or work stress. However, the control-oriented parent was quite an interchangeable role between mother and father.

The data confirmed that instrumental parentification (e.g., cooking, cleaning, caring for siblings) led to severe developmental aftermath, but emotional parentification was experienced as significantly more destructive and enduring. These findings are in line with Jurkovic's (2004) emphasis on perceived unfairness. Participants suffered deep psychological distress coming from the injustice of being robbed of their childhood. For example, the respondents felt unfair when

they heard a phrase that their siblings were still kids which raised a call for fairness: “I was also a kid!”. Additionally, the feeling of injustice and unfairness was enhanced by comparison of two different family backgrounds since their siblings did not endure the same. The feeling of injustice led to hypervigilant need for justice in everyday life.

Furthermore, the study highlights how parentification leads to a “loss of the Self” (Buhl, 2008; Teng et al., 2021). When participants were asked about their familial role, six out of seven resisted the label of “daughter”. Instead, the respondents identified their family role as “mother’s helpers”, “little housemaids” or “the wise ones”. This role rehearsal severely impaired their separation-individuation process. This framed their perception of their worth through value: I am worthy only if I am helpful for others. Heartbreaking thoughts from the participants was “I can be loved only if I am useful”. As it was mentioned in findings, it tied them to become “people pleaser” and several participants said it clearly because it was their primary request when they started working with psychologists.

Gross’s Process Model of Emotion Regulation: Distortion Across the Stages

James Gross’s (1998, 2015) Process Model of Emotion Regulation provides a clear scope for understanding how parentification systematically shifts emotion regulation (ER) strategies. According to Gross (2015), ER unfolds across five stages: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. The empirical findings reveal that childhood parentification fundamentally destroys each stage of emotional regulation to meet the requirements and needs of the family. In the following part of discussion section, all five stages will be discussed through childhood experience.

The first ER strategy in Gross Model is Situation Selection which answers for choosing situation which will benefit personal well-being (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Rather than choosing situations that promote personal well-being, parentified children eagerly enter high-stress family environments out of obligation or fear of parental anger, completely ignoring their personal state and feelings. In adulthood, learning helplessness (Jurkovic, 1986) distorts their

ability to remove themselves from toxic interactions such as toxic friendship, toxic romantic relationships or any type of unhealthy interactions. The extent of inability to withdraw from such situations goes to inability to withdraw from sexual interactions that are unwanted because of the childhood experience. This example was both horrifying and eye-opening, that being valuable weighs more than personal consent. Additionally, parentified adults are prone to get into relationships that create the same high-stressful environment.

Situation Modification as ER strategy is also distorted in parentified children. Instead of modifying for personal comfort, the parentified child engages in extrinsic modification. Extrinsic modification is focused on controlling external variables for someone's comfort which will bring comfort to parentified children. For example, very common for parentified daughters to become a "mother" in a group of friends and control each variable to foster a good environment. Although, it helps to avoid distress from the disagreements or someone's negative emotions, it is mentally exhausting to control everything and everyone (Gross, 2015).

Attentional deployment was also found to be distorted in the parentified respondents. Natural attentional deployment is usually described as distraction or delay of gratification (Mischel et al., 1972). However, the respondents have a high level of hypervigilance. The child cannot redirect attention inward or toward play because is permanently focused outward on scanning parental facial expressions and auditory cues for danger. However, during adulthood attentional deployment is used extensively to work with emotions: going for a run, extensive workouts and going for walk alone. Attentional deployment is persistent in adults as a primary source of emotional regulation. However, the participants described this emotional regulation technique as the only one when emotions become so overwhelming, it is difficult to breathe or think.

Cognitive change/reappraisal, an adaptive strategy (Trentini, 2024), was repurposed as a defensive mechanism to rationalize parental abuse or invalidation (e.g., "She didn't mean it, she's just stressed"). Rather than protecting the child, reappraisal served to excuse boundary

violation and enforce self-blame. In adulthood, this strategy transformed into overthinking and rationalization of each feeling they have which led to suppression of emotions and inability to work with them. The problem lies further: during the psychological sessions, the eldest daughters rationalize everything, and everyone blocks the feeling of emotions.

The last ER strategy is response modulation which refers to the modulation of reaction to emotion once it starts (Gross, 2015). In childhood, open emotional expression (crying, anger, fear) was met with verbal aggression, physical violence or the dismissive refrain (“Cry, cry. The less you’ll piss”). Consequently, participants relied heavily on expressive suppression (Gross, 2015). Participants turned to severe response modulation techniques, including self-harm (cutting, hitting walls), fleeing into fantasy (extensive daydreaming), or somatic freezing because emotional suppression creates physiological tensions without resolving affective distress.

However, in adulthood, a significant trajectory toward adaptive ER was observed. Participants began utilizing relational processing (co-regulation) with trusted partners or peers, as well as physical exercise to release accumulated tension. Additionally, participants point out that with passing time and emotional validation from their peers/partners, they start (although very slowly) developing their inner support that eventually might allow them to regulate their emotions independently and not rely on extrinsic regulation.

Family Systems, Bowenian Triangulation, and Parental Emotional Immaturity

The empirical findings align directly with Murray Bowen’s (1978) Family Systems Theory and Kerr and Bowen’s (1988) formulations of family emotional processes, while providing a clear link to the literature on parental emotional immaturity (Dobric & Patric, 2024; Jibson, 2020). According to Jibson (2020), emotional immaturity is defined by the capacity to regulate one’s own emotions, maintain independence, and foster healthy social integration. They operate as emotionally immature caregivers who are incapable of serving as extrinsic emotional regulator for their children (Dobric & Patric, 2024; Marcinkovskaya, 2014). Following this, the

participants described their CIS households with low differentiation of self (Soviet legacy) and severe enmeshment (the absence of boundaries).

Emotionally immature parents experience intense emotional reactivity because they lack self-regulation and inner ego strength. In Bowenian terms, when anxiety increases within a dyad (such as between two emotionally immature partners), the system attempts to stabilize itself through triangulation (Bowen, 1978). The data demonstrate that emotionally driven and control-oriented parents systematically pulled the eldest daughter into the adult subsystem, forcing her to act as a “bridge”, “peacemaker” or structural confidant (Dobric & Patric, 2024). This structural inversion directly reflects Kiley’s (1983) dynamics of infantilism, where adult caregivers abandon their parental responsibilities and demand over-functioning position from their children to compensate for the fundamental under-functioning and emotional infantilism because of their parents (Kulagina, 2001) who did the same with them. Again, it is a cycle of a child becoming an adult in childhood and a child in their adulthood.

Furthermore, the study shows how parental emotional immaturity manifests through systemic emotional manipulation. When adultified daughters attempted to set boundaries or express legitimate frustration, emotionally immature parents weaponized somatic complaints (e.g., elevated blood pressure, migraines, heartache) or, worse, blaming child’s emotions in the somatic complaints. Additionally, they expressed “no/my rule” (Yakovleva, 2015) in their household by saying there is nothing that belongs to children and everything belongs to parents, so they must obey and be convenient. This dynamic transformed arguments about the child’s emotional needs into existential crises of parental survival. By framing the child’s natural affective expression as dangerous and potentially lethal to the caregiver, emotionally immature parents enforced emotional suppression through systemic guilt, locking the child within the family’s regulatory system and preventing genuine separation-individuation (Teng et al., 2021; Marcinkovskaya, 2014).

Transgenerational Trauma, Post Soviet History, and the Genesis of Parental Immaturity

A crucial contribution of this study lies in bridging the historical literature on post-Soviet collective trauma with the clinical construct of parental emotional immaturity. Parental emotional immaturity does not immerse in a vacuum. It is the direct developmental outcome of cumulative, transgenerational trauma that came from the psychological resources of successive generations. As detailed in the historical context, CIS families are survivors of a century-long continuum of crisis that stretches from serfdom's cancellation and learned helplessness through the October Revolution, World War I and II devastation, Stalinist repressions (e.g., Kurapaty), and the catastrophic economic collapse of the 1990s.

When synthesized with theories of transgenerational trauma transmission (Bekes, 2025; Hall, 2025; Yehuda et al., 2016), the empirical data demonstrate how collective socio-historical disasters generated widespread caregiver emotional depletion.

First, parental immaturity holds the intergenerational root. Grandparents and parents who survived the severe material precarity of the 1990s or the ideological rigidity of the Soviet era ("Homo Sovieticus") were forced to remain in a chronic state of "survival mode" (Cheng, 2009; Klymenko, 2016). In such environments, psychological attunement, empathy, and emotional self-regulation were secondary to basic physical survival. As a result, these caregivers failed to achieve the psychological milestones of emotional maturity outlined by Jibson (202) and Evlampieva (2017), such as emotional sensitivity, responsiveness, and boundary respect. Additionally, for parents this survival framed their perception of love was to give best of best to their child, but in financial way.

Second, institutionalized deprivation and cultural normalization played a significant role in the transmission of intergenerational trauma and family systems. Parents developed severe deficits in mentalization because they themselves grew up in invalidating environments where emotional vulnerability was stigmatized as "bourgeois egoism" or "whining" (Jurkovic, 1997).

They unconsciously reproduced the exact same emotionally immature parenting styles that they experienced in their own childhoods such as passive, rejecting or overly controlling. The widespread linguistic framing of overburdened young girls as "grown-up mares/cows" (*взрослая кобыла*) across different post-Soviet nations serves as a culturally sanctioned defense mechanism designed to rationalize the exploitation of child labor and mask parental emotional inadequacy.

Lastly, data showed that cultural normalization played more significant role in transgenerational experience of dysfunctional families than economic determinism. A pivotal theoretical outcome of this study is the refutation of purely economic determinism. In Western literature, parentification is often depicted as an adaptive reaction to low socio-economic status (Elder, 1974; Khafi et al., 2014). However, our data show that in post-Soviet countries, parentification occurred regardless of financial status, even in rich and upper-middle-class families. The provision of material things was often a tool of manipulation and emotional blackmail used by emotionally immature caregivers ("We gave you everything, so you owe us"). These findings explain how the ER maladaptive strategies and emotional immaturity become a transgenerational pattern which creates a Traumatic Cycle where one generation continues to rely on younger generation.

4.3. Practical Implications

The empirical findings of this study offer critical, actionable insights for psychotherapists, counselors, and mental health professionals working with parentified adults from CIS countries. Traditional Western therapeutic protocols focus solely on individual symptom reduction or immediate boundary confrontation often prove insufficient or even re-traumatizing because of somatic body response of respondents to set their boundaries. It is important to take into consideration that parentification in CIS countries operates as a culturally normalized, transgenerational mechanism of emotional regulation. Clinical interventions must be

culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, and structurally targeted at working with deeply internalized scripts.

De-normalization and Re-framing of the “Helper Daughter” Script

A primary therapeutic objective is facilitation the systematic de-normalization of the “eldest daughter as caregiver” script. As demonstrated by Jurkovic (1997) and Hooper (2007), parentified individuals frequently misinterpret developmental violations as personal moral virtues, framing childhood exploitation as “maturity”, “family responsibilities”, or being “a good helper”.

Psychoeducation on role inversion is an important step of de-normalization of their experience. Clinicians must provide clear psychoeducation regarding parentification, adultification, and parental emotional immaturity (Dobric & Patric, 2024). Clients need to explicitly understand that assuming adult caretaking roles during childhood was not a sign of advanced maturity, but an extrinsic structural adaptation to caregiver emotional neglect.

Addressing shared cultural idioms for denormalization and raising awareness is vastly important for future generations. Future researchers and therapists working with CIS populations must directly address culturally invalidation scripts such as “grown-up cow”, “cry, cry, less you will piss”, “our parents also bit us, and we grew up normal people”. Unpacking these linguistic mechanisms helps clients recognize how family systems weaponized shame to enforce compliance. According to Jurkovic (2004), such linguistic mechanisms raise and enforce the pervasive sense of unfairness.

Somatic Re-Regulation and Restructuring Gross’s Emotion Regulation Model

Given that participants demonstrated a gap between cognitive awareness and somatic dysregulation, therapy cannot remain purely conversational. Applying Gross’s (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation, clinical work must systematically restructure how clients process affective distress across all five stages.

First, during the therapy, the clinicians should focus on replacing expressive suppression with embodied safety. In childhood, open emotional expression was met with parental aggression or invalidation, compelling participants to rely on expressive suppression, fantasy, or self-harm. Clinicians should utilize somatic therapies to help clients tolerate the physiological arousal (tachycardia, panic, tremors) associated with sadness and anger without defaulting to somatic freezing or self-punishment.

Second, it is important to work on restructuring cognitive reappraisal since this is one of the fundamental emotion regulation techniques but altered in parentified daughters. Parentified women frequently misuse cognitive reappraisal as a defense mechanism to rationalize parental abuse (e.g., “She’s just stresses, so I shouldn’t be angry”). Therapists must guide clients to redirect cognitive reappraisal inward through validation their legitimate negative emotions rather than excusing boundary violations.

Third, in line with Evlampieva’s (2017) emphasis on emotional sensitivity, clients must be trained to shift their attentional focus away from scanning external environments for parental moods and toward internal visceral cues, restoring their capacity for self-attunement. Thus, it will allow women to shift from the hypervigilance to healthy attentional deployment.

Restructuring Conditional Self-Worth and De-linking Utility from Identity.

Restructuring Conditional Self-Worth and De-linking Utility from Identity

Childhood parentification forecloses the development of a stable, intrinsic sense of self (Buhl, 2008; Teng et al., 2021). Participants exhibited conditional self-worth through linking their self-worth to their utility to others. That is why future psychological practices should be focused on redefining self-worth and promote growth of inner self who will provide feeling worthy without being valuable to everyone. For that there are two primary targets: the utility bias and lost childhood “self”.

Therapeutic interventions must target the internalized belief that human value is strictly tied to productivity and caretaking. Clinicians should actively work with clients to decouple rest

from guilt, introducing structured “unproductive” time as a necessary therapeutic task. This will allow for eldest daughters to relax and reclaim their space where their mind and soul can take a full rest without feeling shame or guilt.

As was mentioned in the interview findings, parentified adults lose their childhood and lose a sense of themselves. Thus, it is quite clear that reclaiming the lost “childhood” is essential for recovery after parentification and gaining a hold on self-regulation and not co-regulation of emotions. Therapists should utilize experiential and inner-child modalities to allow clients to process the unlived developmental stages of childhood. Fostering self-compassion helps clients to erase the compulsive need to be “the rock” or “the wise one” in their personal and professional relationships.

Navigating Bowenian Differentiation and Parental Denial

In line with Bowen’s (1978) Family Systems Theory, parentified adult daughters remain deeply entangled in family triangled and over-function patterns. As it was described by the respondents, they became a bridge between older people who had to ensure harmony and bond. In the therapy, there should be a focus on separation from this triangle, and after separation work on the feeling of guilt which will be entitled according to the mentioned above family systems theory.

One of the strategies was always acceptance of difficult childhood and acceptance of making mistakes. However, the emotionally immature parents and grandparents are in constant denial of any situation that will shutter their understanding of being a good parent meaning shuttering their fragile self-esteem (Dobric & Patric). Thus, if seeking acceptance is not possible due to parental rigidity, it is important to manage parental denial without seeking closure. Clinicians must prepare clients for this inevitable denial, helping them abandon the fruitless expectation of parental validation or apology. True separation (Bowen, 1978) involves achieving emotional autonomy despite ongoing parental invalidation.

The risk of failed separation also lies in the constant feeling of guilt which can be reinforced by somatic manipulations (e.g., pressure spikes, heart attacks, migraine attacks). Clinicians must assist clients in recognizing the “No/My” rule structure (Miroshnichenko & Yakovleva, 2023) which will not allow their parents to reinforce emotional compliance through guilt. Clients need support to set firm boundaries without internalizing the belief that asserting independence makes them responsible for a parent’s physical deterioration.

Intergenerational Cycle Breaking and Parenting Preparation

Finally, to break intergenerational trauma there is a need for interventions and preparation for parenting for both parents (Lieberman et.al., 2011; Price et al.,2025). For eldest daughters it is important to go through therapeutic interventions to avoid repeating their mother’s history both in romantic relationships and family dynamics. In the first stages, it will allow them to choose the right partner for parenting, and afterwards preparation before parenting will allow them to avoid projection of their childhood traumas.

First, mentalization and co-regulation skills are important during coaching about parenting. In agreement with Lieberman et al. (2011), adult survivors of trauma must develop mentalization capacity meaning to develop the ability to understand their own mental states and those of their children, and, most importantly, differentiate them. Clinicians should coach clients on co-regulation techniques, enabling them to remain present with their children’s negative emotions without becoming overwhelmed or defaulting to authoritarian suppression.

Second, the concern that should be addressed is prevention of secondary traumatization in High Stress Environments. Given the geopolitical instability in CIS countries, clinicians must work proactively with clients to build strong personal support systems. By establishing external resources and peer co-regulation, therapists help ensure that when big level crises occur, clients do not regress into defaulting on their children for emotional containment. It will help to avoid the parentification of fourth generation.

4.4. “Silver lining” of parentification

While most of the findings reflect the negative consequences of parentification, participants also reported positive outcomes consistent with Jurkovic's (1997) observation of "silver linings" in the parentification experience.

First, participants described high competence and self-efficacy in the work environment. Participants developed strong organizational, caregiving, and problem-solving skills. As adults, they described being reliable and comfortable taking leadership roles ("the rocks" of their teams) because they had learned to manage households and care for others from childhood. They are getting promoted in their jobs quickly and always achieve the best school results.

Second, participants reported increased empathy and interpersonal sensitivity. They reported being highly sensitive to others' emotions, a skill that, while rooted in hypervigilance, also enabled them to build deep connections in their adult relationships. Several participants noted that this sensitivity made them very good friends, partners, and colleagues. Especially, with the same eldest daughters. Additionally, their increased empathy led them to profession where this empathy and sensitivity is highly required: teachers, leadership development, counselors, etc.

Third, participant described very strong sibling bonds. Despite the burdens of caregiving and constant feeling of injustice, participants described close relationships with siblings that persisted in adulthood. The shared experience of parentification, while painful, sometimes created a unique bond between siblings who understood each other's experiences. Therefore, the bond is so strong that it can be compared to the romanticized bond between mother and child. “I would give up on my life for her/him” is the phrase that participants said when were asked about their relationships with their siblings now.

Lastly, all participants expressed a conscious intention to be different parents: to provide the emotional validation, physical affection, and developmental space that they were denied.

Several participants had seek for therapy specifically to address these patterns before having children.

Protective factors that moderated negative outcomes included: (a) presence of an emotionally available grandparent or other relative; (b) early exposure to alternative family models (e.g., through friends' families, media, or later partners); (c) supportive peer relationships; (d) therapeutic intervention; and (e) physical distance from the family of origin.

Clinicians should acknowledge these strengths while also validating the pain of the parentification experience. Parentified adults are often highly functioning, which can lead therapists to underestimate their distress or to focus exclusively on deficits. A balanced therapeutic approach recognizes both competence and vulnerability, helping clients integrate their resilience with their need for healing.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1. Overview

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of seven eldest daughters from post-Soviet countries who underwent parentification during childhood. The findings demonstrate that parentification in this context is not primarily a response to economic hardship, as some Western literature suggests, but rather a cultural phenomenon driven by transgenerational emotional deficits and rigid cultural schemas about the role of eldest daughters. These experiences produce lasting consequences for emotion regulation: a trajectory from childhood suppression, self-harm, and hypervigilance toward adult relational coping and physical activity, with persistent somatic distress (tachycardia, trembling, freezing) when setting boundaries or facing conflict.

The study introduces the concept of the "normalization blind spot" which is the phenomenon where dysfunction is not recognized because it is universal in one's environment. Participants did not recognize their experiences as problematic until adulthood, when exposure to alternative family models provided the contrast necessary for awareness. This normalization, reinforced by the cultural script "everyone did it," is a primary mechanism sustaining the transgenerational cycle of parentification and emotional immaturity.

5.2. Limitations of the study

The findings should be interpreted considering several limitations. First, the sample was small (seven participants) and homogeneous: all participants were female, identified as eldest daughters, and came from urban areas in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations, including males, younger siblings, and individuals from rural areas or other post-Soviet countries.

Second, the study relied exclusively on retrospective accounts of childhood experiences. While retrospective qualitative research is valuable for understanding how individuals construct

meaning from past experiences, it is subject to memory bias and may be influenced by participants' current emotional states and life circumstances.

Third, the study did not include perspectives from parents or other family members. Understanding parents' accounts of their own childhoods and their motivations for their parenting choices would provide a more complete picture of the transgenerational cycle.

Fourth, participants are self-selected into the study through social media recruitment. This may have attracted individuals with higher levels of psychological awareness or motivation to reflect on their experiences, potentially biasing the findings.

Last reflection

The phrase that recurred throughout the interviews (I didn't realize it wasn't normal because everyone around me was doing the same thing) captures the central challenge of this work. The normalization of dysfunction through social comparison is a powerful mechanism of intergenerational transmission. It creates what this study has termed the "normalization blind spot": the inability to recognize dysfunction because it is universal in one's environment. Breaking this cycle requires not only individual therapeutic work but also broader cultural change: the recognition that what has been normalized for generations may be, in fact, a violation of children's developmental needs.

Despite the risks, the findings of this study offer hope. The participants describe their desire to become better parents and to provide the emotional validation they were denied, and to create family systems grounded in emotional presence rather than utility. Additionally, the girls showed inner intention to attend special psychological courses before becoming parenting to avoid re-traumatization of the following generation. They are seeking therapy, reading about parenting, and building relationships with partners who model secure attachment. This is the "third generation" in action: the first generation in post-Soviet history with the psychological resources to prioritize emotional well-being alongside material provision.

The hope of this research is that by documenting and validating these experiences, it may support others in taking the same step: recognizing that what was normalized in their families was not "just how it is," but a violation of their developmental needs. The cycle can be broken. The third generation has the potential, and increasingly the language and resources, to create new family models grounded in emotional presence, validation, and love that is not conditional on utility. This is the promise of their experience: that the pain they endured can become the foundation for a different future for themselves and their children.

This research is dedicated to the eldest daughters who became adults too early.

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