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## **The Mediating Role of Shame and Guilt in the Relationship Between Parentification and Separation-Individuation**

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## **Abstract**

In this study, the main purpose was to explore the mediating roles of shame and guilt in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation. In order to measure the relationships between variables, data was collected through an online survey with the participation of 384 individuals between ages 18 and 58. Parentified Child Scale-Adult Version, Separation-Individuation Inventory, The Trait Shame and Guilt Scale and Demographic Information Form were used to assess these variables respectively. Quantitative research methods were used through the SPSS : 1) correlational analysis of study variables with each other were performed, 2) mediation analysis was performed for the mediating role of shame and guilt on the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation issues, 3) means of demographic informations and study variables were compared for their possible contribution. The findings suggested that all study variables had significant and positive relationships among themselves. Therefore, there was a significant and positive relationship between parentification and separation-individuation issues. In addition, according to mediation analysis, it was observed that parentification significantly predicted shame and did not significantly predict guilt. However, when shame and guilt were taken into equation at the same time, both emotions were found to have a positive and significant partial mediating role in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation issues. Finally, all findings were discussed in reference to existing literature and implications along with future directions were presented.

**Keywords:** Guilt; parentification; role reversal; separation-individuation; shame

## INTRODUCTION

### Parentification

Parentified children are those who forgo their developmental needs in order to meet their parents' needs by doing so at the expense of not being able to establish their true, independent, authentic self (Castro et al., 2004; DiCaccavo, 2006; Haxhe, 2016; Nuttal et al., 2014). For instance, these children, in the face of adult parental conflicts, try to calm their parents like an adult, and their need for reassurance for the distress they feel while witnessing the conflict can be overlooked. Peris et al. (2008) observed in the study that in families with parentification dynamics, parents perceive that they have a close and warm relationship with their children, while children perceive that they have a low warm and unsupportive relationship with their parents.

Jurkovic (1997) divides children's caregiving behaviors, which are mostly not age-appropriate, into two categories as instrumental (*taking responsibilities of their siblings, preparing meals, cleaning the house, earning money for the needs of the house etc.*) and emotional (*socioemotional needs of family e.g., marital problems, appease parents' anxiety*). Trying to meet the emotional needs of parents can be more burdensome (Champion, 2016), as well as meeting the needs of all kinds of parents' that are resulting from parentification, usually expectations that are above what children can do (Castro et al., 2004). In this case, the false self that emerges as a result of the denial of one's own needs and desires, as in this way a child can establish approval, acceptance, intimacy from his parents, is experienced as a self that fails to meet the expectations of parents (DiCaccavo, 2006.) This situation causes the person to feel shame against both the real self and the self that is already inadequate in the face of the expectations of the parents (Wells, 2000). Hooper et al. (2013) see parentification as a relational paradox. They emphasize that parentified children's needs for bonding and intimacy are not met by their parents, however children achieve their need for intimacy and bonding by meeting the parental or/and relational needs of the family.

Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark (1973) defined the concept of invisible loyalties that can exist within the family. What is meant to be mentioned with the invisible loyalties is

that the attitudes which are accepted as loyal in the family are internalized and non-compliance can cause individuals to feel guilty as a result of not matching with the debt of gratitude they feel towards the family. Such loyalty commitments have a function of keeping the family system together, while it may also distance the person from the feeling of guilt. (Winnicott, 1965). In Parmiani et al. (2012) study with divorced parents, they state that parents turn to their children to meet their emotional needs and to be supported by their children. They express that children perceive this situation as a loyal attitude by giving up their own needs in the face of expectations of their parents and even seeing themselves as self-sufficient about their needs. At the end of the study, they add that one of the results of experiencing such a loyalty conflict leads to negative effects on the children's individuation processes. However, the recognition, acceptance and love that children gain as a result of such inverted family roles takes precedence over their needs for self-actualization and independence (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Parmiani et al., 2012).

### **Separation-Individuation and Parentification**

With the completion of the Separation-Individuation developmental process in a healthy way, it is expected that people will be able to establish self and other boundaries in close relationships, and accordingly, optimal closeness and distance can be achieved in those relationships. By this achievement, individuals are expected to be able to distinguish and describe their own needs and desires by being differentiated from others, and not to lose their closeness in the relationship as they differentiate and diverge. In some cases, the quality of the boundaries between the self and the other may lead individuals not enough to be differentiated and separated, and as a result, not be able to form their authentic individual self (Schier et al., 2014). One of the situations that may hinder the formation of self-other boundaries, which plays a significant role in individuals being separated and individuated, is parentification (Borchet et al., 2016; Perosa & Perosa, 1993; Schier et al., 2014).

As parentification is related to diffusion and/or enmeshment boundaries between family members, it causes the child to not be able to stay in a role that will support her/his separation-individuation task and limit the child's self-development with the burden of

the adult role (Borchet et al., 2016; Boumans & Dorant, 2018). These explanations do not mean that children should not take care for their parents at all, but it is emphasized that the caregiver should be mostly parents by providing to children protection, safety, guidance and promoting their separateness (Boszermenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1975; Maysel & Scharf, 2009). Otherwise, children's emotional overinvolvement within the enmesh boundaries limits the separation-individuation process (Perrin et al., 2013). For instance, in conflictual couples (Borchet et al., 2016), alcohol dependent parents (Pasternak & Schier, 2014), divorced parents (Perrin et al., 2013), low level of individuation has been observed in their children in case of boundary enmeshment and/or parentification. The common situation among these studies is that parents are overly preoccupied with their own needs and are insensitive, unavailable to their children's needs. As a result, children cannot benefit from the parental resources they need during their individuation process. Additionally, children who need to stay connected with their parents under all circumstances may also tend to direct negative emotions toward themselves in order to maintain their parents' positive mental representations.

Being connected but at the same time acquiring a high level of autonomy and individuation is seen as the main issue of the separation-individuation process. Although parentification also serves to enable children to establish a connection with their parents, it is difficult to say that this connection most likely can serve the separation-individuation process functionally. One of the meanings of close connection between family members signifies that there is a warm, accepting, nurturing, supportive, secure based family climate (Barrera et al., 2011; Bell et al., 2008; Bowlby, 1979). Bell et al. (2008), described that close connection with parents is a primer component for individuation if that close connection is established with clear interpersonal boundaries. Such a family environment evolves a space for individuals to express their own feelings, needs and ideas that promotes increasing differentiated self and develops a sense of personal autonomy. Barrera et al. (2011) emphasized that although parentification is associated with enmeshment boundaries, enmeshment boundaries should not be considered as inhibiting individuation in every family system.

They pointed to family systems that depend on collectivist values such as emotional connectedness and interdependency that may seem in an enmeshment boundaries. Individuals from such a family system may feel secure and connected by adopting these values. As a result, individuals may be able to explore and define who they are, with the basis of a safe connection provided in this way. In other words, while individuals are separating intrapsychically and moving towards individuation, it is as important as clear self-other boundaries that individuals feel within these boundaries secure, warmth, connected in their close relationships (Barrera et al., 2011; Bell et al., 2008).

### **Shame, Guilt, and Parent – Child Relations**

Considering the above mentioned, it can be said that the development and formation of the child's sense of guilt and shame depend on the quality of the relationship established with caregivers. In many studies it is observed that negative parenting practices and childhood maltreatment causes shame and guilt emotions in children to be inhibiting and destructive rather than to be in an adaptive form (Mintz et al., 2017; Sekowski et al., 2020; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005).

In order to have adaptive self-conscious emotions, children need attention, warmth, guidance, monitoring, and consistent discipline by their parents while experiencing these emotions (Hoseini et al., 2021; Mojallal et al., 2021). Otherwise, they can not develop positive and consistent self-evaluation skills and they may have difficulties in coping with the experiences emerged by these feelings (Hoseini et al., 2021). In the case of childhood maltreatment, children may tend to direct negative emotions towards themselves in order to maintain positive representations of their parents. At the same time, they do not get enough emotional mirroring from their parents to process their emotions, which can cause difficulties in regulating emotions, causing them to feel highly generalized feelings of shame and guilt (Sekowski et al., 2020). Shahar et al. (2014) and Sekowski et al. (2020) emphasized that individuals who experienced emotional abuse and/or emotional neglect in their childhood may feel an intense internalized shame and guilt later in their lives. These carelessness, unresponsive and unavailable attitudes of parents towards children can cause children to feel rejected and

to form irrational beliefs that these attitudes of their parents are due to their own deficiencies and/or a mistake they have made (Donohue et al., 2019; Mintz et al., 2017).

Considering the negative consequences of parentification mentioned earlier, it can be said that parentification can also be a kind of childhood maltreatment output. Accordingly, one of the negative consequences of parentification is seen that people experience feelings of shame and guilt intensely in their future experiences (Byng-Hall, 2002; Castro et al., 2004; DiCaccavo, 2006; Wells & Jones, 2000).

### **Shame, Guilt, and Individuation**

Considering that emotions of shame and guilt are shaped by self and other differentiation ability, it can be assumed that individuals must achieve a differentiated self in order for these feelings to function adaptively (Vieira, 1993). However, since feelings of shame and guilt have a regulatory effect on in-group relations, these feelings can emerge in some families at an excessive level that may hinder the separation-individuation processes of individuals (Stierlin, 1974).

In Erik Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory, there is an autonomy versus shame and doubt phase. The concept of autonomy here means that the person can independently, individuated and realistically define own interests, goals, values, as well as be competent, authentic and related (Severino et al., 1987; Young et al., 2016). However, this does not mean that there is no sense of shame, on the contrary, the non-traumatic experience of shame is associated with the individuals' realistic limitations and inadequacies, and individuals may modify their autonomous functioning with some degree of shame. Moreover, lack of feeling of shame may cause ego regression, defensive grandiosity, and the use of splitting defense mechanisms as a result of not being able to be in touch with one's deficiencies and inadequacies (Severino et al., 1987). One of the significant factors in the formation of shame that ensures the development of autonomy is related to the fact that the child is protected from intense shame and doubt experienced by the caregivers during the autonomy practices. In this process, also child's independence initiatives need to be supported and encouraged by the caregiver, which also contributes to the child's confidence, competence and self-

esteem. Under these conditions, the child is able to form a unique, autonomous and acceptable identity with some deficiencies and limitations without experiencing intense shame (Graves & Larkin, 2006).

Vess et al. (2013) and Young et al. (2016) stated in their studies that people with autonomy can use their feelings of shame and guilt in a more adaptive way. Roth (2008) examined the differences between autonomy support parenting and parental conditional regard. He emphasized that in the autonomy-supportive parenting attitude, the internalization process of the person is experienced in an identified and integrated way. However, in the conditional regard parenting attitude, introjection (*taking values and goals despite not accepting them*) plays a role in the person's internalization process. He added that in the internalization process that occurs with introjection, people have excessive amounts of shame, guilt and unstable self-esteem.

In cases when children express their emotions, if their parents do not contain their emotions and/or if children encounter reactions that make them think that their feelings affect their parents negatively may cause children to distance themselves from their own feelings and feel that they are responsible for their parents' emotions. Along with this responsibility, intense feelings of shame and guilt may occur in case of hurting or upsetting their parents (Vieira, 1993). In the study of Chang (2012) on codependency, one of the personality traits focused on excessive care for the other, stated that people with this trait have intense internalized shame, guilt and low self-esteem. It has been also stated that excessive codependency may cause individuals to be unable to go through the processes of self-differentiation, individuation as a result of dysfunctional family environment and boundary distortions.

Charles et al. (2001) conducted research on how mothers who have separation-individuation difficulties affect their daughters' separation-individuation processes. It has been observed that in the face of increasing competence and autonomy efforts due to the natural developmental process of their daughters, mothers may exhibit ambivalent attitudes and insensitivity towards these developmental processes. It has been examined that daughters who are faced with such a situation may experience intense emotional conflicts, including feelings of shame and guilt, about attempts at

autonomy. Therefore, daughters may prefer to move away from such distress at the expense of psychological differentiation and individuation.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive information was calculated as mean scores, standard deviations, standard error means, and minimum-maximum values for the measures of General Parentification, Separation-Individuation Inventory, Shame and Guilt. Findings are presented in **Table 3**.

### **Demographic Characteristics and Study Variables**

The relationships of demographic variables with study variables were checked in order to identify possible contributions of them to the variance. When the PCS-A, SII, Shame and Guilt scores were tested with the independent t-Test according to gender, the mean scores of the scales did not differ significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ).

When the mean scores of the PCS-A, SII, Shame and Guilt scales were compared according to who participants live with, significant differences were found between the mean scores of SII ( $F(4, 379) = 4.15, p < 0.05$ ), shame ( $F(4, 379) = 4.47, p < 0.05$ ) and guilt ( $F(4, 379) = 8.44, p < 0.05$ ). The differences between the groups were examined, it was found that the mean SII score of the people living with their parents ( $174.91 \pm 51.78$ ) was significantly higher than the mean score of the people living with their spouse ( $147.81 \pm 51.35$ ). In addition, it is seen that the mean scores of shame ( $9.43 \pm 4.77$ ) and guilt ( $10.83 \pm 4.33$ ) of people living with their spouses are significantly lower than the mean scores of people living with their parents and in other ways. Moreover, the average scores of the scales according to living in the same city with the parents do not differ significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ).

The mean scores of the PCS-A, SII, Shame and Guilt were compared to the whether mothers/fathers of participants were alive. It was found that the average scores of general parentification ( $54.65 \pm 13.82$ ) of the people whose mother alive were significantly lower than the average scores of those whose mother did not alive ( $t(382)$

= -2.78,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $t(286) = -2.53, p < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, the mean scores of SII, Shame and Guilt do not differ significantly according to whether the mother is alive or not ( $p > 0.05$ ). Moreover, it is seen that the mean scores of shame ( $11.75 \pm 5.36$ ) and guilt ( $13.72 \pm 4.95$ ) of those whose father alive significantly higher than the average scores of those whose fathers not alive ( $t(382) = 2.95, p < 0.05$ ;  $t(382) = 2.23, p < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, the mean scores of PCS-A and SII do not differ significantly according to whether the father is alive or not ( $p > 0.05$ ).

The mean scores of the PCS-A, SII, Shame and Guilt were tested according to the number of siblings; a significant difference was found with general parentification ( $F(4, 379) = 5.17, p < 0.001$ ). It was found that the general parentification mean score of people with 4 or more siblings ( $52.16 \pm 12.91$ ) was significantly higher than the mean score of people who had 1 sibling ( $43.85 \pm 12.09$ ) and no sibling ( $44.20 \pm 13.94$ ). On the other hand, the mean scores of general parentification, SII, Shame and Guilt do not differ significantly according to the birth order of the individuals ( $p > 0.05$ ).

When the mean scores of the PCS-A, SII, Shame and Guilt were compared according to the marital status of the father, a significant difference was found with the mean scores of general parentification ( $F(2, 381) = 6.61, p < 0.05$ ), shame ( $F(2, 381) = 4.92, p < 0.05$ ), and guilt ( $F(2, 381) = 4.45, p < 0.05$ ). The general parentification mean score of individuals whose fathers are married/remarried ( $45.30 \pm 12.41$ ) is significantly lower than the mean scores of individuals with separated/divorced/widowed ( $51.75 \pm 11.89$ ) fathers and in other ( $51.75 \pm 11.89$ ) marital status. It was also found that the mean score of shame ( $11.79 \pm 5.47$ ) and guilt ( $13.76 \pm 4.96$ ) of those whose fathers were married/remarried was significantly higher than the mean score of those whose fathers were separated/divorced/widowed and in other marital status. When the mean scores of the PCS-A, SII, shame and guilt were tested according to the marital status of the mother, a significant difference was found in the mean score of general parentification ( $F(2, 381) = 9.78, p < 0.001$ ). It was also found that the general parentification mean score of those whose mothers were married/remarried ( $45.09 \pm 12.27$ ) was significantly lower than the mean score of those whose mothers were separated/divorced/widowed ( $49.77 \pm 13.11$ ) and in other ( $58.08$

$\pm 13.00$ ) marital status. On the other hand, SII, shame and guilt mean scores do not differ significantly according to the marital status of participants' mothers ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### **Correlational Analyses**

In order to assess the associations of general parentification, separation-individuation, shame and guilt, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed (**Table 4**). The correlation coefficients' strength is determined by Field (2005) as + .50 is large; +.30 is medium; + .10 is a small correlation.

The findings indicate that general parentification significantly and positively correlated with separation-individuation ( $r = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ), shame ( $r = 0.16, p < 0.01$ ), and guilt ( $r = 0.15, p < 0.01$ ). Separation-individuation significantly and positively associated with shame ( $r = 0.58, p < 0.01$ ) and guilt ( $r = 0.53, p < 0.01$ ). In addition, there is a significant and positive relationship between shame and guilt ( $r = 0.78, p < 0.01$ ).

### **Mediation Analyses**

According to the results of the mediation analysis, while general parentification significantly predicts the shame ( $a_1$  path;  $\beta = .070, SE = .022, t = 3.242, p < 0.001, CI [ .027, .112]$ ), it does not significantly predict the guilt ( $a_2$  path;  $\beta = .011, SE = .013, t = .868, p > 0.05, CI [ -.014, .037]$ ). It means that individuals who have higher levels of general parentification were more likely to have higher levels of shame but not guilt. Moreover, shame ( $b_1$  path;  $\beta = 4.314, SE = .665, t = 6.487, p < 0.001, CI [ 3.006, 5.622]$ ), and guilt ( $b_2$  path;  $\beta = 1.994, SE = .711, t = 2.806, p < 0.01, CI [ .597, 3.392]$ ), variables were found to be significantly associated with separation-individuation. It means that individuals who have higher levels of shame and guilt were more likely to have higher levels of separation-individuation. The total effect of the parentification variable on separation-individuation is significant ( $c$  path;  $\beta = 1.217, SE = .217, t = 5.600, p < 0.001, CI [ .789, 1.644]$ ). When parentification and the mediator variables shame and guilt were taken into the equation simultaneously, the direct relationship between parentification and separation-individuation did not lose its significance level, but the level of effect decreased ( $c'$  path;  $\beta = .792, SE = .180, t = 4.410, p < 0.001, CI [$

.439, 1.145] ). These results display that shame and guilt variables have a partial mediating role in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation. In addition, it was found that the whole model was significant ( $F(3, 380) = 80.988$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .39$ ) and %39 of the total variance was explained (**Figure 1**).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Discussion Related to Correlation Analyses**

Firstly, correlational analysis displays that there is a small positive association between these two concepts but according to regression analysis parentification strongly predicts separation-individuation issues. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Borchet et al., 2016; Perosa & Perosa, 1993; Schier et al., 2014). Mahler & Furer (1963) emphasized that in order to experience the separated and individuated self, one must first be able to differentiate from the first significant other. Considering the *practicing* subphase involved in the separation-individuation process, the child's ability to differentiate increases, but he/she also feels anxiety as he/she separates from the significant other. Because of this emerging dilemma, the child needs to turn to the significant other for "emotional refuel" when the level of anxiety increases, so that the child may continue to enjoy and wonder about his/her discovery. When the *rapprochement* subphase is considered, there is a greater increase in anxiety about separation, and there is an increase in the need for caregiver's attention, support, sharing discoveries, and feeling emotional connected (Mahler et al., 1975; Meeus et al., 2005). The caregiver should be sensitive to the needs of the child while establishing a balance of closeness and distance in the relationship. Moreover, parents should be flexible for changing needs of the child, as well as open a space for the child to freely explore autonomously. However, in a situation such as parentification, the caregivers' prioritization of their own needs and being unavailable to the child's developmental needs may interrupt the child's separation-individuation process (Goldner et al., 2022). In this case, the child may have unresolved separation-individuation issues by being preoccupied with the needs of their parents at the expense of not being able to create their own authentic self (Borchet et al., 2017; Pasternak & Schier, 2014).

According to the correlation analysis, a positive and significant relationship is observed between parentification, shame and guilt. Wells (2000) and Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark (1973) have emphasized based on their clinical experiences and conceptualization studies that parentification may increase the intensity of shame and guilt feelings in individuals. However, there is a lack of study in the literature on the relationship between the concept of parentification and feelings of shame and guilt. In spite of there are studies displaying that negative parenting practices and childhood maltreatment may form feelings of shame and guilt emotions in children to be inhibiting and destructive rather than to be in an adaptive form (Mintz et al., 2017; Sekowski et al., 2020; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). Considering the negative consequences of parentification that may disrupt the psychological development of individuals, it can be evaluated that parentification may become a kind of negative parenting practice and childhood maltreatment. For instance, children who are oriented to meet their parents' needs are actually inadequate because these needs are beyond what they can do (Castro et al., 2004). Therefore, it may cause them to feel shame against the real self as their actual needs and desires are denied, and against the self that is inadequate against the expectations of their parents (DiCaccavo, 2006; Wells, 2000). Moreover, in order to protect the positive mental representation of their parents, children may also direct their negative emotions to themselves (Borchet et al., 2016; Pasternak & Schier, 2014). By the same token, unresponsive and unavailable attitudes of parents towards children may cause children to feel rejected and to form irrational beliefs that these attitudes of parents are due to their own deficiencies (Donohue et al., 2019; Mintz et al., 2017). Sekowski et al. (2020) argued that in such parent-child relationships, there may be difficulties in processing and regulating emotions that arise because children do not receive adequate emotional mirroring from parents, so they may feel highly generalized feelings of shame and guilt. Additionally, insufficient mirroring function and conditional acceptance of idealized selfobjects may lead to distressful shame experiences (Morrison, 1984). In line with all these expansions, the significant positive relationship between parentification and feelings of shame and guilt found in the present study seems reasonable.

Among the results of the correlation analysis, it is found that there is a positive and significant relationship between separation-individuation issues, shame and guilt. This means that as individuals' feelings of shame and guilt increase, separation-individuation issues also increase and this finding is meaningful when looking at the previous studies. For instance, according to developmental perspectives on self-conscious emotions such as shame and guilt, the quality and construction of these emotions depend on the formation of differences and boundaries between self and others (Lagattuta & Thompson, 2007). Moreover, in order for these emotions to function adaptively, the person needs to also be able to constitute stable self-representations (Muris & Meesters, 2013; Taihara & Malik, 2016). However, when these can not be achieved, the individual's separation-individuation process may be inhibited due to intense feelings of shame and guilt. Vess et al. (2013) and Young et al. (2016) stated that individuals with high autonomy can use their feelings of shame and guilt in a more functional way. On the other hand, Chang (2012) emphasized that individuals with codependency personality traits feel too much shame and guilt to go through the processes of self-differentiation and individuation.

### **Discussion Related to Mediation Analyses**

According to correlation analysis, a positive and significant relationship was observed between parentification, shame and guilt, but in mediation analyzes, while parentification significantly predicted shame, it did not significantly predict guilt. When we look at the literature, it is seen that shame usually arises as a result of an individual's evaluation of a situation by attributing it to his/her whole self, while guilt emerges as a result of the evaluation of a specific behavior or part of self (Karlsson & Sjöberg, 2009; Tangney, 2001). Accordingly, shame brings with it the desire to get lost, disappear, annihilate the situation, because the situation is perceived as stable, permanent and difficult to change, since the judgment against the situation belongs to the whole self. The feeling of guilt, on the other hand, brings with it the tendency to change, repair and excuse what has been done because the evaluation made against the situation is perceived as temporary and modifiable (Carni et al., 2013). Considering the differences between these two emotions, guilt becomes less intense and destructive than

shame (Lewis, 2019), but guilt can also be destructive if it fused with shame (DiCaccavo, 2006). As in the mediation analysis, although parentification significantly predicted shame and it did not significantly predict guilt, when shame and guilt were taken into equation at the same time, both emotions were found that had a positive and significant partial mediating role in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation.

Considering the mediation analysis, shame and guilt have a partial mediating role in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation issues. Moreover, shame and guilt emotions had significant positive accounts in the relationship between higher levels of parentification and higher levels of separation-individuation issues. Supporting this expected finding is also meaningful in the light of the literature. Separation-individuation accomplishment refers to one's establishment of clear self and other boundaries, able to distinguish one's needs and desires by being differentiated from others and achieve one's unique mature individuality (Blos, 1967; Kins et al., 2013). However, role reversal that may arise when the boundaries between self and other are enmeshed in a situation such as parentification, may lead to an individual to not be able to stay in a role that will support separation-individuation task and limit one's self development with the burden of the parent role (Borchet et al., 2016; Boumans & Dorant, 2018). Therefore, the finding that parentification may lead to separation-individuation issues becomes meaningful.

It is also meaningful that feelings of shame and guilt may have a mediating role in this relationship, because shame and guilt are essentially adaptive emotions (Taihara & Malik, 2016). They are having a functional effect on improving self and behavior (O'Connor et al., 1997), protecting self (Weiss, 2015), maintaining social interactions and close relationships in an optimal way (Muris & Meesters, 2013). However, depending on the intensity of these emotions, the capacity of the person to regulate these emotions, and how individuals interpret these emotions subjectively, these emotions may turn from being constructive to destructive or inhibiting emotions (Leach, 2017; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2018). The adaptive or maladaptive functioning of these emotions may also depend on the quality of the parent-child relationship. For

instance, according to Erik Erikson's shame and doubt versus autonomy phase, nontraumatic experience of shame associated with individuals' realistic limitations and inadequacies which is necessary for the development of autonomy (Graves & Larkin, 2006). Nonetheless, it can be inhibiting if the individual is constantly shamed by parents or constantly made to feel guilty for their actions (O'Conner et al., 1997). For instance, extreme shame experiences may lead to narcissistic injuries and, accordingly, may cause the person to be unable to create their own realistic values and ideals (Morrison, 1983). Moreover, for adaptive shame and guilt emotions, children need attention, warmth, guidance, monitoring while experience these emotions (Hoseini et al., 2021; Mojallal et al., 2021), otherwise children may feel intense shame and guilt (Shahar et al., 2014; Sekowski et al., 2020). It may even evolve into feelings that are difficult to cope with, creating threats such as loss of connection to social order or ultimate form of separation (Lansky, 2005) or may lead to one's negative self evaluations state (Karlsson & Sjöberg, 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

In the context of all these mentioned, it can be said that the model in which shame and guilt have a partial mediating role in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation issues is meaningful.

### **Discussion Related to Demographic Characteristics and Study Variables**

Although the average age of the participants in this study was twenty-eight, they had a distribution between eighteen and fifty-eight. This can be seen as a wide range, but patterns of parentification, separation-individuation issues, shame and guilt are formed at very early ages. Accordingly, unless there is a treatment on these issues, it can actually affect the person for life (Carroll et al., 2000; Cho et al., 2018). For instance, Macfie (2015) and Hooper (2007) stated that mothers with parentification patterns in their childhood may create a mother-child relationship to meet the needs that they lacked in their own childhood, through their own children.

In this study, who participants lived with was compared with the study variables. As a result of these comparisons, it was found that the separation-individuation, shame and guilt scores of the participants living with their parents were higher than those living

with their spouses. There may be many parameters and variables affecting this result, but we found it appropriate to evaluate it based on the family system theories discussed in this study. According to family system theories, each individual in the family can be a part of the functioning family system with the formation of some behavioral/emotional patterns in the family. Therefore, it may be insufficient to evaluate the individual independently from the family (Bowen, 1996; Minuchin, 1985). In some families, the family system may emerge with patterns aimed at reducing anxiety. However, in order not to interrupt the individuation processes of family members or to make a distinction between self and others, family members need to develop their emotional awareness of their reactions to each other. According to these perspectives, the reason why the separation-individuation, shame and guilt scores of the participants living with their spouses were lower than the participants living with their families, it was thought that the participants living with their spouses might have established a different family system that suits their adult selves.

Additionally, it is stated that parentification can be the result of role reversal that occurs at a level that causes the boundaries between family members to become enmeshed (Kerig, 2005; Shaffer, 2005). The boundaries mentioned here are not static boundaries, but rather the boundaries that need to be organized/reorganized in crises that arise within family or in developmental transition stages (Fullinwider-Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993). There are cases such as depression in the parents (DiMarzio, 2021), alcohol/substance misuse (Pasternak & Schier, 2012), divorce (Johnston, 1990; Parmiani et al., 2012) that parentification may occur as a result of difficulties in the organized/reorganized boundaries. In this study, it was found that the parentification scores of the participants whose mothers were not alive and whose mothers and fathers were divorced/widowed were higher than the participants whose mothers were alive and whose mothers and fathers were married/remarried.

According to cases that are mentioned above, it can be said that in a situation of loss of mother and the children of divorced or single parents may have a role reversal and a parentification may have occurred. While it is expected that one of the negative consequences of parentification may lead to the separation-individuation issues, no

significant difference was observed in the separation-individuation scores of the participants. In other words, separation-individuation issues have not been seen where the parentification is observed. It can be said that this finding may support studies emphasizing that parentification does not always create negative results. For instance, parentification may even have constructive outputs such as interpersonal/relational competence (Hooper et al., 2013), better coping skills (Stein et al., 2007), resilience (Polomski et al., 2021), self-esteem based on feelings of competence and self efficacy (Borchet et al., 2016), post-traumatic growth (Hooper et al., 2007).

Furthermore, while it was seen that the parentification scores of the participants with four or more siblings were higher than the scores of the participants who had one or no siblings, there was no significant difference between the separation-individuation, shame and guilt scores. Bobbitt-Zeher et al. (2016) clarified that as the number of siblings increases, individuals may become more conducive in developing the skills necessary for long-term relationships. Because sibling relationships are intimate, mixed with both positive and negative emotions, unique, long duration, shared familial environments. Moreover, regardless of birth order, siblings can provide a unique opportunity for children to learn to understand others and manage challenging emotions, resolve conflict, nurture themselves, and provide mutual support (Bobbitt-Zeher et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). Accordingly, the fact that while the parentification scores of participants with four or more siblings were high, there was no significant difference between separation-individuation, shame and guilt scores may be related to the fact that siblings can be a kind of source. For instance, Borchet et al. (2020) displayed that despite being parentified, siblings can make positive contributions to their individual development as a result of factors such as support, mutual contribution, and warmth.

In conclusion, comparisons between demographic information and study variables were made in order to evaluate their possible contributions to the study. Accordingly, when we look at the results, it is predominantly observed that there could be situations where the phenomenon of parentification is seen but the negative consequences that are assumed in the study are not observed. It can be added that, besides the fact that

parentification can have a very deep structure, it can be misleading to assume that parentification can have directly negative consequences.

### **Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Studies**

Although many significant results were obtained regarding the study variables in this study, there are some limitations. Firstly, most of the participants in this study were female, and the averages of the scores obtained from the scales did not differ significantly according to gender. However, in studies investigating the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation in the literature, significant differences were observed as female participants may be more prone to caregiving attitudes when gender roles are considered (Fişek, 2018; Goldner et al., 2022; Mayseless et al., 2009; Pasternak et al., 2014). In this study, a significant and positive relationship between parentification and separation-individuation was obtained between the scores from mostly female participants. The fact that the majority of the population was female can be seen as a limitation. Future studies may shed light on this point, with a more balanced gender distribution.

Moreover, the data of the present study was based on self-report measurements that may lead to some biases in the data due to social desirability effect. Participants in the study were included using the convenience sampling method which may lack clear generalizability (Jager et al., 2017). In future studies, replication studies with different groups or applying the random selection method may contribute to the generalization of the findings. Moreover, the present study was based on cross-sectional research; however, experiences of parentification may turn into different meanings over time, and this may create some changes in effects. Therefore, further studies may investigate the current subject in detail using a longitudinal design.

Additionally, experiences of shame, guilt and parentification may have subjective meanings for each individual and accordingly, there may be differences in degree of separation-individuation issues, intensity and functionality of emotions. Moreover, although the relationship between parentification and separation individuation issues and the mediating role of shame and guilt feelings in this relationship was the focus of

this study, the phenomenon of parentification also has positive outcomes in individuals. However, these concepts were not examined in depth in this study. Future studies may add qualitative methods to evaluate these aspects in more detail.

### **Implications of the Study**

There are several studies in the literature displaying that there is a significant positive relationship between parentification and separation-individuation. There are also discussions about the existence of feelings of shame and guilt in both parentification and separation-individuation issues. However, there is no study in the literature showing that feelings of shame and guilt may have a mediating role in parentification and separation-individuation issues. One of the contributions of this study is the finding that feelings of shame and guilt have a mediation role in the relationship between these two concepts.

It is also known that the level and intensity of shame and guilt feelings can cause these feelings to function in an adaptive or maladaptive way. Accordingly, seeing that these two emotions can have a mediating role may help reduce the possible negative consequences of parentification and separation-individuation issues by working on these emotions. In particular, mental health professionals who practice individual psychotherapy may focus on whether there are separation-individuation issues in clients with family role confusions. During this evaluation, it may also be beneficial for mental health professionals to focus on how shame and guilt function in their clients.

Finally, it has been a study that can shed light on possible preventive studies for institutions or individuals carrying out family studies. Especially since the enmeshment of parent-child roles of individuals in the family may inhibit individuals' individuation processes, this study may lead to preventive and educative studies on the importance of family roles and boundaries and the possible intense feelings of shame and guilt that may arise.

### **CONCLUSION**

The separation-individuation process and the emotions of shame and guilt are concepts that are parts of psychological developmental growth. Moreover, the structuring of the

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separation-individuation and emotions of shame and guilt in the developmental process may affect the social relations, self-perceptions, functionality and autonomy of individuals in their future lives. In order for individuals to develop these concepts in a positive way, it is significant that they have a good enough, adaptive, functional family environment that has clear interpersonal boundaries and supports psychological development. The situation of parentification, which may arise from a dysfunctional family environment, may reach a level that hinders psychological developmental processes of individuals. In line with all these mentioned, the mediating role of shame and guilt in the relationship between parentification and separation-individuation was examined in this study. The results showed that shame and guilt had a positive and significant mediating role. These findings not only serve to gain deeper understanding of the parentification and separation-individuation relationship, they have also contributed to psychotherapy settings and to preventive studies.

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**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

		$\underline{X}$ SD	Min.-Max.
Age		28.14 ± 9.09	18-58
		n	%
Gender	Women	259	67.4
	Men	125	32.6
The people who living	With Parents	185	48.2
	With The Relatives	12	3.1
	With wife/husband	86	22.4
	Alone	50	13.0
	Other	51	13.3
Mother alive	Yes	367	95.6
	No	17	4.4
Father alive	Yes	340	88.5
	No	44	11.5
	None	44	11.5
Number of Siblings	1	142	37.0
	2	85	22.1
	3	52	13.5
	4 and over	61	15.9

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Row of birth	First child	195	50.8
	2.child	98	25.5
	3.child	49	12.8
	4. and over	42	10.9
Living same city with family	Yes	244	63.5
	No	140	36.5
Father marital status	Married	305	79.4
	Separate	9	2.3
	Divorced	20	5.2
	Married again	17	4.4
	Widow	3	.8
	Other	30	7.8
Mother marital status	Married	300	78.1
	Separate	8	2.1
	Divorced	30	7.8
	Married again	6	1.6
	Widow	27	7.0
	Other	13	3.4

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**Table 2**

*Reliability Statistics for Scales*

Measures	Cronbach's alpha	N of Items
<b>PCS-A</b>		
General Parentification	0.864	22
<b>Separation-Individuation</b>	0.923	39
<b>The Trait Shame and Guilt</b>		
Shame	0.867	5
Guilt	0.809	5

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables*

	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Minimum	Maximum
<b>PCS-A</b>					
General Parentification	384	46.33	12.72	21.0	87.0
<b>Separation-Individuation</b>	384	168.03	56.20	44.0	328.0
<b>The Trait Shame and Guilt</b>					
Shame	384	11.46	5.43	5.0	25.0
Guilt	384	13.51	5.07	5.0	25.0

**Table 4**

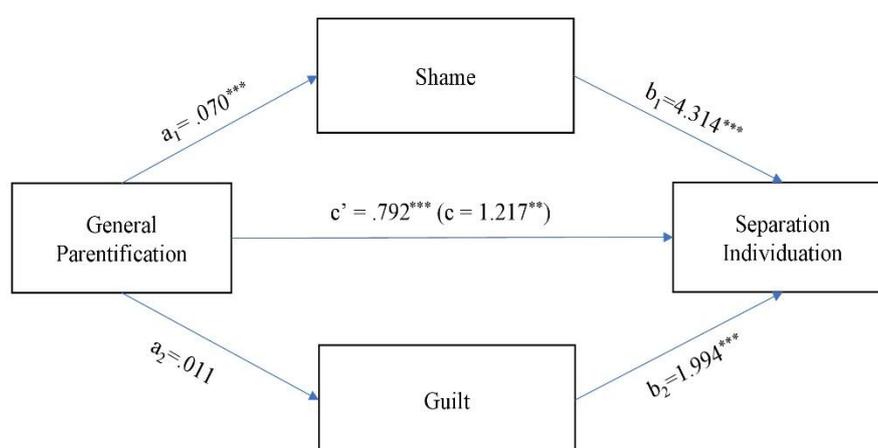
*Correlations of the General Parentification, Separation-Individuation, Shame and Guilt*

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		General Parentification	Separation-Individuation	Shame	Guilt
General Parentification	r	1			
	p				
Separation-Individuation	r	.275**	1		
	p	<.001			
Shame	r	.164**	.587**	1	
	p	.001	<.001		
Guilt	r	.155**	.533**	.781**	1
	p	.002	<.001	<.001	

**Figure 1**

*Parallel Multi - Mediation Model for Shame and Guilt on the Relationship Between General Parentification and Separation-Individuation*



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001