Is Parentification a Gendered Issue?

Examining the Relevance of Gender in Adults' Lived Experiences of Childhood Parentification

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Abstract

Parentification is commonly discussed in the psychological literature as a parent–child role reversal, in which children are often positioned in families as pseudo adults/parents (Hooper, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). Interest in this phenomenon has largely been psychological and relevant literature has produced significant intra-personal insights (Jurkovic, 1997). However, an inherent limitation of existent research has been a failure to thoroughly examine the significance of gender affiliations within parentification dynamics. To address this research gap, I set out to explore the extent to which notions of gender are significant in adult participants' recollections of parentification from a feminist perspective. The participants involved in this study include 9 females and 3 males, who self-identify with experiences of parentification. Applying a feminist-thematic analysis this study indicates that parentification is gendered in a number of significant ways. Gendered parenting norms influence mothers' and fathers' involvement in parentification. Additionally, this study shows that whether gender is relevant to the participants' parentification tasks depends on the sex formation of the role reversal they are involved in. Participants in same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) perform gender-normative tasks. In contrast, the tasks performed by the males in cross-sex dynamics (mother–son) are gender subversive. Further, this study shows that gender difference influences the outcomes of parentification, the nature of adult relationships, mental health and the seeking of professional psychological assistance. The findings of this study underline the usefulness of replacing a gender-blind perspective of parentification with a feminist understanding.

Declaration

I, Melanie Ann Thomas, declare that the PhD thesis entitled 'Is Parentification a Gendered Issue? Examining the Relevance of Gender in Adults' Lived Experiences of Childhood Parentification' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Melanie Thomas

6th December 2017

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Margaret Joy because you deserve to be in the foreground! Thank you for all your kindness and support, I love you!

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Contents

Introduction

Parent-child role reversals have been largely theorised, debated and researched from a psychological perspective (Winton, 2003). While this literature has provided many important insights, primarily regarding the consequences and outcomes of parentified children, the relevance of the social construction of gender has been largely overlooked. Nonetheless, parentification research has shown that mothers are more likely to parentify their children than fathers (Mayseless, Bartholomew, Henderson & Trinket, 2004; Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings & Emery, 2008; Perrin, Ehrenberg & Hunter, 2013; Rowa, Kerig & Geller, 2001). However, limited attempts have been made to examine the influence of gendered parenting norms on mothers' greater parentification of children. Indeed, these social expectations are barely even framed in the discussion. Studies have also shown that daughters are typically parentified more than sons (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier, Herke, Nickel, Egle & Hardt, 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh, Shulman, Bar-On & Tsur, 2006). Yet, this sex pattern is often downplayed with daughters and sons frequently conceptualised as 'parentified *children*'— rather than girls and boys—as discussed in Chapter 1. Some of the detrimental outcomes of parentification, such as problematic adult relationships (Baggett, Shaffer & Muetzelfeld, 2015; Jurkovic, 1997; Valleau, Bergner & Horton, 1995; West & Keller, 1991) and poor mental health (Abraham & Stein, 2013; Jankowski & Hooper, 2014, Hooper, DeCoster, White & Voltz, 2011; Hooper & Wallace, 2010, Sandage, 2010) have also been examined largely without considering the implications of broader gender affiliations. Consequently, in this thesis I examine the extent to which gender is relevant to parentification from a feminist perspective. It explores the significance of gender in both female and males' recollections of their parentification experiences.

Defining Parentification

Parentification has been defined as a role reversal in the family unit in which excessive and unsuitable roles that are normally reserved for adults are given to children (Hooper, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). The term 'parentification' was coined by family therapists Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) in Invisible *L*oyalties: Reciprocity in *I*ntergenerational *F*amily *T*herapy. This book focused on themes of loyalty and obligation in family dynamics and included discussions of parentification. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) defined

parentification as implying 'the subjective distortion of a relationship as if one's partner or even children were his parent. Such distortion can be done in a wishful fantasy or, more dramatically, through dependent behaviour' (p. 151).

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1973) definition of parentification is not adopted in this thesis because keeping with the dominant language of the time they used male pronouns in their description. In doing so, they implied that parentification was an unconscious, psychological process existing in the minds of men. Female experiences were consequently ignored in their description. Owing to the androcentric nature of Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1973) definition, this study alternatively adopts Chase's (1999) definition. Breaking from earlier practices, Chase used pronouns pertaining to women and men, and tacitly acknowledged both female and male experiences of parentification. In her book *Burdened Children: Theory, Research and Treatment of Parentification*, Chase stated that 'parentification entails a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own need for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for logistical or emotional needs of a parent' (p. 5). She elaborates that children learn to sacrifice their own needs because when parental dependency on the child is too great, children may receive the message that their needs are less important. This tends to suggest some obligation on the child's part rather than an unadulterated willingness to sacrifice their own needs. Lisa Hooper (2007), who has extensively studied parentification from a psychological perspective, highlighted the general suitability of Chase's definition as 'a good starting point for better understanding this construct' (p. 217).

Chase's (1999) emphasis on the child sacrificing their own needs to support their mother and/or father is an important feature of her definition and is used to distinguish parentified children from children who provide more appropriate levels of support and assistance in their families. According to Jurkovic (1997), what distinguishes parentified children from other children is the minimal recognition and support received by parentified children in return for their contributions; non-parentified children are properly acknowledged and receive reciprocal care, support and guidance (Jurkovic, 1997).

An important feature of parentification is the types of responsibilities and tasks undertaken by daughters and sons. For example, Chase's definition (1999) notes that parentification may entail a functional and/or emotional role; commonly known in role reversal literature as 'emotional and instrumental parentification'. Jurkovic (1997), who assisted in establishing

these differences in his book *Lost Childhoods: The Plight of the Parentified Child,* stated that emotional parentification involves tasks such as 'protecting family members, serving as a confidant, companion, or mate-like figure, mediating family conflicts, and providing support, nurturance and comfort' (pp. 8–9). He added that instrumental parentification involves responsibility for 'concrete functional tasks that are necessary for the physical maintenance and support of the family, such as childcare, grocery shopping, cooking, nursing an ill or disabled parent, and earning income' (p. 8). Jurkovic's (1997) descriptions of emotional and instrumental parentification provide a good basis for understanding the types of tasks and responsibilities involved in the parentification experience.

As a construct, parentification is most applicable in a Western cultural context. In *Children as Caregivers: Parental and Parentified Children*, sociologist and family therapist Chester Winton (2003) argued that the concept of parentification is affected by cultural variance based on the shared expectations of childhood within any given culture. Inherent in Western understandings of childhood is the notion that children are vulnerable and dependant (Laird, 2016; Wyness, 2006). Thus, childhood is a time suspended from adult responsibilities, such as paid work, and is focused instead on schooling and play (Laird, 2016). Consequently, parentification is viewed here as a Western construct, where a normal childhood is understood ideally as a time of freedom, particularly from adult responsibilities. Suitably, this research project is set in a Western cultural setting with participants who mostly experienced parentification living in Australia.

The contemporary idea that childhood is as a phase distinct from adulthood is a social construct that emerged around the 17th century (Aries, 1973). This understanding of childhood is the only way in which parentification can be considered a psychological event in a Western person's life. Prior to modern understandings, children were viewed as small adults; no distinction was made in the ways in which adults and children dressed, worked and played. Children could not be conceptulised as parentified or adultified because a contemporary concept of 'childhood' as a distinct developmental period had not yet arose. At this time, the family, or what Stone (1977) refers to as 'the open lineage family', was also different from the one in which parentified children would be able to exist. A striking feature of 'the open lineage family' was that it was embedded in kin networks; a far cry from the modern privatized nuclear family of the coming centuries. Children were socialized from a young age via an extended network of elders through work and play. Due to high infant and

child mortality rates, however, relations between parents and children were rather remote; thus, it seemed counterproductive to invest in children emotionally (Stone, 1977). As the concept of childhood, as a separate and distinct phase, began to emerge, families become more prominent as a private place to nurture children (Aries, 1973; Stone, 1977). Children were more enmeshed within their families and became more emotionally dependant on their parents. This is the modern setting in which parentification is able to exist. Taking this into account, parentification must be considered as historically situated within contemporary understandings of childhood and the nuclear family.

Although parentification is largely a Western term used to describe children's caregiving responsibilities, some of the 'young carers' literature (e.g., Becker, 2007) has identified and discussed global perspectives on children's caregiving. Becker (2007) stated that, globally, children's informal care needs to be viewed on a 'caregiving continuum'. He suggested that children providing inappropriate levels of care have much in common despite the variations involved in living in either developed or developing countries. According to Becker, in all countries, children providing excessive care to others need 'to be recognized, identified, analysed and supported as a distinct group of 'vulnerable children' (p. 23). Therefore, although Winton (2003) asserts cultural diversity in understandings of parentification, a notion accepted in this thesis, it is also important to acknowledge that children providing inapproiate levels of care are still viewed by some (e.g., Becker, 2007) as a global concern. Nonetheless, a global perspective cannot be further addressed in this thesis because most participants interviewed for this study experienced parentification whilst living in Australia.

Defining Gender

Gender is defined and conceptualised in this thesis as a social construct. The notion that gender is not something individuals are born with, but are socialised into, comes from feminist and sociological understandings of gender (Kramer & Beutel, 2015). For instance, Kramer and Beutel (2015) have stated that 'sociologists take the view that gender is socially constructed; that is, the differences between females and males are not based in some biologically determined truth' (p. 3). Building on this understanding, traditional notions of gender are defined in terms of endorsing socially desirable roles stereotypical for women and men (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017). Gender is also conceptualised as a 'system of power differences between men and women' (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015, p. 208) in which

masculinity symbolises authority, social power and influence, and femininity symbolises a lack of authority and is associated with little power, social status and influence (Brownmiller, 2014; Connell, 2005). In contrast to gender, sex is defined according to biological markers, such as possessing male or female genitalia and secondary sex characteristics (Newton, 2017, p. 5). The purpose of making a distinction between sex and gender is to emphasise that notions of gender are socially constructed rather than essential features of being a woman or man.

The Importance of Examining Gender in Parentification

Most scholarship ignores the relevance of gender in role reversals. Indeed, argued in Chapter 1, is the idea that parentification is typically conceptualised as a gender-blind process. In this section, I outline four key areas of literature that have failed to thoroughly examine the extent to which the social construction of gender is relevant to parentification.

1) The Role of Mothers and Fathers in Parentification

The role that mothers and fathers play in expecting pseudo-parenting support from their children is an important one. In role reversal literature, parents are often described as precursors who are responsible for producing parentification dynamics with their children (Byng-Hall, 2008; Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski & Tomek, 2012). However, establishing the role played by *both* parents has mostly been overlooked. Mothers and fathers are often conceptualised in gender-free terms, making it difficult to examine any differences in the roles they play. While parents are frequently conceptualised as free from gender affiliations, quantitative research shows that mothers are more likely to parentify their children than fathers (Mayseless et al., 2004; Peris et al., 2008; Perrin et al., 2013; Rowa et al., 2001). As a result, mothers are often (implicitly) viewed as responsible for the parentification of children, while the role of fathers is ignored. Consequently, examining the relevance of gendered parenting norms on the roles played by both mothers and fathers is crucial. Since the role of gendered parenting norms has only been speculatively explored in the role reversal literature, examining the significance of gender in relation to mothers' and fathers' contributions to parentification is imperative, and a key interest of this research.

2) Daughters' and Sons' Parentification Tasks and Responsibilities

Daughters and sons are also typically conceptualised as free from gender affiliations, frequently being labelled simply as 'parentified children'. Despite this downplaying of gender, some studies have noted that the parentification tasks and responsibilities performed by daughters and sons are gender normative (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). Harrison and Albanese (2012) observed that some daughters perform emotional caregiving and domestic labour traditionally associated with females, while McMahon and Luthar (2007) described sons performing gender-normative tasks, such as maintaining the garden, fixing items and taking the rubbish out. However, there have been few examinations of whether the parentification tasks performed by daughters and sons are gender normative in both same-sex (mother–daughter, father–son) and cross-sex (mother–son, father–daughter) dynamics. To address this gap, this study considers the significance of gender normativity in the enactment of parentification tasks for daughters and sons in both same-sex (mother–daughter, father–son) and cross-sex (mother–son) role reversals. Father–daughter dyads are not examined because appropriate participants did not volunteer to be a part of this study (see Chapter 2).

3) Outcomes of Parentification: Unmet Needs in Childhood and Problematic Adult Relationships

The outcomes of parentification often have serious ongoing effects on adult life. Childhood role reversals are known to significantly influence adult relationships (Baggett et al., 2015; Jurkovic, 1997; Valleau et al., 1995). Children who have experienced parentification frequently find themselves involved in destructive adult relationships because they were inadequately exposed to equal standards of give and take in caregiving relationships (Jurkovic, 1997). The legacy of insufficiently met childhood needs often results in lifelong servitude, helping others while sacrificing one's own need for care (Chase, 1999; Reeves, 1999). Consequently, children who experience parentification often engage in 'compulsive caregiving' as adults (Meier et al., 2014; Reeves, 1999; Siegel & Silverstein, 1994; West & Keller, 1991). However, most research has overlooked examining whether both females and males perceive that their needs were unmet in childhood. Further, most research has overlooked examining whether problematic relationships are experienced by females and males alike. Consequently, this study aims to examine whether both females and males experience unmet childhood needs and problematic adult relationships, and whether gender plays a role in participants' accounts.

4) Outcomes of Parentification: Poor Mental Health and Seeking Professional Psychological Assistance

Parentification can have negative effects on mental health. Parentification is often associated with severe psychological impairments such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, eating dysfunction, substance misuse and even suicide (Abraham & Stein, 2013; Jankowski & Hooper, 2014, Hooper, DeCoster, White & Voltz, 2011; Hooper & Wallace, 2010, Sandage, 2010). Despite the well-established relationship between parentification and mental health, very few scholars have explored whether gender affiliations are found in accounts of poor mental health reported by females and males who were parentified as children. This is a significant oversight, as feminist and sociological research shows that women and men have reported mental health concerns for different reasons, many of which are attributable to gender socialisation (Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013; Jack, 1991).Females often connect their psychological distress to relational concerns (Jack, 1991; Meyer, Schwartz & Frost, 2008) while males often externalise negative mental health with aggression and risk-taking (Rice et al., 2015; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013). This shows that women and men's emotional lives can be connected to their social categories; a view embraced in the sociology of emotions research (Erickson & Cottingham, 2014), yet significantly missing in the parentification literature. This study, therefore, strongly emphasises the importance of examining the relationship between gender affiliations and poor mental health.

Surprisingly few scholars have assessed whether females and males seek professional psychological assistance to mitigate the negative outcomes of their role reversals. Minimal research has been conducted on whether there are differences between females' and males' accounts of seeking professional psychological help, in the context of parentification. This is alarming, especially considering that other psychological research (not parentification research) has established that females are more likely to seek professional psychological help than males (Buffel, Van de Velde & Bracke, 2014; Mackenzie, Gekoski & Knox, 2006; Yamawaki, 2010; Yousaf, Popat & Hunter, 2015). Whether this is also true of females and males who have experienced parentification is largely unknown. This has a potentially significant bearing on the recovery of males, if they are less likely to seek help. Accordingly, this study investigates whether both females and males report seeking professional psychological help, as well as the relevance of gender affiliations to their reports.

Studies have shown that parentified individuals are likely to pursue a career in caring professions, such as counselling and psychology. (Dicaccavo, 2002, 2006; Jurkovic, 1997; Nikcevic, Kramolisova-Advani & Spada, 2007). However, as with other areas of parentification scholarship, little is known about whether both females and males pursue careers in the caring professions. Despite the best efforts of parentification scholars to outline the significance of parentification as a motivation for pursuing such careers, previous efforts have overlooked examining the potency of gender standards on the career choices of adults in the context of parentification histories. This study examines whether both females and males report pursuing careers in caring professions.

Methodological Approach

Studies that have aimed to examine differences in female and male experiences of parentification have predominantly adopted quantitative research methodologies (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006). As these studies are based on statistical analyses, they tend to lack in-depth accounts of the extent to which gender is relevant in parentification experiences. Through the adoption of qualitative methodology, this research project aims to provide a more nuanced and complex account of participants' parentification experiences, allowing for examination of the extent to which notions of gender are relevant. Supporting the approach taken here qualitative methodology is generally viewed as useful in capturing a richly descriptive account of the topic under investigation (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015; Merriam, 2009).

A feminist theoretical perspective has been adopted to examine the relevance of gender in participants' narratives. This approach is deemed necessary because feminist theorists, such as Jovanovski (2017) and others (i.e., Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989) have recognised that gender is a political and social construct that aims to keep women in a subordinate position. As it currenlty stands, the existent parentification literature (e.g., Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006) has a tendency to ignore this view of gender, and thus, a feminist analysis is long overdue. This study's feminist lens draws on Braun and Clarke's (2006) theoretical thematic analysis involving six phases of research detailed in Chapter 2. Braun and Clarke suggested a theoretical thematic analysis is useful when the researcher brings a particular interest to a topic (i.e., a feminist perspective). The benefit of applying a

theoretical thematic analysis lies in its flexibility to apply different theoretical lenses as well as its compatibility with constructivist epistemological approaches. The flexibility inherent in applying Braun and Clarke's phases of analysis allowed me to apply a feminist perspective to my own analysis and focus on examining the extent to which gender is relevant in participant's narratives.

Development of the Thesis

The development of this thesis was motivated, in part, by my own experience of parentification. I grew up with a mother and a father in a home characterised by a patriarchal structure and gendered notions of power. I became one of my mother's only confidantes as she grappled with feelings of helplessness. My early adult life was characterised by psychologically and physically abusive relationships, ones in which I was often positioned as the selfless and caregiving woman.

An awareness of my personal experience with parentification first arose during my undergraduate studies, which included a major in psychology. I discovered the topic of parentification in the psychological literature. I developed an intellectual interest in the topic and self-identified with the construct. Upon commencing this dissertation, I had a gender-blind understanding of parentification that had been shaped by the literature I had read. Due to my personal experience with parentification and selfless caregiving experiences, the notion that parentification requires self-sacrifice on behalf of the child resonated strongly with me (see Chase, 1999). For many years, I believed that my experience of self-sacrifice was due to my childhood experience of parentification. However, as my interest in feminist theory grew, I began to identify broader social roots of the struggles with self-sacrifice. Feminist psychologist Dana Crowley Jack's (1991) book *Silencing the Self* was a significant turning point in my understanding that self-sacrifice is a larger sociocultural phenomena that typically affects women. This sparked my curiosity and caused me to wonder whether parentification is a phenomenon that affects mainly young girls and women. I began to suspect that there were important unexamined links between the social construction of gender and parentification. This project developed as a quest to understand the extent to which gender is relevant in parentification processes.

Research Aim, Question and Contribution to Knowledge

The primary aim of this research is to examine the significance of gender in parentification experiences from a feminist perspective. This research project is guided by the following research question: 'how relevant are notions of gender in parentification experiences?' Noting the failure of previous research to adequately account for the affects of gender in experiences of parentification, this study examines:

- The significance of gendered parenting norms in terms of how participants discussed their mothers' and fathers' roles in parentification.

- The incidence of whether both female and male participants performed gender-normative parentification tasks in both same-sex (mother–daughter, father–son) and cross-sex (mother–son) role reversals.

- The incidence of whether both female and male participants experienced unmet needs in childhood and provided accounts of problematic adult relationships.

- The relevance of gender in female and male participants' accounts of poor mental health and the incidence of whether both female and male participants sought professional psychological assistance and pursued careers in the caring professions.

This thesis's contribution to parentification theory is to explore the significance of gender in both female and male participants' accounts of role reversal experiences. By examining the role of gender in parentification, it adds to feminist theorising by enabling scholars to continually identify and challenge patriarchal oppression through the confines of gender.

Thesis Overview

Chapter 1 substantiates the importance of this study's relatively novel approach to parentification by providing a literature review of the largely gender-blind assumptions underlying existent research on parentification. While much of the literature reviewed discusses parentification without reference to gender, I also draw attention to role reversal research that shows mothers often parentify their children more than fathers, specifically arguing that whether gendered dimensions are involved in this sex-pattern is often overlooked. The chapter continues with a discussion of how daughters and sons are often considered without reference to gender and are often described under the generic and gender-blind term 'parentified children'. I highlight the few studies that have offered support for the idea that females and males perform parentification tasks that are gender normative. However, the chapter highlights a gap in the research making it unclear whether gender-

normative tasks are performed by children according to the sex formation of their role reversal. In the second part of the chapter, the limitations of literature on the negative outcomes of parentification, such as problematic adult relationships and poor mental health, is discussed, especially the difficulty of determining whether these consequences are experienced by both females and males, whether gender affiliations are involved and whether they are relevant.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodological procedures adopted to conduct this study. I describe the feminist epistemological approach guiding the study, discuss my role in the research process and consider the usefulness of a feminist theoretical perspective for analysing participants' interview data. I also justify the application of qualitative research in terms of its ability to provide an in-depth account of the extent to which gender is relevant in participants' experiences. My approach is contrasted with parentification studies that have attempted to examine the relevance of gender through quantitative analysis (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006). The participant recruitment process is outlined, and a brief account of the participants' socio-demographic backgrounds is provided. In the interests of transparency, I explain the decisions involved in conducting this study's feminist-thematic analysis, as adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) data analysis guidelines.

Chapter 3 focuses on discussing and analysing the involvement of mothers and fathers in participants' parentification experiences, and examines the relevance of gender affiliations in their accounts. Most participants indicated that their mothers were more involved in role reversals than their fathers. Fathers were often described as distant parenting figures. It is argued that mothers' and fathers' adherence to gendered parenting norms plays an important role in providing mothers with more opportunity to seek pseudo-parenting support from their daughters and, at times, their sons. Conversely, gendered parenting norms provide fathers with less opportunity to parentify their children. In contrast to most parentification scholarship, which typically ignores the role of men (Leon & Rudy, 2005; Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall, Valentino & Borkowski, 2012), in this study, fathers are viewed as contributing to mothers' parentification of children. Chapter 3 challenges the notion that mothers are individually responsible for the occurrence of parentification by suggesting that their psychological distress and childish behaviours are

linked to gender affiliations and inequalities. The chapter concludes that gender plays an important part in mothers' and fathers' roles in parentification experiences.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to examining whether the parentification tasks performed by participants were gender normative for those in both same-sex and cross-sex role reversals. This chapter illustrates that, for the participants in same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son), their parentification tasks and responsibilities were gender normative. Conversely, for those in cross-sex role reversals (mother–son), parentification tasks and responsibilities were gender subversive. The conclusion drawn from this chapter is that same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) encouraged the performance of gender-normative tasks, in contrast to those in cross-sex (mother–son) formations. This suggests that daughters' and sons' parentification tasks are guided by mothers' and fathers' gender needs, rather than their own gender socialisation.

Chapter 5 considers the ongoing effects of parentification in participants' adult lives. It examines whether both female and male participants experienced unmet needs in childhood and problematic adult caregiving, and whether notions of gender are relevant to their accounts. Both female and male participants reported unmet needs in childhood. However, females tended to report more negative perceptions than males. Further, females reported more problematic adult relationships than their male counterparts. This can be explained by the role that gender socialisation plays in reporting by females and males. The chapter concludes that, by encouraging the effects of parentification for females and buffering the effects for males, notions of gender played a role in unmet needs in childhood and in adult relationships.

Chapter 6 considers the ongoing psychological effects of parentification on female and male participants. It examines whether notions of gender influenced females' and males' reporting of poor mental health and whether both females and males sought professional psychological assistance, and chose careers in the caring professions. This chapter shows that gender socialisation plays a role in how female and male participants discuss their poor mental health. This suggests that the relationship between parentification and poor mental health is not straightforward. Females also report seeking ongoing psychological assistance to mitigate the psychological effects of parentification. Conversely, males provide few accounts of receiving psychological assistance. This reflects gender norms; in particular, the greater social acceptance of females seeking professional therapeutic assistance (Shea, Wong,

Nguyen & Baghdasarian, 2017; Shea & Wong, 2012), with males typically expected to cope on their own (O'Neil, 2008; Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer & Hubbard, 2011). In this way, sociocultural expectations detrimentally affect parentified males' ability to seek assistance to alleviate the psychological impact of their role reversals. Further, the females and males parentified by their mothers all chose careers in the caring professions. Therefore, this chapter argues that while gender played a role in females choosing a career in the caring sector, it did not affect males' choices.

My analysis of the participants' interview data indicates that parentification is largely a gendered process. The only exceptions were reported by males who were parentified by their mothers. To some extent, parentification is considered a gender-subversive process for them. Yet, as I argue in the conclusion to the thesis, such notions should be treated with caution, as male participants also reported secondary and tacit alliances with a traditional notion of manhood. Further, parentification is considered most detrimental to females, as it reinforces traditional notions of gender socialisation and results in excessive engagement with gender-normative tasks. Overall, the females involved in this study reported more detrimental effects than the males. The second most damaging reports of parentification came from the male parentified by his fathers, as the relationship reinforced a traditional notion of manhood. Conversely, males who were parentified by their mothers described role reversals as the least detrimental, partly because they were able to disengage with a conventional notion of manhood. Observing the futility of research that takes a gender-blind approach to the study of parentification, this study concludes with a call for further research exploring the role and influence of gender in parentification.

Chapter 1:

A Literature Review of Parentification—A Gender-Blind Approach

This chapter provides a literature review of parentification scholarship. It focuses on identifying gaps where the role of gender in parent–child role reversals has been overlooked. It is argued that significant areas of role reversal literature adhere to a gender-blind perspective of parentification. For example, the role of mothers and fathers is typically conceptualised without considering the influence of gendered parenting norms. Similarly, most role reversal literature conceptualises daughters and sons as largely free from gender affiliations. However, some research has indicated that the parentification tasks preformed by daughters and sons are gender normative (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). Nevertheless, I note that there has been limited research indicating whether those involved in both same-sex and cross-sex role reversals perform gender-appropriate tasks. Literature on the negative outcomes of parentification—that is, problematic adult relationships, poor mental health and the need to seek professional psychological assistance—are discussed in the second part of this chapter, highlighting how the intersection between role reversals and notions of gender have rarely been examined.

1.1 The Role of Mothers and Fathers in Parentification

When mothers and fathers are discussed in parentification literature they are often described as precursors who establish role reversal dynamics with their children (Byng-Hall, 2008; Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski & Tomek, 2012). The concern highlighted here is that mothers and fathers are often discussed using gender-blind terms; they are often referred to as 'parent/s' 'parental' and 'parent'. For example, Byng-Hall (2008) categorises mothers and fathers as one and states that the occurrence of parentification is often the result of the physical absence of a *parent* through death or divorce, *parental* dysfunction (such as physical illness/disability and/or psychological distress) *parental* conflict and *parental* attachment disorders. By using the terms 'parent' and 'parental', questions about sex and gender are left answered. Is it the mother or father who is physically absent? Do mothers and/or fathers have a physical illness/disability and/or psychological distress? Are gender politics relevant in parental conflict, and is it mothers and/or fathers who experience attachment disorders?

Adopting similar non-specific terms, in an article entitled 'Patterns of self-reported alcohol use, depressive symptoms, and body mass index in a family sample: The buffering effects of parentification', Hooper et al. (2012) also classifies mothers and fathers as one, thus, failing to address questions about sex and gender. She states that, *parents'* poor physical health, psychological distress and/or substance misuse are the three commonly cited antecedents to parentification across the family psychology and adolescent health literature. Over-using gender-blind terms dampens the need to explore whether it is mothers and/or fathers circumstances that influence the occurrence of parentification, and whether the role of socialised gender difference is significant. In an attempt to move away from a gender-blind paradigm and begin to understand the relevance of gendered socialisation on people's parenting behaviours, this thesis will explore whether gendered parenting norms create differences in mothers' and fathers' role in the parentification of their children.

Despite the otherwise common practice of overlooking the role of gender, some role reversal research has illustrated a pattern that differs according to parental sex (Mayseless et al., 2004; Perrin et al., 2013; Peris et al., 2008; Rowa et al., 2001). This quantitative research has shown that mothers are more likely than fathers to seek more pseudo-parenting support from their children. Investigating the role of both mothers and fathers in parentification, a rarity for a role reversal study, Perrin et al. (2013) reported that mothers relied on their children for caregiving support more than fathers. Consistent with Perrin et al. (2013), Peris et al. (2008) also found that mothers parentified their children more than fathers. They too stressed that highlighting the role of both parents made their study 'one of only a handful' (p. 639) that had obtained data from both mothers and fathers. Rowa et al. (2001) compared women with and without anorexia, and similarly found that in both participant groups that role reversals more frequently involved mothers. Although these studies (Peris et al., 2008; Perrin et al., 2013; Rowa et al., 2001) have provided quantitative evidence that mothers tend to parentify their children more than fathers, an explanation for this pattern is rarely provided, and the extent to which gendered parenting norms are involved has been left largely unexplored. Consequently, the role of gendered parenting norms in mothers' greater parentification of children will be examined in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Scholars who have studied parentification have only vaguely identified and discussed that gender norms may enhance mothers' needs for support from their children (Kelley et al., 2007; Stein, Riedel & Rotheram-Borus, 1999). Kelley et al. (2007) examined role reversals in

families and found that daughters experienced higher levels of parentification when their mothers were alcohol dependent. They stated that 'because mothers typically assume greater responsibility for the home, when a mother misuses alcohol the daughter may experience greater role-reversal' (p. 683). Similarly, Stein, Riedel and Rotheram-Borus (1999) investigated parentification in the context of children living with parents who had contracted HIV/AIDS. They found that having a mother with the illness was associated with children performing more household chores than in cases in which the father had the disease. These research studies suggest that when mothers were unable to engage in their gendered day-to-day responsibilities (such as looking after the home) they turned to their children for support. It would follow that fathers are less likely to parentify their children because they are not typically responsible for the upkeep of the home. However, this is yet to be thoroughly examined because the role of fathers has generally been overlooked in parentification research (i.e., Leon & Rudy, 2005; Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al., 2012). The role of gender in fathers not typically parentifying their children is investigated further in Chapter 3.

Despite adhering to largely a gender-blind perspective, scholars often focus on the mother's role in parentification. Indeed, researchers have frequently examined mother–child dyads alone (i.e., Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall, Valentino & Borkowski, 2012; Titzmann, 2012; Vulliez-Coady, Obsuth, Torreiro-Casal, Ellertsdottir & Lyons-Ruth, 2013). Over examining mother–child samples can inadvertently result in privileging these relationships. For instance, in an article entitled, 'When Mom has a Mental Illness: Role Reversal and Psychosocial Adjustment Among Emerging Adults', Abraham and Stein (2013, p. 601) argued that emerging adults (between the ages of adolescents and adulthood) are more likely to have better connections with their mothers than fathers. Additionally, by focusing on mother–child dyads—without also examining the role of fathers—researchers insinuate that there is no need to examine fathers, who may in fact play a role in mothers parentifying their children. In one example, Leon and Rudy (2005, p. 121) examined family processes and children's representations of parentification, but excluded data provided by fathers. Their study initially included data from both parents (in two thirds of the families involved). However, the researchers decided to remove the information provided by fathers because previous research indicated that mothers engaged more in role reversals (Leon & Rudy, 2005, p. 121). While previous research does indicate a heavy

involvement by mothers, the contribution of fathers also needs to be examined. Accordingly, fathers' roles in mothers' parentification of their children are explored in Chapter 3.

Instead of investigating the role that fathers might play in mothers' parentification of their children, most role reversal research highlight and individualise mothers' psychological flaws as largely responsible for this behaviour. For example, a mixed-method study by Mayseless et al. (2004) found that mothers were typically more involved in the parentification of their children than fathers. Emphasising mothers' involvement, Mayseless et al. noted in the families they studied the frequent 'presence of an incapacitated parent, typically the mother' (p. 82). Mothers were predominantly described by the researchers in individualistic terms and as 'psychologically weak' (p. 82): as depressed, passive or agoraphobic. Mothers were also described as physically or chronically ill, involved in substance misuse or as generally irresponsible and unstable. Four mothers were described as dominant rather than passive and were characterised as individually flawed due to their immaturity, parenting style, which was highly rejecting, and inability to contain their anger. Fathers' contributions to the mothers parentifying their children were largely not considered. While fathers were briefly mentioned, they were not presented in a favourable light—although it was noted by only one participant that their father could be counted on 'as a secure base or as [a] haven for the child' (p. 82). Nevertheless, fathers' contributions to mothers' parentification of their children were not generally examined, nor did fathers' roles receive the same intensity of interest as the roles of mothers.

Other researchers, such as McMahon and Luthar (2007) and Nuttall et al. (2012) have likewise produced knowledge that attaches little importance to the role of fathers. Their research is focused on mothers' perceived flaws and individual histories. For example, in their attempt to produce empirical evidence supporting the intergenerational transmission of role reversal, Nuttall et al. (2012) overlooked fathers' contributions and focused solely on investigating mothers' parentification histories. They found that mothers with a history of role reversal in their own childhoods were less attentive to their children's affective cues. According to them, mothers were less likely to provide their children with 'warmth, sensitivity and acceptance' (Nuttall et al., 2012, p. 772). In the context of their life histories, these women's poor parenting styles were emphasised as the main predictor of parentification; fathers' contributions are consequently not considered. Additionally, McMahon and Luthar (2007) also neglected to examine fathers in their research, which

showed that maternal psychopathology, particularly forms of personality disturbance, were related to excessive caregiving in children. By focusing on mothers alone, Abraham and Stein (2013) further diminished the importance of understanding father's contributions to the occurrence of mothers parentifying their children.

Importantly, some parentification research indicates that fathers contribute to mothers parentifying their children when fathers are physically missing in families (Chee, Goh & Kuczynski, 2014; Meier et al., 2014; Schier, Herke, Nickel, Egle & Hardt, 2015). The quantitative study conducted by Meier et al. (2014) found that the absence of fathers, due to divorce, was related to an increase in children's caretaking behaviours towards mothers. They suggested that this finding may either be specific to their sample or may reflect a trend that children are more likely to live with their mothers after divorce. Meier et al. (2014) suggested that children are not provided with the same opportunity to regularly care for their fathers as they are towards their mothers. In another quantitative study, Schier et al. (2015) found that fathers' absences increased the risk for maternal parentification, particularly for young females, although the exact reason for this remained unclear. Further, the qualitative study conducted by social workers Chee et al. (2014) found that fathers' absences, due to incarceration and divorce, left mothers relying on their children for support. These studies showed that, in some cases, when fathers are physically absent, maternal parentification increases. However, the relevance of gendered parenting norms to fathers' contributions to mothers parentifying their children have remained largely unexplored.

A further blind spot in existent parentification research lies in examining whether mothers' individual circumstances are connected to broader issues related to gender inequality. This limitation is visible in the work of Titzmann (2012), who studied mother–adolescent dyads to explore parentification among immigrant and native adolescents in Germany. Despite the fact that only mothers participated in his study, the article is saturated with gender-blind language. Titzmann (2012) insisted that *parental* dissatisfaction with partners predicted parentification among the native German sample. More specifically, when considering that only mothers were involved in his study, Titzmann's (2012) research illustrated that mothers' dissatisfaction with their partners predicted parentification in native adolescents in Germany. The mothers reported unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships, which consequently predicted the parentification of their children; yet, the factors influencing their dissatisfaction were overlooked. Gender inequalities may provide an explanation for this finding, but this

was not examined. Importantly, feminist scholars have emphasised that gender-based concerns are often associated with reports of dissatisfaction in heterosexual romantic relationships (Jack, 1991; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012).

A study conducted by Leon and Rudy (2005) entitled 'Family Processes and Children's Representations of Parentification' provides a further example of diminished attention to gender, and corresponding inequality. In their study, links between mothers' lives and the broader social context, which clearly involves gender politics, were not considered. Leon and Rudy showed that the frequency of interpersonal and unresolved conflicts between parents, as reported by mothers, was related to role reversal and vulnerability in children's drawings. Mothers identified the following areas of conflict in their intimate relationships: child rearing issues, career decisions, household tasks and difference of opinions regarding egalitarian versus traditional roles. The authors interpreted mothers' reports of conflict in their intimate relationships as mothers' personal defects, highlighting that 'it may be that mothers who have difficulty maintaining appropriate boundaries and role relationships with their children also have difficulty with boundary issues and roles in romantic relationships' (p. 135). Rather than attempting to understand mothers' concerns in relation to gender, Leon and Rudy interpreted mothers' reports from an individualistic, psychological perspective, conceptualising mothers as individually flawed. In contrast, this study's examination of participants' accounts of their mothers' contributions to parentification considers the mothers' personal circumstances in the context of broader gendered concerns.

Another area in which scholars have overlooked the possible connection between mothers' psychological traits and notions of gender is in reports suggesting that mothers who parentify their children often do so because they experience a sense of helplessness. In 'Defining the Caregiving System: Toward a Theory of Caregiving', Solomon and George (1996) argued that some mothers of role reversed toddlers describe a sense of helplessness in terms of raising their children; they see themselves as lacking effective skills as well as the resources to manage their child's behaviour. More recently, Vulliez-Coady et al. (2013) have also linked maternal role reversal or 'role-confusion' as they prefer to call it, with mothers reporting a sense of helplessness. Vulliez-Coady et al. (2013) measured helplessness in mothers, with questions such as 'I often depend on my child to teach me about the world', and 'I feel that my situation needs to be changed but I am helpless to do anything about it' (p. 9). Identifying with these statements, mothers described themselves in ways that reflected

feelings of disempowerment and lack of control. Importantly, Solomon and George (1996) and Vulliez-Coady et al. (2013) both viewed mothers' reports of helplessness exclusively in terms of individual and psychological processes, ignoring the effect that gender politics may have had on mothers' reports. Traditionally and historically, women have been kept helpless and dependant on men within patriarchal societies (Millett, 1977; Sultana, 2012). The legacy of this historical oppression of women may still influence some mothers who build their parenting role on foundations of helplessness rather than empowerment and leadership abilities. The effect of women's traditionally dependant role in patriarchal societies is explored in Chapter 3.

1.2 Daughters' and Sons' Parentification Tasks and Responsibilities

Most role reversal scholarship has largely overlooked examining the extent to which notions of gender are relevant influences on the types of parentification tasks and responsibilities performed by females and males. Sociologists Harrison and Albanese (2012) have raised concerns about the tendency of psychological researchers to ignore the role that gender plays in shaping different manifestations of parentification for females and males. They stated that 'for the most part, the literature on parentification treats the parentified child as gender neutral' (Harrison & Albanese, 2012, p. 5). Their claim is supported by the predominantly gender-free accounts of parentified females and males within role reversal literature, in which the genderless terms used to describe mothers and fathers are also used to refer to daughters and sons. Instead of distinguishing daughters from sons, generic terms such as 'children' and 'child' are invariably used. For example, in Gilford and Reynolds's (2011) qualitative investigation of the effect of parentification on black female college students, language that specified that females had participated in the study was used sparingly. The authors predominantly used the term 'parentified children' to refer to the women who participated in the study (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011, p. 73), only occasionally stipulating that they had specifically researched females. Using language that does not explicitly demonstrate whether females and/or males are being researched may be seen as indicative of an overarching approach that tends to overlook the role of gender.

Even though gender is often overlooked in parentification literature, research has shown a sex pattern in the prevalence of parentified females and males. A significant body of role reversal research has concluded that females are more likely to experience role reversals than males (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon &

Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006). For example, Mercado (2003) investigated the effects of language brokering and parentification, revealing that females reported higher levels of role reversals than males. This was particularly burdensome for females, as higher levels of stress were related to higher levels of parentification. Villanueva and Buriel (2010) note that knowledge and behavioural expectations that are underpinned by gender difference can influence which child is recruited to perform language brokering for the family. They suggest that because girls are expected to be closer to their parents than boys, who are afforded more freedom away from the family, boys may be offered some level of protection from becoming the family's language broker. Similarly, Schier et al. (2015) found that young females were at greater risk of parentification than young males. The authors claimed that females were more at risk of parentification when a parent was missing. Yet, Schier et al. (2015) failed to investigate the influence of gender on this finding, and whether gender socialisation contributed to the types of tasks taken on by the young girls.

Most role reversal studies either show substantially higher rates of female participation, or focus exclusively on females (Castro, Jones & Mirsalimi, 2004; Hooper, Tomek, Bond & Reif, 2015, Fitzgerald et al., 2008). Hooper et al. (2015) and Castro et al. (2004) reported rates of female participation at 81 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively. However, it is barely acknowledged that females make up the greater proportion of participants in role reversal studies. The implications and significance of using only or mainly female samples is not generally emphasised. For example, Fitzgerald et al. (2008) examined parentification and its relation to family risk, child sex abuse and psychosocial adjustment in a sample of college women. However, the authors neglected to emphasise that their results do not necessarily apply to the parentification of males. Importantly, Jacobvitz, Riggs and Johnson (1999) suggested that the parentification of males manifests in different ways. Therefore, this research project proceeds from the view that, in the case of an exclusively or predominantly female sample, it is necessary to highlight that results relate to the parentification of females rather than males. Previous researchers, such as Fitzgerald et al. (2008), have tended to ignore these sex differences.

Contrasting the body of research that demonstrates females are more likely to be parentified than males (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al. 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al.

2006), some quantitative research has reported mixed findings (Castro et al., 2004; Hooper et al., 2015; Giles, 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007, Perrin et al., 2013; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). Surprisingly, some of this research has shown a higher rate of parentification in males than females (Hooper et al., 2015; Giles, 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). In their study, 'Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Parentification and Psychological Functioning: Comparisons Among a Nationwide University Sample', Hooper et al. (2015) found that males had a significantly higher rate of parent-focused parentification than females. Interpreting this finding, Hooper et al. (2015) contended that was either unique to their sample or could be accounted for by unmeasured factors such as birth order (p. 43). Additionally, unmeasured qualitative differences related to gender may also account for the greater parentification of males found in their study.

Some research has found no statistical difference between the parentification of females and males (Castro et al., 2004; Perrin et al., 2013; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). Perrin et al.'s (2013) research shows 'that adolescent boys are not invulnerable' to boundary diffusions, such as parentification, and 'should continue to be included in future studies' (p. 778). Even though females and males may report statistically similar levels of parentification, qualitative investigations may yield important differences. The notion that parentification is likely to be qualitatively different between the sexes has been suggested by Vulliez-Coady et al. (2013). According to the authors, their quantitative results indicated that 'both boys and girls appear to be equally exposed to pressures to take on undue responsibility for parental functioning' (Vulliez-Coady et al, 2013, p. 125). However, they also stated that, despite their findings, qualitative differences may still exist in the types of parentification that manifest between mothers and daughters and mothers and sons. Consequently, studies that show both females and males reporting statistically similar levels of parentification, such as Perrin et al. (2013) and Vulliez-Coady et al. (2013), may also be influenced by qualitative differences related to gender that were not examined.

Sociological researchers Harrison and Albanese (2012) showed that, based on gender difference, role reversals can be qualitatively different for females and males. In contrast to most of the quantitative research discussed in this chapter, their research stands out for its emphasis on investigating the social construction of gender on females' and males' parentification tasks and responsibilities. Investigating parentification in the context of parental military deployment, they suggested that the quantity and quality of work performed

by the females and males in their study was underpinned by sociocultural, gendered divisions of labour. For example, the authors found that females participated in more domestic work of all kinds while males provided more instrumental support, such as shovelling snow or collecting firewood. Further, females provided far more emotional work by acting as confidantes for their mothers, managing their mothers' anxiety and providing emotional care to their siblings. Fewer males demonstrated atypical behaviour, such as providing emotional and domestic support to their mothers, although, in one instance, a male stated that he performed vacuuming and tidying up around the house. However, in general, Harrison and Albanese's research demonstrated that the types of tasks undertaken by females and males were gender normative.

Supporting Harrison and Albanese's (2012) sociological study, occasional claims have been made in the psychological literature that males perform role reversal tasks associated with their gender (Khafi, Yates & Luthar, 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). For example, McMahon and Luthar (2007) indicated that males perform parentification tasks that are consistent with a traditional notion of manhood. They found that females reported more involvement in the care of their mothers. Surprisingly, they also found that females reported less responsibility for household chores than males. Although McMahon and Luthar (2007) explained that the quantitative questionnaire they used (i.e., the Child Caretaking Scale, Baker & Tebes, 1994) included items that were homogenous with tasks traditionally performed by males. The questionnaire consisted of items such as maintaining the garden, fixing items, emptying the rubbish and unaccompanied shopping. In a more recent study, Khafi et al. (2014) used the same questionnaire and replicated McMahon and Luthar's (2007) finding that males had higher levels of instrumental parentification than females. However, unlike McMahon and Luthar (2007), Khafi et al. (2014) did not report that the questionnaire they used was suitable for detecting instrumental parentification in males. Despite this limitation, both studies offer quantitative evidence that males undertake parentification tasks that are gender normative.

1.3 Do Sex Formations Matter?

Some sociological and psychological studies (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; Khafi et al., 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007) support the idea that females and males perform role reversal tasks that are associated with traditional gender stereotypes and socialisation. Yet, few overt attempts have been made to examine whether females and males perform gender-normative

tasks in both same-sex and cross-sex role reversals. For example, Harrison and Albanese (2012) did not explicitly confirm whether the daughters and sons they investigated were involved in same-sex or cross-sex dynamics. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain whether sex formation played a role in the children performing gender-appropriate tasks.

While minimal attempts have been made to explicitly examine same-sex and cross-sex role reversals on females and males performing gender-normative parentification tasks, a few studies support the idea that daughters perform emotional caregiving when in parentification dynamics with their mothers (Macfie, McElwain, Houts & Cox, 2005; Mayseless et al., 2004, Titzmann, 2012). Although produced from a gender-blind perspective, these studies demonstrate that when mothers parentify their daughters the provision of emotional support is the central component of a daughters' role. This thesis claims that this reflects conventional gender norms and socialisation. For example, in a mixed-method study by Mayseless et al. (2004), the parentification role among females, termed 'guardians and protectors' (p. 83), was based on providing emotional support to their mothers. According to Mayseless et al. (2008), daughters provided reassurance, guidance and an emotional anchor. These roles are often associated with normative sociocultural expectations (Furze et al., 2015; Kramer & Beutel, 2015; Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Further, Macfie et al. (2005) stated that when mothers are in the primary role of caretaker, which involves fostering and maintaining interpersonal relationships, 'mother role reversal with girls may take the form of daughter as caregiver' (p. 525).

Conversely, a qualitative study by Baggett et al. (2015) indicated that emotional care is not a central element of father–daughter parentification, when the father has a health concern. Baggett et al. (2015) explored the impact of father–daughter parentification on adult females and their romantic relationships, noting that 'paternal health could affect both the form of parentification taking place (more likely to be instrumental than emotional) and the perceived fairness of that parentification' (p. 777). Father–daughter role reversals have also been reported as involving elements of sexual abuse (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Mayseless et al., 2004, Schier et al., 2015). In the mixed-method study of Mayseless et al. (2004), three of the four women who experienced role reversal with their fathers stated that their parentification entailed a sexual component. One woman stated: 'he was intimate with me, not my mum. He would touch me inappropriately on a regular basis' (Mayseless et al., 2004, p. 84). Another woman stated that her father said he adored her and felt closer to her than her mother.

Unsurprisingly, Mayseless et al. (2004) noted that this 'spousified' group were 'the most troubled' (p. 84). In cases where father–daughter parentification involves sexual abuse, gender-based violence is not explicitly discussed due to the limitation of adopting a gender-blind perspective of role reversals studies.

Limited information is available regarding the types of tasks undertaken by males who are parentified by their fathers. This was confirmed by Jacobvitz et al. (1999) in their important chapter, 'Cross-Sex and Same-Sex Family Alliances, Immediate and Long-term Effects on Sons and Daughters'. Jacobvitz et al. (1999) claimed that little is actually known about father–son parentification. Nevertheless, the authors suggested that when father–son role reversals do occur, fathers may parentify their sons differently to mother–daughter formations. Jacobvitz et al. (1999) stated that:

> Perhaps fathers expect sons to take on major household responsibilities, such as holding a job at a younger age, attempt to live vicariously through their sons' athletic and academic achievements, and even encouraged their sons to engage in sexual experiences at an early age. (p. 41)

Jacobvitz et al. (1999) implied that fathers parentify their sons differently to how mothers parentify their daughters. However, they did not explicitly draw any connection between this and gendered standards and conventions. Instead, they suggested that more research is needed to identify whether fathers engage in role reversals with sons and, if so, what form the father–son parentification takes. Subsequently, Clerici and Vanin (2002), who created a culturally specific version of the parentification questionnaire for an Italian context, found that sons were parentified by non-working and alcohol dependant fathers. Clerici and Vanin suggested that when children find themselves substituting a parent, they do so by the process of identification with the parent's sex. However, they did not confirm the type of parentification tasks undertaken by sons, nor whether this was influenced by the same-sex (father–son) formation. Therefore, examining the type of parentification tasks performed by those in same-sex and cross-sex dynamics is an important research gap, and one that is addressed in Chapter 4.

Although not much is specifically known about father–son role reversals, some research indicates that even when parentified by their mothers, males perform instrumental parentification congruent with gender standards. Psychological researchers such as Khafi et al. (2014) and others (e.g., McMahon & Luthar, 2007) who have exclusively investigated

mother–child dyads have implicitly confirmed that sons perform tasks that are gender normative (e.g., fixing the garden and emptying the rubbish) rather than emotionally supportive. Importantly, sons' stronger engagement with instrumental tasks over emotional labour is consistent with traditional gender norms that encourage males to be stoic and less emotional (Hanlon, 2012; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1453). A significant qualitative study by Van Parys and Rober (2013) entitled 'Trying to Comfort the Parent: A Qualitative Study of Children Dealing with Parental Depression' showed support for the notion that sons are not typically willing to express emotional concern for their mothers. Two sons in their study stated that they were not worried about their mothers. Notably, when one son was asked whether he worried about his mother during the night, he replied 'no that didn't cross my mind' (Van Parys & Rober, 2013, p. 335). According to Van Parys and Rober (2013), the mothers explained that when their sons showed less sensitivity it was due to them just being boys.

Conversely, some qualitative studies have indicated that sons do perform a variety of emotional and instrumental parentification tasks when parentified by their mothers. For example, Chee et al.'s (2014) qualitative study, 'Oversized Loads: Child Parentification in Low-Income Families and Underlying Parent–Child Dynamics', noted that males performed a variety of both emotional and instrumental tasks to assist their mothers. The males in their study performed duties that were not necessarily influenced by conventional notions of gender, such as washing the dishes and cleaning, looking after siblings, attending to their mother's physical and emotional needs and encouraging their mothers to share their worries with them. These young males also displayed a concern with family finances. They saved money, curbed their desire for unnecessary items and monitored the family's debt and expenditure. Although research that has shown that males are more likely to engage in instrumental parentification congruent with 'men's work'—even when they are parentified by their mothers (Khafi et al. 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007)—it seems that some young males defy gender standards and engage in both emotional and instrumental parentification towards their mothers. This indicates that gender stereotypes are perhaps less relevant in some mother–son dynamics. There are mixed findings in this area and a lack of research that overtly examines the influence of sex-formation pairings on performing gender-appropriate tasks. Chapter 4 of this thesis therefore aims to address this research gap.

1.4 Outcomes of Parentification: Unmet Childhood Needs and Adult Relationships

Role reversal studies have found a relationship between parentification and problematic adult relationships (Baggett et al., 2015; Levine, 2009; Valleau et al., 1995). Parentified children who learned to subjugate their own need for care to attend to the needs of their parents may find themselves in destructive relationships during adulthood that mimic this pattern (Jurkovic, 1997; West & Keller, 1991). An important aspect of parentification scholarship suggests that role reversals foster 'compulsive caregiving'. West and Keller (1991, p. 425) were among the first scholars to discuss links between parentification and compulsive caregiving. Compulsive caregiving suggests that those exhibiting it 'may engage in many close relationships but always in the role of giving care, never that of receiving it' (Bowlby, 1977, p. 207 cited in West & Keller, 1991, p. 425). However, the question of whether both females and males perceive that their needs were unmet in childhood, and whether, subsequently, they experienced problematic adult relationships, was not explicitly confirmed.

Rather than making comparisons with males and exploring the relevance of notions of gender, some researchers who have studied parentification from a psychological perspective (e.g., Baggett et al. 2015; Valleau et al., 1995) have implicitly supported the idea that only females experience problematic adult relationships. In one example, quantitative evidence presented by Valleau et al. (1995) confirmed the connection between compulsive caretaking practices that create problematic relationships and parentification in female subjects. In 'Parentification and Caretaker Syndrome: An Empirical Investigation', Valleau et al. (1995) noted in their methodology that parentification and caretaking syndrome are issues that affect females more often than males. Therefore, they recruited females to participate in the study. However, as with other scholarship discussed in this chapter, Valleau et al. (1995) downplayed this decision; they also downplayed the association between females and compulsive caregiving and made no comparisons with male subjects.

West and Keller (1991) implied that females who had experienced parentification were more likely to engage in compulsive caregiving than males. Attempting to illustrate characterisation of compulsive caregiving, West and Keller (1991) began with an extract from C. S. Lewis's novel *The Four Loves*. Implying that women engaged in compulsive caregiving, the vignette involved a female named Mrs Fidget who lived for her family by

working her 'fingers to the bone' (West & Keller, 1991, p. 425). West and Keller (1991) also used a female named Mary, rather than a male, to illustrate compulsive caregiving in parentified '*children*'. According to West and Keller (1991), Mary struggled with compulsive caregiving due to the unavailability of her mother. By contrast, rather than blame the mother for Mary's propensity for excessive caregiving, this thesis identifies social norms that dictate that females 'should be' largely responsible for caregiving (Jack, 1991; Oakley, 2005) as problematic. In other words, it views the social context that expects women to carry an extra caregiving load as pathological and problematic, not individual women themselves. Chapter 5 makes comparisons with the male participants in this study to investigate whether gender plays a role in female adult relationships and caregiving styles.

1.5 Outcomes of Parentification: Poor Mental Health and Seeking Psychological Assistance

Parentification is considered by researchers to be a maladaptive process that impacts negatively upon a child's development (Castro et al., 2004; Jurkovic, 1997, Peris et al., 2008). In *Lost Childhoods: The Plight of the Parentified Child*, Jurkovic (1997) argued that children involved in role reversals suffer the loss of a normal childhood. He explained that, during psychoanalytic treatment, parentified clients often reported dreams of being partially dead, and that this symbolised the loss of the joys and freedoms associated with childhood, as parentification prematurely demands adult responsibilities. However, as with other areas of parentification research, little is known about whether this is experienced by both females and males.

Previous qualitative research has presented narratives recounting lost childhoods by daughters. Female experiences are well outlined by Dial (2014) in her qualitative doctoral dissertation, in which female participants explained the loss of their childhood in relation to their burden of work. Dial (2014), reflecting on the stories provided by female participants, suggested the women felt as if 'childhood had stopped, and adulthood began, or the fun ended and business began' (p. 38). The female participants in Dial's important study did not speak of re-entering childhood once they had begun the process of parentification. Similarly, in 'Parentification and Resilience in the Family Unit and Understanding a Sense of Self,' Behoteguy (2009) included her story of looking after her mother and losing her carefree childhood:

As a child, some of my friends would encourage me to dream, imagine and explore; but I resisted because I already felt the burden of my responsibility of taking care of my mother. Upon realising I missed out on the adventures and carefree spirit associated with being a child, I began the journey of experiencing and grieving the loss of my childhood. (p. 1)

Jurkovic (1997) also discusses the necessity of grieving a loss when one becomes aware that their childhood was overtaken by the demands and responsibilities associated with adult life. The few qualitative studies (Dial, 2014; Behoteguy, 2009) that report daughter's experiences, do not explore whether sons also reported losing their childhoods. Chapter 6 addresses this limitation by discussing the loss of childhood reported by the females and males who participated in this study.

Poor mental health is another well-established outcome of parentification (Abraham & Stein, 2013; Byng-Hall, 2002; Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Hooper, DeCoster, White & Voltz, 2011; Hooper & Wallace, 2010; Hooper, Wallace, Doeher & Dantzler, 2012; Jurkovic, 1997; Meier et al., 2014; Sandage, 2010; Williams & Francis, 2010). The relationship between parentification and depression has been thoroughly examined (Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Hooper, Wallace, Doeher & Dantzler, 2012; Giles, 2014; Meier et al., 2014; Williams & Francis, 2010). However, this research attaches little importance to exploring the relevance of sex, and corresponding gender affiliations. Consequently, whether the results are relevant to both females and males is rarely explored. Instead, the findings are generically linked to 'parentified children'. Therefore, it is unclear whether both females and males experience poor mental health in response to the experience of parentification, and whether the social construction of gender is involved.

A small number of quantitative studies have indicated that females experience depression in parentification contexts more than males (Giles, 2014; Williams & Francis, 2010). Giles (2012) found that the relationship between parentification and depression was stronger for females than males, and suggested that this was because females' roles were compounded by social expectations implying women should perform parental duties more than males. Similarly, in 'Parentification and Psychological Adjustment: Locus of Control as a Moderating Variable', Williams and Francis (2010) showed that parentification was associated with higher levels of depression and lower levels of happiness in adulthood. Although a sex and gender analysis was not specifically undertaken, 84 per cent of their sample was female. Consequently, their results are perhaps more applicable to females.

Contradicting his earlier findings, Giles (2014) subsequently (and surprisingly) found that females did not report higher levels of depression than males. Reflecting on the larger social context, Giles (2014) suggested that improvements in women's socioeconomic and political status could explain these results. After finding that females and males reported the same statistical level of depression, Giles did not take the next step and examine whether there were qualitative differences in the participant's experiences. This is an important oversight, as research outside the topic of parentification shows that females and males experience depression differently and for gendered reasons (Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013). For example, females tend to report depression in the context of interpersonal concerns (Jack, 1991; Meyer et al. 2008), whereas men's depression is often externalised and associated with aggression and risk-taking (Rice et al., 2015; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013). Gendered accounts of poor mental health have rarely been examined in parentification research; addressing this gap, Chapter 6 examines whether notions of gender are relevant to reports of poor mental health for those with parentification histories.

Compared to the established relationship between parentification and depression, anxiety has been less associated with role reversals. Rather than specific information about links between parentification and anxiety, researchers have found connections between parentification and broader notions of poor mental health (Abraham & Stein, 2013; Hooper et al., 2011; Hooper & Wallace, 2010). For example, Hooper and Wallace (2010) found that emotional parentification was related to poor psychological outcomes, such as depression, anxiety and somatic symptomology. Additionally, Abraham and Stein (2013) stated that maternal mental illness was related to higher levels of role reversal, which was associated with higher reports of psychological symptoms in parentified individuals. In another study, Hooper et al. (2011) also revealed statistically significant links between childhood parentification, anxiety and personality disorders. Although they did not analyse whether the rates of psychological conditions were different for females and males higher numbers of females participated in their study. While this does not confirm that females experienced more mental illness, it does highlight this as a possibility. Therefore, it is imperative to make comparisons between females' and males' reports of poor mental health in the context of parentification.

As well as showing that childhood parentification was related to later anxiety and personality disorders, Hooper et al. (2011) found a link between parentification and eating dysfunction. Outside of parentification scholarship, psychological literature has established a strong

connection between eating disorders and females (Jovanovski, 2017; Piran & Cormier, 2005; Snyder & Hasbrouck, 1996); nevertheless, Hooper et al. (2011) did not discuss this association. Additionally, using a female sample of 66 per cent, Black and Sleigh (2013) found that emotional parentification and perceived unfairness were related to a decrease in feelings of attractiveness and lower levels of self-esteem. This means that parentification has been related to eating disorders, low self-esteem and feeling unattractive in samples that largely consisted of females (Black & Sleigh, 2013; Hooper et al., 2011). Importantly, outside of the scope of parentification literature, self-esteem and feelings of attractiveness have also been coupled with problematic eating in women (Malachowski & Myers, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that the relationship between parentification and mental health intersects with gender in ways that have not been thoroughly theorised and examined.

Substance misuse has also been connected to parentification (Hooper et al., 2011; Jankowski & Hooper, 2014) with some parentification researchers (Jankowski & Hooper, 2014) suggesting that this association is stronger in males. Jankowski and Hooper (2014) found that perceptions of parentification as unfair was related to an increase in alcohol use among boys. Males in their study scored higher than females on the perceived unfairness of parentification, a measure that was related to increased alcohol use. These scholars, however, failed to acknowledge that this might reflect a tacit form of gender socialisation. Further, Stein, Rotheram-Borus and Lester (2007) found that parentification predicted better coping skills and less alcohol and tobacco use in adolescents whose parents were HIV positive. Yet, they also found that alcohol and tobacco use were more prevalent in parentified males than females. In contrast, some research has found that parentification does not lead to substance misuse at all (Hooper et al., 2012; Shin & Hecht, 2013), but this is possibly related to being female rather than parentification, as research tends to show that, typically, males are more likely to misuse substances than females (Buu, Dabrowska, Heinze, Hsieh & Zimmerman, 2015; Lee & Kim, 2017).

Suicide has also been suggested as a risk for parentified children (Byng-Hall, 2002; Jurkovic, 1997; Sandage, 2010). Jurkovic (1997) stated that children may unconsciously turn to suicidal gestures to elicit a caring response from parents. However, limited research has investigated this proposition, and even less research has looked at potential differences in suicidal ideation and behaviours for parentified females and males. Sandage's (2010) investigation of intergenerational suicide is a rare exception. A hermeneutic-

phenomenological analysis of a case study, Sandage's (2010) data included correspondence between an incarcerated father and his eldest daughter, both of whom eventually committed suicide. According to Sandage (2010), the letters showed that the daughter related to her father through a parentified role and there were many instances of the daughter tracking her father's moods. For Sandage (2010), this case provided a glimpse of the potential risk of suicide within the context of parentification. Further, due to the case involving a father–daughter dyad, it indicated that suicide was potentially more prevalent in role reversals involving fathers, especially as more males than females take their own lives (Burns, 2016; Coleman, Kaplan & Casey, 2011).

The association between parentification and poor mental health is well established; yet, it remains difficult to find research assessing whether females and males seek professional psychological assistance to counteract the negative mental health outcomes of their role reversals. This is more than surprising. It is alarming, especially considering the well-known fact that females are more likely to seek professional psychological assistance than males (Buffel et al., 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2006; Yamawaki, 2010; Yousaf et al., 2015). The social construction of gender that encourages men to downplay their vulnerability plays a pivotal role in males avoiding and seeking psychological assistance (O'Neil, 2008; Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer & Hubbard, 2011). However, whether this is also the case for males with parentification histories is unclear. Chapter 6 addresses this issue by examining whether gender plays a role in females' and males' attempts to seek professional psychological help.

Although there is little research available to confirm whether parentified females and males seek professional psychological assistance, many scholars have suggested that parentified children often pursue careers in the caring professions: in occupations such as counselling psychology. This has been understood as an attempt to mitigate the negative impact of their parentification (Dicaccavo, 2002, 2006; Jurkovic, 1997, Nikcevic, Kramolisova-Advani & Spada, 2007). Emphasising the correlation between role reversals and caring careers, Jurkovic (1997) noted that 'many helping professionals, including therapists, counsellors, and analysts, functioned in a parentified role in their families of origin' (p. 258). The correlation between parentification and pursuing a career in the caring professions has also been supported by quantitative research. In 'Early Childhood Experiences and Current Emotional Distress: What Do They Tell Us About Aspiring Psychologists?', Nikcevic et al. (2007)

found higher rates of childhood trauma and parentification among participants who wanted to pursue careers in mental health—especially psychologists with clinical aspirations. Similarly, Dicaccavo (2002) found that counselling psychology students reported more parentification and self-efficacy towards helping than art and design students. However, as with other areas of parentification scholarship, little is known about whether both females and males tend to pursue careers in the caring professions.

The relationship between parentification and the caring or helping professions is usually explained in terms of the parentification experience. Entering a career in the caring professions is often viewed as an extension of one's childhood role—a way of utilising the interpersonal skills developed in childhood. Dicaccavo (2002) explained that because the child often anticipated the needs of others, this style of relating is continued in a professional career of helping. Echoing this sentiment, Braunstein-Bercovitz, Cohen, Geller and Benjamin (2014) described caring professions as an arena for once-parentified children to apply interpersonal skills such as empathy, sensitivity and the ability to understand the distress of others. Further, Braunstein-Bercovitz et al. (2014) argued that, for adults who were parentified as children, pursuing this type of career can be considered a corrective experience, which may involve regulating one's sense of worth and satisfying narcissistic needs. Similarly, Dicaccavo (2002) stressed that adults with parentification histories may be attracted to these types of careers because they can process their personal hurts vicariously through their clients. In other words, caring for the wellbeing of the client is a method of caring for one's self at a distance, as clients' emotional distress is a mirror to one's own hurts and disappointments (Dicaccavo, 2002).

Despite the best efforts of parentification scholars to outline the motivations for pursuing a career in the caring professions, most research in this area has failed to consider the role of gender affiliations in the career choice of those with parentification histories. It is known that gender norms perpetuate stereotypes in career choices (Gadassi & Gati, 2009) and that gendered standards relating to career choice are often internalised by girls and boys at an early age. This is one of the reasons why adult women and men often choose different career paths. Women tend to be more interested in careers with a social focus, while men are more interested in enterprising fields (Gadassi & Gati, 2009). Hence, there is an over-representation of women in helping and caring sectors (Hanlon, 2012; O'Connor, 2015; Warin, 2014) and men in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields (Riegle-

Crumb, Moore & Ramos-Wada, 2011; Wang & Degol, 2017). Given this, a possible intersection between gender, parentification and career choice may, in fact, exist. Consequently, the career choices of the females and males who participated in this study will be examined in relation to notions of gender.

1.5.1 Is Parentification Beneficial for Females and/or Males?

A debate exists within parentification literature regarding the outcome of role reversals for children. Some researchers claim that parentification scholarship has been too focused on the pathological and negative outcomes of the process (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Hooper, Marotta & Lanthier, 2008), and that parentification can actually lead to beneficial outcomes (Hooper et al., 2008). For example, Hooper et al. (2008) demonstrated that parentification often leads to a post-traumatic growth response, which indicates 'positive changes that may occur as a result of experience with adversity or trauma' (p. 698). Similarly, other researchers have linked parentification to a level of resilience that leads to positive adaptation and healthy child adjustment (Tompkins, 2007). Consequently, examining bi-modal outcomes that focus on both positive and negative outcomes is favoured for furthering our understanding of parentification.

An area of particular relevance to this thesis is the contentious claim that parentification can be beneficial for females in relation to gender socialisation (Fitzgerald et al., 2008; Walsh et al., 2006; Wolkin, 1984). For example, Wolkin (1984) suggested that parentification may actually bolster self-esteem in young girls by encouraging them to adopt behaviour congruent with normative gender expectations. Along similar lines, Fitzgerald et al. (2008), who conducted research with a sample of college women, found that caring for siblings bolstered parentified females' skills and self-efficacy, which are important to their psychosocial adjustment. Conversely, Jurkovic (1997, p. 245) argued that parentification may be harmful for females precisely because of its capacity to foster the uptake of a traditionally feminine role. Further, according to Jurkovic (1997), because relationships are more central to the social development of females, males may experience less emotional upheaval regarding family difficulties; therefore, males may bypass some of the more detrimental outcomes of parentification.

Researchers who support the idea that role reversal is beneficial for females (Fitzgerald et al., 2008; Walsh et al., 2006; Wolkin, 1984) tend to overstate positive claims, and downplay the

harmful association between parentification and female gender socialisation. Sociologists Kwan-Lafond, Harrison and Albanese (2011) have raised concerns about the link between gender roles and the excessive amount of unpaid domestic labour performed by young parentified girls. They examined the nature and extent of household and caregiving work performed by adolescents affected by military deployments, and found that daughters built their self-esteem largely through increased responsibility for domestic work. In response to this finding, Kwan-Lafond et al. (2011) reflected that:

> It was troubling for us to see that an important source of increased self-esteem for young women in CF [Canadian Forces] families is connected to meeting the very gender role expectations that keep their interests subordinate to men's in CF culture. (p. 184)

Kwan-Lafond et al.'s (2011) concerns support the need for further research into claims that parentification is beneficial for females, especially examining the harmful implications associated with their gender socialisation. Consequently, this thesis analyses the negative and positive ways in which the females and males interviewed for this study experienced parentification to deduce whether parentification was beneficial and/or detrimental.

1.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide a review of parentification scholarship, focusing on identifying gaps where the role of gender has not been thoroughly examined in role reversals. This chapter demonstrated that significant areas of role reversal research are constructed in a way that promotes a gender-blind depiction of parentification. Little research has investigated the extent to which gendered parenting norms are relevant in terms of mothers' and fathers' involvement in parentification. Further, despite some research that suggests that daughters and sons perform tasks that are gender normative (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; McMahon & Luthar, 2007) insufficient research has investigated whether the sex formation of the role reversal influences the uptake of gendered parentification tasks. Outcomes of parentification in relation to adult caregiving, poor mental health and psychological assistance have also been theorised and researched without examining whether females and males have different experiences. Given that significant areas of parentification scholarship have largely overlooked the relevance of gender, this study aims to explore its significance.

Chapter 2:
Research Methodology—A Feminist Approach to Research

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework applied in this study. First, it discusses the epistemological approach underpinning the research project. Second, the adoption of a feminist theoretical perceptive is explained in accordance with the four research objectives outlined in the introduction. The justification for utilising a qualitative in-depth interviewing method is also clarified. A discussion of ethical considerations, the recruitment process and participants' socio-demographic backgrounds follows. The chapter finishes with an overview of the feminist-thematic analysis, modified from Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, chosen to analyse the participants' interviews. To inform the reader of all decisions made throughout the analytical process, details are provided regarding how Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of research were carried out.

2.2 Feminist Epistemology

The feminist epistemology informing this project holds that all knowledge is socially constructed, partial and subjective (Undurraga, 2012). Accordingly, the findings in this study should be understood as constructed—as shaped by the participants' interview responses and my role as a researcher analysing and interacting with the data. Feminist scholar Undurraga (2012) emphasised her role as researcher 'as a way of reading and interpreting the data, in the way I select and write the text, and how I answer the research questions' (p. 420). The methodology outlined here builds on this approach.

The standards of objectivity are not upheld in this study, deliberately. In *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice,* Gayle Letherby (2003) argued that feminist researchers often aim to challenge standards of objectivity that insist that knowledge can be produced impartially and in uncontaminated ways. A feminist approach embraces interpretation and subjectivity (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Letherby, 2003). Therefore, in my research, I welcomed the merging of my subjectivity with participants' accounts of their parentification experiences. This approach led to an inter-subjectivity based on shared meanings that contributed to the building of knowledge (Gunzenhauser, 2013). In this study, participants' accounts of

parentification and my interaction with the data contributed to the building of rich and meaningful knowledge (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007)—this was my methodology.

Researcher reflexivity has been identified as an important tool in feminist studies (Jorgenson, 2011; Beckman, 2014). It aims to address the contributions that researchers bring and 'refers to the process by which individuals use their self-reflections both about themselves and their reactions to others to uncover different types of knowledge' (Beckman, 2014, p. 169). One of the most common self-reflective exercises conducted by feminist researchers consists of 'deconstruct[ing] the researchers' positionality (Nencel, 2013, p. 76). This is essentially a process of providing an appropriate level of disclosure and aiming to illustrate how the researcher's assumptions, history and identities influence the research process (Nencel, 2013).

To provide details of my own research positionality, I detail my personal experience of parentification, which I began to document in the introduction. Articulating my personal recollections illustrates how my lived experience influenced my interpretations of the interview data and how the interview data in turn shaped me. I initially identified with the construct of parentification after reading about the phenomenon in the psychological literature. I internalised a gender-blind understanding of the topic in response to the lead provided from this scholarship. I understood from this literature that it was my *parents* who parentified me. After most of the research participants in this study had explained that they were parentified by their mothers, I began to realise it was also my mother who largely expected me to parent her and not my father. Upon reflection, one of my parentified roles was to act as my mother's confidante. My mother was helpless; she would shy away from leadership responsibilities that required her to be assertive and confident, instead looking to me for leadership and direction, as if I was the parent and not the child in our relationship. I was the elder of two children; my younger brother committed suicide in his early twenties. I am an unmarried woman in my early forties without children. I identify as a feminist.

To increase my awareness of the influence I had over the research process, I kept a researcher's diary and often reflected on my own interpretations (Silverman, 2005). Upon reflection, I was surprised to find that my original gender-blind understanding of parentification had changed throughout the research process. This propelled my interest in interpreting the data from a feminist perspective and understanding the extent to which gender is relevant in parentification experiences.

2.3 A Feminist Theoretical Perspective

A feminist theoretical perspective has been utilised in this study to achieve the primary aim of investigating the extent to which notions of gender are relevant within parentification experiences. Feminism has a long and multifaceted history involving diverse viewpoints on what constitutes women's oppression as well as how women can be emancipated (Abbott, Wallace & Tyler, 2005; Karam & Jamali, 2017). However, a uniting feature of various feminist approaches is a shared concern over women's experiences of inequality (Marshall, 2007). This same concern underpins the arguments in this thesis. Feminists have also argued that the social construction of gender, which prescribes appropriate standards for women and men, maintains a social order that secures female subordination (Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989). The core feature of the feminist approach utilised in this study is embedded in the view that because gender results in the oppression of women this social construct needs to be examined. As a result, this research project brings a central focus to examining the relevance of gender to parentification, something that most role reversal studies have failed to identify. A feminist perspective is adopted to examine the four aims outlined in the introduction of this thesis and restated below. The following is a summary of the usefulness of applying a feminist perspective to investigate each objective.

A feminist approach is invaluable for examining mothers' and fathers' involvement in the parentification of their children. From a feminist perspective, parenting is viewed as a largely gendered practice (Hays, 1996; Oakley, 2005). Traditionally, fathers are expected to be breadwinners, while mothers take up primary responsibility for the children (Hays, 1996; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Confirming that parenting is typically a gendered practice, Renk et al. (2011) suggested that fathers spend more time in play activities with their children, while the primary instrumental and emotional parenting role is usually undertaken by the mother. However, with rising divorce rates and the breakdown of traditional family formations, fathers are increasingly spending more time on parenting responsibilities (Kalil & Rege, 2015). Yet, despite some advancement, overall mothers are still more heavily involved in parenting (Kalil & Rege, 2015). Therefore, a feminist perspective is vital for examining whether gendered parenting norms influence mothers' and fathers' involvement in the parentification of their children.

A feminist perspective that foregrounds the significance of gender and its sociocultural origins is important for examining the types of roles and responsibilities parentified females

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and males engage in. From a feminist perspective, gender practices within society, and those transmitted between parents and children, have important ramifications for shaping female and male children according to their sex and gender (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Well-documented evidence suggests that children are significantly influenced by gender norms regarding the toys they play with, the clothes they wear, their bedroom decor and the activities they participate in (Furze et al., 2015). Through traditional gender socialisation, daughters are encouraged to participate in domestic work and focus on interpersonal relationships (Furze et al., 2015; Kramer & Beutel, 2015). Conversely, sons are encouraged to participate in sport, are permitted to express anger and aggression and are socialised to avoid emotional expression related to vulnerability (Blakemore & Hill, 2008). Notably, some parentification research has shown that gender socialisation is evident in the types of role reversal tasks undertaken by females and males (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). However, examining whether gender-normative parentification tasks are performed by those in both same-sex and cross-sex dynamics remains to be thoroughly examined and is thus an important part of this feminist study.

As documented by feminist scholars, notions of gender play a significant role in what is considered important in an individual's life (Jack, 1991; Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). For example, underpinned by gendered expectations women are likely to value emotional connectedness and focus on social interactions more than men (Jack, 1991). As women are taught to value their interpersonal life, women's and men's experiences are often different in adult relationships (Jack, 1991; Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). Feminist scholars have highlighted how the negotiation of care in adult romantic relationships is often dictated by collective understandings of gendered notions of care. In a broader sense, caregiving is not socially constructed as a shared ideal for mainstream standards of being female and male (Hanlon, 2012; Leaper & Friedman, 2007). In 'Masculinities and Affective Equality: Love Labour and Care Labour in Men's Lives', Hanlon (2012) suggested that, in contrast to femininity, masculinity is void of caregiving responsibility, with men often receiving a 'free ride' on women's care labour. Society is often laden with 'feminised' understandings of care (Hanlon, 2012) which effect adult romantic relationships. Within interpersonal relationships, women are often positioned as caregivers and men as care 'receivers' (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). The feminist understanding that care is a gendered phenomenon that impacts adult relationships has been overlooked and under-examined in most role reversal research (see Chapter 1).

Consequently, I utilise a feminist understanding of care to examine the role that gender plays in adult relationship experiences reported by female and male participants in this study.

A feminist perspective that considers the role of gender in mental health is a useful lens through which to examine female and male participants' reports of poor mental health in the context of their parentification. Feminist scholars and sociologists have shown that mental illness is associated with gender stereotypes in various ways. For example, when women and men report depression and anxiety symptomology they often do so for different reasons (Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013; Ussher, 2011). Women tend to report depression stemming from interpersonal concerns (Jack, 1991; Meyer et al., 2008), whereas men's depression is often externalised and is associated with aggression and risk-taking (Rice et al. 2015; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013). Additionally, men have been found to commit suicide in greater numbers than women (Burns, 2016; Coleman et al., 2011). Therefore, a feminist understanding of mental health is necessary to fully appreciate reports of poor mental health in this study. A feminist perspective is also useful for examining whether both females and males sought professional psychological assistance and pursued a career in the caring/welfare sector. Gender has been shown to play a significant part in females and males seeking professional psychological help (Buffel et al., 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2006; Yamawaki, 2010; Yousaf et al., 2015), as well as in the career choices that women and men make (Gadassi & Gati, 2009). Consequently, it is necessary to investigate whether notions of gender also plays a role in seeking professional psychological assistance and a career in the caring/welfare sector for the women and men with parentification histories, who participated in this study.

2.4 Qualitative Research Approach

Parentification studies that have attempted to examine gender differences in role reversals have often been produced using quantitative methodologies (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006). In contrast, this study uses a qualitative methodology—that is, in-depth semi-structured interviews—to understand the extent to which gender is relevant within parentification processes. A qualitative interviewing approach is often described as 'richly descriptive', as it produces detailed information of the phenomena under investigation (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). According to Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra (2015), 'feminists have championed and defended in-depth qualitative methodologies

as valid approaches to research on families and family processes' (p. 95). A qualitative interviewing approach enables individuals to give voice to their lived experiences, particularly women who have often had their voices marginalised (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was authorised by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. In accordance with ethical standards, participants were provided with details regarding the nature of the research prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews. An information sheet was provided to the participants explaining the specifics of the research and the participation requirements (see Appendix 2). In accordance with ethical standards, emphasis was placed on the voluntary, anonymous and confidential nature of participation. Participants were advised that withdrawal from the project at any time without explanation was completely acceptable. Participants were also provided with a semi-structured interviewing schedule, which included details of the planned questions and a statement encouraging participants to discuss matters outside of the interviewing format that were of importance to them (see Appendix 3). The interview schedule was provided to participants to ensure they felt comfortable with the questions being asked during the interview. This provided participants with the opportunity to ask further questions and/ or clarify what was expected of them during the interview. This was deemed an important step in achieving informed consent. As outlined by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), gaining informed consent is a process that involves providing research details in advance, which is a necessary component of conducting ethically-viable feminist research.

The identified risk of being involved in the research was the possibility that the interview process would elicit emotional and psychological distress. To minimise and manage this risk, participants were made aware of the potential consequences and were encouraged to withdraw from the interviewing process at any time. Additionally, participants were advised that they could receive access to free, face-to-face, psychological assistance and were provided with the phone numbers to twenty-four-hour crisis telephone support in the event that such services were needed.

Once participants were full informed of the details of the study and the requirements of participation (and subsequently still expressed interest in participating), consent forms were

provided (see Appendix 4). Consent forms were subsequently signed by each participant. In accordance with the committee's guidelines, ethical conduct was upheld throughout the research process. In this study, participants are referred to using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

2.6 Participant Recruitment

Feminist qualitative researchers are often interested in recruiting a purposive sample who met the requirements of discussing their research topic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Along these lines, the recruitment process for this study was undertaken through advertising for a sample of adults who self-identified with six statements that described parentification (see Appendix 1). The participants' self-identification process was important because it was the aim of the study to capture the participants' lived experiences according to their own understandings of parentification. Undoubtedly, there is a need for further discussion and research around the definition of parentification; however, this was outside of the scope of this thesis.

Advertisements were placed on poster boards at Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, at both the Footscray Park and St Albans campuses. An advertisement seeking recruitment was also sent by email (via the postgraduate officer) to all postgraduate students of Victoria University. People over the age of 18 were invited to participate; no restrictions were placed on age, sex or gender. The recruitment process was conducted over an eight-month period; it yielded 9 females and 3 males who self-identified with parentification experiences. After 9 females were interviewed, data saturation was achieved. This decision was made according to Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Enwistle, Eccles and Grimshaw's (2010) principle of 'stopping criterion'- the idea that the interviewing process can cease after no new themes emerge within interviews. Specifically, data saturation was achieved after 6 female interviews; the last 3 interviews produced no new themes. Despite best efforts to recruit male participants, only 3 males volunteered to be a part of the study. It was reasonable to conclude that it was difficult to access more males considering that most quantitative parentification research (e.g., McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012) shows they are less likely to be parentified than females. Consequently, the small sample of males is a limitation of this study. Further research to understand males' experiences of parentification is needed.

The aim of the study was not to examine participants from the four potential parentification dyads (mother-daughter, father-daughter, mother-son, and father-son). Being one of only a few studies (e.g., Harrison & Albanese 2012) that have considered the role of gender in parentification, this study aimed to interview females or males on their parentification experiences, regardless of the dyads they belonged to. The participants in the study made up the following dyads; 9 mother-daughters, 2 mother-sons and 1 father-son. Indeed, future research is needed in relation to making comparisons across all four dyads.

2.7 Description of Participants

A brief description of the 12 individuals who participated in this research study is provided to familiarise the reader with participants' socio-demographic backgrounds. All names are pseudonyms and the terms female and male are also used to refer to the participants throughout.

Ava is a white female in her early sixties who has completed or undertaken aspects of tertiary education. Living in a heterosexual marriage she has two adult children. Although she has spent her life in Australia, her family has an Irish Catholic background. Referring to her early life, Ava described herself as an only child who lived with her single mother. Parentified by her mother, Ava stated that her father left when she was nine months old and never returned.

Olivia is a white female in her late twenties and is a tertiary student. Identifying as a heterosexual, she is unmarried and has no children. Growing up in Australia herself, Olivia stated that her mother is of Maltese heritage. Describing her family of origin, Olivia said she is the eldest of two younger brothers. Parentified by her mother, Olivia stated that her parents separated when she was 17 years old.

Laura is a white female in her late twenties, who made no indication she had prior tertiary education. Divorced with one child, she is living with a de-facto partner in a heterosexual relationship. When describing her childhood, Laura said she grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family and was the eldest of three younger brothers.

Sarah is a white female in her early forties with a tertiary education. Describing herself as heterosexual, she is unmarried with no children. Despite currently living in Australia, as a child she lived with her parents in New Zealand. Reflecting on her childhood, she described herself as the youngest child who had an older sister, her parents separated when she was

five. As a result of the separation she decided to live with her father. Nonetheless, Sarah said she was parentified by her mother.

Fiona is a white female in her late fifties she stated she was undertaking tertiary-education. Living with her third husband, she also has three adult children from her previous marriages. She lives in Australian, and her family has a mixed cultural heritage that includes Italian and Maori. Describing her family of origin, she said she was the youngest in the family, with an older brother and sister. Parentified mostly by her mother, her father was a heavy drinker.

Charlotte is a white female in her early forties and a tertiary student. Living in a heterosexual marriage, she has a young son with her husband. Although currently living in Australia she was raised in South Africa. In her family of origin Charlotte was the eldest in the family and had a younger brother and sister. Parentified by her mother, she said her father was often working.

Carly is a white female in her late twenties and a tertiary student. Indicating she is a heterosexual female, she is unmarried with no children. Life for Carly has existed in Australia with an Anglo-Saxon cultural background. As an only child, Carly was parentified and lived with her single mother, seeing her father on very few occasions throughout the year.

Natalia is a white female in her early twenties and a tertiary student. Identifying herself as a lesbian, she is unmarried and without children. Australia is her home and her cultural background is Anglo-Saxon. Detailing her family of origin Natalia described herself as the eldest child of a younger brother and sister. Living with her biological mother and stepfather until they separated when she was fourteen, and her step father moved out. Parentified by her mother, she has met her biological father a few times.

Angela is a white female in her early fifties and she is tertiary-educated. Describing herself as unmarried with no children her sexual orientation is unknown. Living in Australia, she is from an Anglo-Saxon background. Discussing her family of origin, Angela said she was the youngest in her family and has an older sister. Parentified by her mother, she described her father as abusive. When she was ten, her parents' separated and she eventually lived with her mother and step father.

Chris is a white male in his early thirties and a tertiary student. Living in a heterosexual relationship with a de-facto partner he has no children. Although he was raised in Australia

his parents are from a Polish cultural background. Detailing his family of origin, Chris is the youngest in his family with an older brother. Parentified by his mother, his father was involved in paid work.

Brock is a white male in his late twenties and a tertiary student. Identifying as a heterosexual, he is unmarried and has no children. Growing up in rural Australia for most of his life, he also indicated an Anglo-Saxon cultural background. Detailing his family of origin, Brock described himself as a middle child, who has an older brother and a younger sister. With a father who was often away working, he stated that he was parentified by his mother.

John is a white male in his early twenties and a tertiary student. Unmarried with no children, he indicated he is a heterosexual man. Raised in Australia, he stated he is from an Anglo-Saxon background. Explaining his family of origin, John described himself as the eldest child with a younger brother and sister who was parentified by his father.

2.8 Data Collection

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data for this study. This method offered a platform for participants to provide in-depth accounts of their parentification experiences. The interviews were conducted with a set of broad questions that provided a direction for the interview. However, the interview schedule was flexible and made allowances for the interview to move in ways that were meaningful to the participants (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). The interview schedule was provided to each participant prior to the commencement of their interviews.

The interview schedule was designed in consultation with my PhD supervisors. It consisted of 14 questions encompassing four topic areas (see Appendix 3). Questions were designed to gather a broad and detailed account of participants' experiences. Of the 14 questions asked, only one specifically requested participants to reflect on being female or male in relation to their role reversals. The four topic areas covered were:

1) **Parentification experience and family background.** The intent of this section was to yield a wide breadth of information regarding why the participant identified with experiences of parentification, in their family of origin. Questions included 'why do you feel that you experienced parentification while growing up? (i.e., what

experiences, roles and responsibilities make you identify with this description and how did you experience this)'.

2) **How participants felt they were cared for by their parents and how this impacted their identity and relationship to others.** This was designed to explore how participants recalled receiving caregiving from their parents and how this impacted their own identity and caregiving for others. Questions included 'could you describe how your own needs, thoughts and feelings were responded to in your family?'

3) **Sociocultural information relating to gender, culture and religion.** This section was designed to gather information about participants' sociocultural milieu and whether they perceived these factors as influencing their parentification experiences. Questions included 'do you feel that being either a female/male had any impact on your parentification role within the family?'

4) **Feedback on the interview process.** The purpose of this section was to allow participants to reflect on the interview process and to provide them an opportunity to clarify and add to the information they shared. Questions included 'could you describe your thoughts and feelings about talking to me about these issues today?'

I conducted the interviews in accordance with feminist principles that suggest that building rapport and reducing power imbalances are paramount in the interview process (Letherby, 2003; Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), 'feminist researchers are particularly concerned with reducing the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched' (p. 128). Being self-reflective regarding my position of privilege in the interviewing process, I sought to reduce power imbalances and build rapport; therefore, rather than serve as the 'expert', I assumed an active-listening position to allow participants' subjective points of view to be the primary source of authority (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

The interviews were conducted at Victoria University (at the Footscray Park or St Albans campuses) in a private study room at the library. At the request of two participants, interviews were conducted in private homes. All interviews were recorded with the permission of participants. The duration of the interviews varied between 60 and 90 minutes. When participants were requested to reflect on the interviewing process, many reported receiving benefits from discussing their experiences. Despite this, after each interview, I reassured participants that they could access psychological assistance if required.

2.9 Data Analysis

A feminist-thematic procedure was applied to analyse the interview data using a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) theoretical-thematic analysis. In 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', Braun and Clarke explained that, unlike inductive analysis, theoretical-thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interests in a topic (p. 12). Data analysis is thus approached with a deductive framework in this study. Applying a deductive approach means that certain areas of the interview data are coded with a theoretical interest and research question in mind. Due to this study's interest in examining the extent to which gender is relevant within parentification experiences, a feminist theoretical perspective was used to answer the following research question: 'how relevant are notions of gender in parentification experiences?' To explicitly convey the decisions made during data analysis, a detailed account is provided of how Braun and Clarke's six guidelines were modified and applied in this study.

2.9.1 Phase 1: Familiarising Yourself with Your Data

Phase 1 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for conducting data analysis consists of the researcher becoming familiar with the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87), the researcher must immerse themselves in the data to become accustomed with its depth and breadth. To become acquainted with my data, I decided to transcribe the interviews myself. Transcription was viewed as the beginning of the interpretation process (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Traditionally, transcription has been viewed as a mechanical and mundane task performed by researchers in the social sciences (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Tilley & Powick, 2002). Transcription is often outsourced and not directly undertaken by the researcher (Tilley & Powick, 2002). This method assumes that transcription easily converts verbally recorded data to text without interpretation. However, according to Lapadat and Lindsay (1999), transcription is an inherent part of the interpretation process, for whoever transcribes the data also interprets the data (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

The transcription process was undertaken by repeatedly listening to the audio interviews to generate transcriptions. Transcription conventions were used to capture verbal accounts of the participants' words as closely to verbatim as possible (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999); however, rather than noting every single pause, utterance or other non-verbal information, this information was only included when it represented meaning (Oliver, Serovich & Mason,

2005). On completion, the transcripts were re-read several times. This was done in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) suggestion that full immersion implies engaging in active and repeated readings of the interview data.

2.9.2 Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Once the researcher is familiar with the data, the second phase involves producing initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of coding is to 'identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). As Braun and Clarke (2006) explained, when applying a theoretical-thematic analysis, coding depends on theoretical interests. In this study, the prime interest was examining the extent to which notions of gender are relevant in the participants' experiences based on four research objectives (see Introduction).

The interview transcriptions were imported into the computer program NVIVO 10. This aided the management of generating initial codes. Working through the dataset, I coded the interviews according to gendered patterns in the participants' narratives, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). For example, the code 'father leaving' was applied to the following: 'my father left when I was in hospital being (pause), having been born, came back three weeks later and then left, when I was nine months old'. I also coded commonly discussed topics according to the participants' sex. For example, many of the females discussed anxiety. Therefore, the code 'female anxiety' was given to the following: 'and, um, because what I would find, would be that, my anxieties, I had a very high level of anxiety, and I guess it all comes back to my, emotional issues never being met, or recognised, when I was a child'.

2.9.3 Phase 3: Searching for Themes

This phase involves analysing and considering how the codes work together to create overarching themes; it 'refocuses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). To conduct this phase, the codes compiled in NVIVO 10 were used to generate candidate themes. Themes were produced based on the prevalence of particular codes across the entire date set. In other instances, themes were formed when codes captured meaning in relation to answering the research question, and addressing the research objectives, as recommended by Braun and Clarke.

2.9.4 Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

This phase involves analysing the themes produced in Phase 3 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As explained by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 91), this process may involve discovering that some themes are not relevant because there is not enough data to support them; two themes may collapse into one or one theme may be more suitable as two themes. Following Braun and Clarke's recommendations, I assessed whether there was enough data to adequately support each theme. I also rearranged themes into different combinations to assess how they best connected with one each other in relation to answering the research question, and addressing the research objectives.

2.9.5 Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this phase, themes are defined and further refined with the aim of preparing to present the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this phase is where the scope and purpose of the themes is determined. In this study, Phase 5 consisted of defining the purpose of the themes to ensure a final arrangement of the themes. The final arrangement of themes was produced in accordance with how the themes best worked together to answer the research question, and address the four research objectives presented in the next four chapters.

2.9.6 Phase 6: Producing the Report

This phase begins when 'a set of fully, worked out themes' have been finalised (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). In this phase, a complex analysis of the data within and across the themes is presented in report form. Braun and Clarke (2006) advised that a theoretical-thematic analysis involves embedding the data in a theoretical perspective that conveys an argument relevant to answering the research question. Here, the data is analysed from a feminist perspective with the aim of answering the research question and addressing the four research objectives. The next four chapters aim to complete Phase 6 of Braun and Clarke's research guidelines.

2.10 Conclusion

The methodological procedures undertaken to produce this study have been made explicit to provide insight into the research process. This study is underpinned by a feminist

epistemology that states that all knowledge is socially constructed (Undurraga, 2012). As indicated, this study does not comply with uncritical standards of objectivity that view interpretation and subjectivity as obstacles to discovering knowledge. Rather, I have embraced interpretation and subjectivity to produce meaningful theoretical insights. Further, this chapter outlined how a feminist theoretical perspective was useful for examining the four research objectives of this study. Data analysis details were also provided, including a discussion of the feminist theoretical analysis modified from Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The next four chapters are where the data analysis is presented; each chapter is based on one of the research objectives. Chapter 3 focuses on examining the relevance of gender in mothers' and fathers' roles in parentification. In this chapter all the participants, with the exception of one, reported that their mothers parentified them rather than their fathers, who are described as distant figures in their lives. Because the participants foreground their mothers in their parentification narratives and the current understanding of mothers and fathers is often a gender-blind one (see Chapter 1), it was deemed relevant to focus primarily on mothers in this chapter. Therefore, the one participant who discussed parentification by his father is left for discussion in Chapter 4. In Chapter 4, attention is given to examining whether the parentification tasks performed by participants were gender normative for those in both same-sex and cross-sex role reversals. Chapter 5 is an investigation of the ongoing effects of parentification in participants' adult lives. It examines whether both female and male participants experienced unmet needs in childhood and problematic adult caregiving, and whether notions of gender are relevant to their accounts. The final chapter considers the ongoing psychological effects of parentification on female and male participants. It examines whether notions of gender are relevant in females' and males' reporting of poor mental health and whether both females and males sought professional psychological assistance, and chose careers in the caring professions.

Chapter 3:

'To Replace that Missing Father, Missing Husband in Her Life'— Examining the Relevance of Gender in Mothers' and Fathers' Involvement in Parentification

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the extent to which notions of gender are relevant to the ways in which participants discussed their parents in the context of parentification. It presents a feminist-thematic analysis of the participants' interview data. The analysis identified five themes that captured the role played by parents in parentification: 1) primarily mothers, 2) distant fathers, 3) fathers' behaviours and limited social support, 4) maternal mental health and 5) childish behaviour. The themes indicated that mothers played a primary role in parentification and fathers a distant one. Importantly, mothers and fathers are analysed in this chapter in relation to gendered parenting norms. The chapter also examines participants' descriptions of their mothers' mental illness and childish behaviours, as these played some role in parentification. In contrast to role reversal scholarship, which has tended to view maternal mental illness and childish behaviours in terms of individual psychology (Mayseless et al., 2004, McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Solomon & George, 1996; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013), these occurrences are understood here as being influenced by gender inequality.

3.2 Primarily Mothers

In this study it was reported that mothers parentified their children more than fathers. This was a universal theme in the participants' interviews, with only one exception. In one case, a male participant disclosed that he was predominately parentified by his father. This father–son role reversal is discussed further in Chapter 4. All other participants were parentified by their mothers. For example:

> I was her [mother] everything, you know, and so there were a lot of times when I was her emotional support, or, um I was her babysitter, or I was, um, her friend, or, sometimes her enemy, you know, so, yeah. (Olivia)

Even though I didn't understand what was happening until my adult years, she [mother] really expected me to, um, contain her emotions, not the other way around. (Laura)

So, she, she would get me, as a very small child, to do things, like look up numbers for her, in the telephone book, and read maps. And, memorise directions and do practical things that she couldn't get her head round. So, I suppose from a really young, age, I had a level of responsibility. (Sarah)

I was my mother's friend, always I was (pause), I was my mother's sort of little friend. (Fiona)

She [mother] put a lot of pressure on me in a way (pause) she [mother] referred to me as her best friend. (Brock)

These excerpts outline some of the ways in which the participants provided parentification support to their mothers. The participants' descriptions of parentification are similar to Jurkovic's (1997) claim that parentification includes anything from serving as a mate-like figure to providing functional tasks that are necessary for the physical maintenance of the family. Nonetheless, the aim of this research study is to capture the participants' lived experiences, according to their understanding of parentification, as explained in Chapter 2.

This study's finding that mothers parentified their children more than fathers is consistent with previous quantitative research that demonstrated the same pattern (Meier et al., 2014; Mayseless et al., 2004; Perrin et al., 2013; Peris et al., 2008). In this way, this study provides cumulative support for the notion that mothers are more involved in the parentification of their children than fathers. However, most parentification scholars under-emphasise this pattern. Moreover, notions of gender are rarely considered as playing a relevant role in explaining why this might be the case (see Chapter 1). Therefore, an enhanced understanding of this pattern is necessary, and the social construction of gender offers an important clue to understand why mothers parentified their children more than fathers.

Most participants described their mothers and fathers in terms reflecting traditional gender stereotypes (Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2014; Furze et al., 2015; Nentwich, 2008). Eight participants who lived with both parents for most of their childhoods discussed their parents in this way. Speaking about her parents, Charlotte stated:

He's [father] always worked very (pause) I suppose in some ways very, they have (pause), it was a very traditional marriage. My father would go off to work at seven o'clock and come back, he would play his golf, on the one afternoon and he would

(pause), I didn't really know, I suppose I never really knew my father, you know, it was my mother who was around all the time. (Charlotte)

Charlotte also recalled:

So, he went off and worked; he had his own business; he was very, very busy; he would get up really early; he would get home late, and when he got home, he didn't want to do anything, he just wanted to eat his dinner and watch TV. (Charlotte)

Other participants expressed similar sentiments:

Yeah, my mum's the stay-at-home mum, cooks, cleans, takes care of the kids. My dad goes to work and provides the money and stuff like that, you know … my parents are very old school, gender stereotype, like … you know, old world, sort of (pause), ah, gender roles, like they have those gender roles … like my mum lived for me and my brother, like, she (pause), cooked for us, cleaned for us, took us places. (Chris)

My father provided the money. I mean that was one thing that was done in that family, so my mother didn't have to work. (Fiona)

These descriptions indicate that mothers were mostly responsible for domestic life and raising the children. Conversely, fathers were often focused on breadwinning. For example, Charlotte stated that her mother was the person who was always around and that her father was busy working. This arrangement is often found in traditional nuclear families, which are defined by fixed gender roles in which mothers maintain domestic life and raise children and fathers principally focus on breadwinning (Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2014; Furze et al., 2015; Nentwich, 2008). In this study, the most common family formation in which parentification occurred was the traditional nuclear family.

The embrace of gender norms by parents, as discussed by the participants, is considered important in this thesis, because it explains, in part, why mothers parentified their children more than fathers did. In the context of traditional nuclear families, mothers are placed under considerable pressure to be the primary caregiver of children (Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2014; Hays, 1996; Nentwich, 2008). With parenting unequally distributed in the families discussed, the mothers were likely in need of assistance, and perhaps turned to their children for extra support. Furthermore, as mothers were in closer proximity, and spent more time with their children, they were provided more opportunity to develop inappropriate (parentification) boundaries. This is not to say that traditional gender roles are the only factor that enabled more parentification by mothers. Yet, when other contributing influences, such

as maternal mental illness (Mayseless et al., 2004) are present, being the primary caregiving may interact with unfavourable circumstances and provide struggling mothers with a greater pathway to lean on their children. By comparison, it seems that fathers are perhaps presented with less opportunity to parentify children because they are focused on breadwinning rather than childcare.

The idea that gendered parenting norms play a role in explaining why mothers' parentify their children more than fathers is not accorded much significance in role reversal literature (see Chapter 1). Instead, parentification scholarship tends to be produced from a perspective that blindly accepts and even tactility perpetuates gendered parenting standards. As highlighted in Chapter 1, this is evidenced by privileging mother–child relationships and overlooking fathers' parenting roles and responsibilities (Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al., 2012; Titzmann, 2012; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). This thesis argues that parentification researchers who privilege mother–child relationships are implicitly aligned with a wider ideological position that women should be responsible for raising their children. Alternatively, in this study, this conventional sentiment is identified as problematic, and something that provided struggling mothers with more opportunity to parentify their children.

Departing from most role reversal scholarship, a small number of parentification scholars have briefly speculated that gendered parenting norms play a part in mothers' role reversals (Kelley et al., 2007; Stein, Riedel & Rotheram-Borus, 1999). As stated in Chapter 1, Kelley et al. (2007) showed that daughters reported greater degrees of parentification when they suspected their mothers were alcohol dependent. They suggested that because mothers are typically more responsible for domestic work, mothers' alcohol dependency left a greater void in the home than if fathers were misusing alcohol. Yet Kelley et al. (2007) only briefly mention how gender norms contribute to mothers parentifying their children; this treatment implies that gender norms are not central to providing struggling mothers with more opportunity to parentify their children. However, as argued above, this study foregrounds the idea that gender roles positioned mothers as primary caregivers, which provided them with more opportunity to parentify their children.

In addition to traditional nuclear families, the other family formations described in this study were: two single-mother families, one dual-income family and one single-father arrangement. Despite these different family formations, parents were still described in line with the gender

roles of traditional nuclear families. For example, Ava and Carly, raised by single mothers, discussed their mothers in terms reflecting traditional gender roles and characterised them as 'stay-at-home mums'.

Ava explained that her mother became a stay-at-home mum when she had to leave paid employment to take care of Ava after her own mother, who was Ava's babysitter, fell ill:

> So, my mother had to give up work again, to look after me. So, there's this history of, you give up your financial security, to be a caregiver. And I guess I've done the same, to look after my children. (Ava)

In contrast, Carly explained that her mother 'never had a job'. In the quotation above, Ava emphasised how her mother had to prioritise her parenting role at the expense of financial security, and Ava disclosed that she repeated this pattern herself in adulthood. The idea that women need to be the primary caregivers (rather than primary breadwinners) is a gendered expectation (Hays, 1996). Ava and Carly's transcripts support the argument made earlier that struggling mothers are provided with more opportunity to parentify their children because they are positioned as the primary caregivers in the first place. Further, their transcripts demonstrate that this was true for single mothers as well.

The single mothers described by their daughters in this study faced difficult circumstances. For instance, Ava and Carly stated that their mothers had to live on government pensions. The partnered mothers may have had better financial situations, as their partners were in positions of paid employment. The single mothers, therefore, likely experienced greater financial stress. With a primary focus on gender, it is outside the scope of this thesis to further examine the relevance of economic disadvantage in the participants' experiences of parentification. Nonetheless, some scholars (e.g., Burton, 2007; Katz, 2014) have discussed poverty in regards to the occurrence of parentification and children taking on adult-like responsibilities. Providing an example of how this occurs, Burton (2007) stated that economically disadvantaged families may have limited access to formal child care, placing pressure on older children to care for younger siblings. Katz (2014) also stated that immigrant families with a low socio-economic status frequently require their children to partake in language brokering for them. The links between poverty and parentification are, therefore, an important area for future research.

Returning to the single mothers living on a pension, as documented by social geographers Longhurst, Hodgetts and Stolte (2012), these mothers may face a unique type of social stigma that can lead to feelings of guilt. Longhurst et al. (2012) emphasised that single mothers are constructed by society to feel 'guilty' for burdening tax systems and for raising children without fathers (p. 295). Explaining how this affects single mothers, Longhurst et al. (2012) found that such women reported visceral experiences of guilt almost every day. Considering the depth of the guilt felt by the single mothers in Longhurst et al.'s (2012) study, it can be inferred that Ava and Carly's mothers were probably affected to some degree by the social stigma that women who raise children alone invariably face. Although the account of the these mothers, who likely experienced guilt, does not assist to explain the greater parentification of mothers described in this study, it aims to highlight that the single mothers faced different life experiences than partnered mothers.

Unlike other participants in this study, Angela described her mother and father as dual-income earners. She explained:

> My mother worked; my father worked; my sister and I were, what (pause), considered latchkey kids … my parents wouldn't come home 'til, sort of (pause) six, seven o'clock at night. (Angela)

Although Angela's mother was involved in paid work, Angela explained that her mother was still more involved with her than her father, reflecting the broader pattern of other participants' accounts. Angela described that she was close to her mother and distant from her father, which reflected gendered parenting norms in which mothers are expected to take a primary role with their children (Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2014; Hays, 1996). Feminist researchers have also noted that, despite the progression of women into the paid workforce, dual-income earners still tend to parent in typically gendered ways (Liu & Dyer, 2014; Renk et al., 2011). Liu and Dyer (2014) interviewed 10 working women, only 3 of whom had completely rejected gender ideology regarding childcare and domestic work. Liu and Dyer (2014) concluded that although traditional gender divisions of labour were being challenged, working women were still largely responsible for domestic duties. Given this context, it can be inferred that Angela's mother probably engaged in what feminist writer Hochschild (1989) has described as the second shift. The second shift refers to the dual roles that working mothers perform—breadwinning and most of the tasks associated with domestic life (Hochschild, 1989). Consequently, paid working mothers, such as Angela's, may have

distinct contexts that are different from stay-at-home mothers that require further acknowledgment and examination in the context of parentification.

Sarah was the only person in the sample who lived for an extended period with her single father; however, it should be noted that prior to the age of five Sarah lived with both parents and was involved in a parentification dynamic with her mother. Reflecting on her parents' separation, Sarah stated:

> I actually chose to go and live with my father because of that (pause), because I didn't, (pause) well, I didn't want to have that level of responsibility [that she had towards her mother]. (Sarah)

According to Sarah, her father did not parentify her. Comparing her father to her mother she said:

> Um, well, I mean my father was much more responsible and practical than that. Um, so I didn't (sigh), yeah, I didn't, I didn't experience that, exactly, but he was very, um, kind of, hands-off, free range parenting. So, I still had to take (pause) I, I didn't feel that I had to take responsibility for him, but I felt I had to take a lot of responsibility for myself. (Sarah)

Sarah felt that her father had a hands-off parenting style. From a feminist perspective, Sarah's account of her father's parenting style accords with a conventional standard of manhood in which masculinity is not primarily associated with childcare (Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2014; Nentwich, 2008). Some men find parenting challenging because it departs from their gender socialisation (Solomon, 2017). Sarah also noted that, while she did not have to take responsibility for her father, she did have to take responsibility for herself, which also indicates that her father played a distant parenting role. Consequently, her father was unlikely to be close enough to seek parentification support from her.

3.3 Distant Fathers

Most participants involved in this study described their fathers as not directly parentifying them. Instead, fathers were characterised as distant parenting figures in their lives. This is not surprising, especially considering that the fathers of the parentified children in this study were focused on breadwinning rather than domestic life and raising children. For some participants, fathers were physically absent. Speaking about her father Ava stated:

My father left when I was in hospital being (pause), having been born (pause) [he] came back three weeks later and then left when I was nine months old. (Ava)

Later in the interview, Ava explained: 'So, I've never had a, a father, in my life'. Similarly, Carly, who also lived with her single mother, did not have regular contact with her father. She explained:

My dad sent me letters, he sent money, and I [would] see him over the summer holidays, I'd go stay with him maybe for a month or something … Yeah, so I would see my dad maybe about once a year, yeah. (Carly)

Expressing how she felt about her absent father, Carly stated:

I feel like he's an uncle or something, like, I love him and I care for him, but I don't miss him, really, or, um, we don't talk on a particularly deep level or anything, it's more, more like an uncle or something, yeah. (Carly)

Others also experienced fathers who were largely physically absent:

Um, I've only met my real dad a couple of times … Um, well, there was pretty (pause), with my stepdad, we weren't ever close. (Natalia)

Um … when I was growing up (pause), um (pause), my dad was mostly away (pause), he was home on the weekends (pause), he's (pause), so (pause), he works different projects around Australia. (Brock)

For most of the other participants, whose fathers were physically present, the theme of distant fathers also resonated. For example:

So, my relationship with my dad was (pause), I don't remember him as a little girl playing, and I don't remember him like that. I don't really have any memories of him as a little girl. (Charlotte)

Quite emotionally absent, he was a very pragmatic personality. And, um, I used to ask when I got older, 'what are you thinking dad?', and he's like 'nothing'. Sometimes men just sit there and think, nothing. (Laura)

I've had a really absent father … I didn't have a lot of parenting from him [father] and that's something I've become aware of, a lack of, um, in my adult years … gradually I became aware that I have no (pause), not much of an internal voice from a male parent. (Fiona)

In these excerpts, most participants indicated that their fathers were distant parenting figures in their lives. Additionally, as mentioned above, the participants did not provide details of

their fathers parentifying them, with the exception of one participant (whose case is discussed in Chapter 4). This finding is consistent with quantitative research that shows that men are less likely to seek pseudo-parenting support from children (Peris et al., 2008; Perrin et al., 2013; Rowa et al., 2001). Typically, minimal explanation is given for why fathers tend not to engage in parentification; this is because men's roles are often under-examined (see Chapter 1). However, descriptions of distant fathers can be interpreted as reflecting gender stereotypes and norms in which fathers are not expected to focus on childcare (Renk et al., 2011; Solomon, 2017). Further, gendered parenting norms that suggest that mothers should be intensively involved in parenting and fathers less so (Hays, 1996) result in fathers having less opportunity to parentify their children.

As well as distant, most of the participants' fathers in this study were described as breadwinners. In the context of a conventional standard of fatherhood, this is not unusual. Research confirms that collective and social meanings of being a father are frequently aligned with notions of breadwinning rather than caregiving, even in contemporary times (Yarwood, 2011). Yarwood (2011) conducted a qualitative study of males in the United Kingdom; she found that breadwinning remained a dominant part of what constitutes a 'good father'. Yarwood concluded that 'despite the contemporary broadening of traditional constructs to accommodate notions of fathers as nurturers and carers, this smorgasbord of identifications is restricted by dominant homogenous normative constructs' (p. 166). In other words, although a contemporary context offers a variety of different constructions of fatherhood, these alternatives are ultimately restricted by a conventional ideal that a father's role is that of a breadwinner. It is important to reiterate that gender roles and, specifically, the idea that fathers should be focused on breadwinning, provided fathers with less opportunity to parentify their children because they were less involved with their children in the first place.

3.4 Fathers' Behaviours and Limited Social Support

Over half of the participants stated that their parentification developed, in part, because they were required to compensate for their fathers' behaviours and/or limited social networks in their mothers' lives. Explaining why her mother needed assistance from her, Olivia stated:

> She wouldn't feel like she had that support from my dad, so, oh, she needed to go to the shops or do something like that, 'can you, take care of the boys', and so I would, yeah. (Olivia)

Later, Olivia explained: 'Um, so she [mother] didn't have that support from a second parent, so she relied on me, (pause) for that support'. Other participants described a similar parental dynamic:

> My dad wasn't good at helping, like sorting it out, you know, like, I don't think he knew how to talk to her in such a way to sort of (pause), like, I think she just wanted (pause), I don't know, to be understood, or some empathy, or, or, or something you know. (Chris)

> So, um, just thinking about it now, that is one of the, um, the comments, and it was, you know, 'you're just like your father', so there was this need in her to have me around, and maybe to replace that missing father, missing husband in her life … I was not allowed to do things; I wasn't allowed to (pause), freedom, because she [mother] wanted me to stay with her. So that was a (pause), a, you know, 'why do you want to go and play with those children, why don't you wanna stay, in your home?' (Ava)

> Um, well, we became bankrupt, like, my stepdad, um, declared bankrupt and didn't tell my mum, so we didn't have any money, so we had to move to a housing commission. And my mum then became a little bit too reliant on painkillers, so, I have a younger brother and younger sister, and she didn't have a job, so I had to work. (Natalia)

Both Fiona and Angela explained during their interviews that their mothers had, at times, experienced physical abuse from their fathers. They explained how their parentification was, in part, tied to their father's disrespectful and abusive behaviour towards their mothers. Regarding her parentification, Fiona said:

> My mother, I adored her, I loved her; I felt she was very dependent on me and I felt very sorry for her, I thought that she was a victim … um, I wanted to protect her from him [father]. (Fiona)

Referring to her father's treatment of her mother, Angela stated: 'I'd just (pause), I'd get protective, of my mother.' These accounts indicate that, although it was the participants' mothers who directly parentified them, their fathers also played a role through their mistreatment of their mothers. Many of the participants' mothers did not receive satisfactory co-parenting support, or emotional and financial assistance, and, in two cases, the fathers were physically abusive towards the participants' mothers. These issues contributed to participants partaking in adult responsibilities.

Thus, although the fathers did not directly engage in role reversals with their children, most contributed to the mothers' involvement by mistreating and disrespecting them in the ways

detailed above. This theme is not covered in role reversal research, most of which have failed to thoroughly examine fathers' contributions (Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al., 2012; Titzmann, 2012; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). As stated in Chapter 1, parentification literature often privileges the mother–child relationship, and consequently deems paternal involvement irrelevant. In contrast, this study shows the father's role to be highly significant. Specifically, the diminished levels of childcare undertaken by fathers, and the ways in which they let their partners down influenced mothers' parentification of their children.

In contrast to most parentification literature, a few role reversal studies suggests that fathers play a role when mothers' turn to children for pseudo-parenting support (Chee et al., 2014; Meier et al., 2014; Schier et al., 2015). This research focuses on the physical absence of fathers', as an explanation for the increase in women's reliance on their children. Previous research often cites divorce and incarceration as reasons for fathers' absence (Chee et al., 2014; Meier et al., 2014). However, this study indicates that fathers who are physically present, but distant in other ways, also contribute to mothers' parentification of their children. For the participants in this study, this distance took the form of fathers avoiding responsibilities, such as not offering mothers co-parenting support and emotional and/or financial assistance, and acts of physical violence.

In addition to compensating for their fathers' behaviours, some participants felt that they were compensating for their mothers' lack of adequate social support, such as significant friendships. This lack was described, in part, as augmenting their mothers' reliance on them. Several times during her interview, Olivia explained that her mother had limited, if any, social support and thus sought assistance from her. In one instance, Olivia said:

> She also relied on me for a lot of emotional support, and because she never had a close female in her life as well, um, she (pause), yeah, she, she, she never had anyone to discuss her emotions with. (Olivia)

Later, Olivia reaffirmed that her mother turned to her because she had no other social support:

> So, when they [parents] would fight, she would come to me for that emotional support all the time; she has sisters, but she didn't have that relationship with her sisters; she definitely didn't have that relationship with her mum who told her after her first marriage ending, 'well you just need to stick it out', 'cause it's traditional

and that's what you do. Yeah, so I was that, that girl in her life, you know, and, if she (pause), she didn't have friends. (Olivia)

Other participants gave similar accounts:

And because we were out on a farm, there won't be enough people, mum didn't really have other friends, you know, um, so, yeah. (Brock)

She was very isolated, like she didn't really have any friends, or many friends, um, and so I can remember, heaps of instances just talking to her about her problems. (Chris)

Although parentification studies are restricted in scope regarding mothers' social circumstances, some role reversal scholars (Burton, 2007; McMahon & Luthar, 2007) have established that lacking a social network is a risk factor for the parentification of children. However, as these studies were conducted from a gender-blind perspective, it is not clear whether it was mothers or fathers or both who lacked adequate social networks. For instance, Burton (2007, p. 334), who developed a conceptual model to understand children with adult responsibilities in economically disadvantaged families, found that limited affiliations with informal and formal services increased the prevalence of children partaking in adult-like roles and responsibilities. However, it was unclear whether Burton's (2007) findings referred to one or both parents. In contrast, the participants in this study emphasised that it was indeed their mothers who had limited social and emotional support systems. This is important, as broader gender politics can be involved in mothers' experiencing social isolation (DeShong, 2015). For example, there is evidence to suggest that, in certain circumstances, men may exercise control and restrict their partners' social connections to prevent them from gaining independence (Choi, Cheung & Cheung, 2012); however, the participants in this study did not explicitly state that this occurred in their families.

The descriptions of mothers' social isolation outlined here indicate that some of the participants' mothers were missing a vital component necessary for healthy psychological functioning (Hancock, Cunningham, Lawrence, Zarb & Zubrick, 2015). Research demonstrates that social support is particularly important during motherhood (Hancock et al, 2015) because it increases health outcomes in pre- and post-natal phases, lowers rates of stress and depression and contributes to more secure mother–child attachments. It follows that mothers who parentify their children would benefit from adequate social support. Indeed,

adequate social support may even alleviate women's needs to share their burdens with their children in the first place.

3.5 Maternal Mental Health

Eight participants stated that their mothers experienced poor mental health and that this contributed to their reliance on them for emotional and instrumental support. Some fathers were also described as experiencing mental health issues: three were described as having bouts of depression or anxiety and one was described as alcohol dependent. However, because fathers were distant and not typically involved in role reversals, their mental health issues were considered less relevant in terms of the participants' parentification experiences.

Most participants discussed a range of mental illnesses affecting their mothers that were linked to their mothers' need for pseudo-parenting support from them. Depression, bipolar disorder and attempted suicides were the most commonly discussed issues. For example:

My mum has got really bad chronic depression. (Carly)

My mum, um, had like pretty, pretty intense depression, sort of thing (Natalia)

My mother's struggled with depression ever since I can remember basically, um, and she was recently diagnosed with bipolar. (Brock)

Ah she's got a bit of a mental health, ah issue. I am not sure what it is exactly, it could be different things, but, um, she has trouble, sort of, um, she's a little bit delusional, so she might believe, sort of, people are out to get her or people, or, or um, people have said things about her, or to her, or have negative intentions towards her, but she doesn't have any evidence to back it up, things like that. (Chris)

Later, Chris confirmed that his mother had been officially diagnosed as bipolar. He said:

My dad showed me a letter from the doctor, and, and she's been diagnosed, by him, as bipolar, which I think ticks a lot of boxes, actually, come to think of it, um, so it's quite possible she's bipolar, with a whole lot of other stuff too. (Chris)

Recalling a distressing mental health situation, Fiona disclosed that her mother had engaged in suicide attempts. She said:

By the time I was 11 she [mother] was regularly, um, taking drug overdoses, um, you know making suicide attempts, some of them were really close calls, and I was the one who called the ambulance and went with her to hospital. (Fiona)

Similarly, Angela said:

> Well mum tried to commit suicide 11 times, you know, so that lasted over a few years. (Angela)

These excerpts suggest that most of the participants' mothers experienced mental health issues that played a part in their parentification. Consistent with this theme, scholars who have studied parentification from a gender-blind perspective have often stated that parental mental illness is a factor that predicts the occurrence of role reversals (Jurkovic, 1997; Hooper et al., 2012; Van Parys, Bonnewyn, Hoghe De Mol & Rober, 2014; Van Parys & Rober, 2013; Woolgar & Murray, 2010). Despite the well-established connection between parental mental illness and role reversal, most of this research does not make it clear whether mothers or fathers or both are inflicted with mental health concerns, and whether this makes a difference to the parentification of children. For instance, Fitzgerald et al. (2008) found that 'family risk'—which included 'parental' substance use, anxiety and depression—positively predicted parentification. However, the researchers did not clarify whether it was mothers' or fathers' mental health issues that contributed to 'family risk'. This study suggests that maternal mental illnesses have the most relevance to participants' parentification experiences.

While parentification research does not typically distinguish between maternal and paternal mental health, some research has indicated that mothers' poor mental health is relevant (Mayseless et al., 2004; Van Parys et al., 2014; Van Parys & Rober, 2013). In Van Parys and Rober's (2013) qualitative study of children dealing with parental depression, seven of eight mothers were hospitalised for depression and only one father. In a later study, Van Parys et al. (2014) similarly found that mothers of parentified children experienced depression more frequently than fathers. Mayseless et al. (2004) also found evidence of poor mental health in mothers of parentified children, and stated that mothers who were depressed, passive and/or agoraphobic were typically more involved in parentification. Similarly, McMahon and Luthar (2007) drew connections between maternal psychopathology and parentification. Although these studies suggest that mothers' poor mental health is related to parentification, they are weakened by a gender-blind understanding that does not examine the role of gender inequality in mothers' poor mental health.

Some participants discussed the influence of gender inequality on their mothers' lives; from a feminist perspective, this can be seen as providing a context for their mothers' mental illnesses. For example, Angela explained that her mother's suicide attempts were a response

to an unstable romantic relationship. Angela was only 11 years old when she was confronted with the reality of her mother's deep unhappiness, which was triggered by her on-again, off-again romantic relationship:

> Um, and, you know, um, he [stepfather] didn't (pause), he was going through his own anxieties, um, mind you I'm 10, 11 at the time, um, so he kept on leaving my mother; every time he left my mother, my mother would try and commit suicide. (Angela)

Confirming that her mother's suicide attempts were a response to her unstable romantic relationship, Angela said:

> Well, mum tried to commit suicide 11 times, you know, so that lasted over a few years, and then, um, until they actually got married, and then, um, then everything was fine. (Angela)

Angela explained that her mother attempted suicide every time her intimate partner left her: approximately 11 times. Every time her partner left, Angela's mother became highly distraught. Her distress can be viewed, in part, as a gendered issue. Feminist scholars have shown that women are often encouraged by sociocultural standards to define themselves according to their intimate relationships (Jack, 1991). Consequently, women's primary identity—their value and source of meaning—is often established in the context of intimate relationships with men (Jack, 1991; Lafrance, 2009). Lafrance (2009) explained how women often construct their value in this way:

> Despite women's advances socially, their value often remains at least partly dependent upon their ability to attract and hold male attention, and women who failed to do so are readily positioned as abject—as the sad spinster, unwanted woman, and representation of failed femininity. (p. 23)

In this context, we can surmise that Angela's mother was heavily invested in her intimate relationship due to the pressures associated with maintaining male attention. To put this another way, if we lived in a society that encouraged women to develop independently, outside of intimate relationships, Angela's mother may have been less motivated to attempt suicide following the breakdown of her relationship. At the very least, the responsibility placed on Angela to monitor her mother's behaviour would have been reduced. Angela's experience shows how serious an issue parentification can be; it resulted in her, a young girl in the formative years of life, placing her own mother on suicide watch over a period of many years.

Revealing the extent to which gender inequality influenced her mother's other intimate relationships, Angela stated that, prior to the relationship that led to her mother's suicide attempts, her mother had been involved in a domestic violence situation with her father:

> He [father] would also abuse my mother, like hit my mother, occasionally, um, and the psychological abuse with my mother. (Angela)

Although Angela stated that it was the breakdown of the other relationship that influenced her mothers' suicide attempts, her parents' abusive marriage, which was based on gendered notions of power, also posed a significant risk to her mother's mental health (Coker et al., 2002; Beydoun, Beydoun, Kaufman, Lo & Zonderman, 2012). Research has shown that intimate relationships that are characterised by physical or psychological violence or both are linked to a range of mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation/action in women (Coker et al., 2002; Beydoun et al., 2012). Prior to the relationship that provoked her suicide attempts, it seems clear that Angela's mother was in a relationship that, research suggests (Coker et al., 2002; Beydoun et al., 2012) would have also detrimentally affected her mental health.

Fiona's mother also attempted to commit suicide. Although Fiona did not directly link her mother's marriage to her suicidal behaviour, she disclosed that her mother's marriage involved domestic violence:

> He [father] was violent towards myself and my mum a few times, physically, but mostly it was emotional and verbal, but it was really extreme, like, the emotional and verbal violence was shocking, you know. (Fiona)

Given that domestic violence is considered a strong indicator of women's suicidal behaviour (Devries et al., 2011), it is difficult to dismiss this as a contributing factor in Fiona's mothers' suicide attempts.

Other participants whose mothers suffered from poor mental health also identified gendered power dynamics in their mothers' relationships. For instance, Natalia and Chris indicated that their mothers' intimate relationships involved gendered notions of power and control. They stated:

> I look back on my parent's relationship, and I just think that is gross, like. Um, my mum wasn't allowed to drive, she wasn't allowed to do anything. (Natalia)

And my father, on the other hand, is somebody who is the perfect match for her, in the sense that he is very directive, he'll tell her what to do, tell her what not to do, you know, so there's kind of (pause) almost this co-dependent, sort of, relationship. (Chris)

According to Natalia, her stepfather expected her mother to perform domestic tasks, traditionally known as 'women's work' (Oakley, 2005), despite episodes of depression that made it difficult for her to perform these duties. Natalia explained:

Because she wasn't, you know, like a domestic goddess, they would fight a lot, like, she didn't really cook because she had (pause), like, she's always had depression, obviously with everything she'd been through. (Natalia)

These excerpts indicate that these mothers were involved in marriages in which their male partners exhibited controlling and dominating behaviours towards them. Such behaviours in intimate relationships are associated with an increased risk of mental health concerns in women, as detailed above (Coker et al., 2002; Beydoun et al., 2012).

One participant described her mother's relationship with her own father—that is, her maternal grandfather—as plagued by gendered notions of power. Carly, who stated that her mother suffered from severe depression, described her grandfather as a constant source of pain for her mother:

Yeah, with my mum, um, her mother died when she was 17, um, that (pause), they came from England and one year after they arrived she died. And then my mum didn't like her dad very much and didn't know anyone else. (Carly)

Later, Carly disclosed further details about her grandfather:

He was a constant source of pain for her [mother]. Like he (pause), um, was strict, and um, fairly uncompassionate about her being sick, and fairly critical. (Carly)

Carly's words suggest that gender expectations and roles influenced her mother and her grandfathers' father–daughter relationship, which provides a partial context for her mothers' depression. According to Carly, her grandfather was authoritarian and lacked empathy. This is a common description of fatherhood; it aligns with a traditional notion of masculinity (Connell, 2005) that is often linked to being a 'good' father (Yarwood, 2011). In an article on the social influences of depression, Neitzke (2016) stated that 'depression is a matter of power and is therefore every bit at work within a system of gender' (p. 67). Thus, Carly's

mothers' depression cannot be divorced from the relationship she experienced with her father that was based on gendered notions of authority and power.

Several participants' mothers were described as survivors of rape and other abuse. For example, Natalia stated that her mother suffered from 'intense depression' as a result of her personal history of rape and abuse:

> And, my mum had been through, like, testing shit, like, not good stuff, and um, rape, um, abuse. (Natalia)

Similarly, Olivia said:

> My mother, ah, was kind of (pause), she, she fought with a lot of personal issues, she was, um, raped as a child … I didn't find out until a couple of years ago.

Indicating the effect of this trauma on her mother, Olivia observed:

> She would say things to me like, 'every man in your life is the kind of man that will, um, hurt you, and abuse you'. And I would say, 'well' (pause), and she would talk about, you know, specifically sexually. (Olivia)

The life histories of these mothers, which included experiences of gender-based violence, provide some context for their poor mental health. Evidence indicates that rape often contributes to detrimental psychological effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Leiner, Kearns, Jackson, Astin & Rothbaum, 2012). Feminist writers, such as Lafrance (2009), have argued that depression and other psychological symptoms are common in the context of gender-based violence. In such cases, the distress needs to be viewed 'as a reasonable reaction to unreasonable situations' (Lafrance, 2009, p.19). Natalia and Olivia's mothers' traumatic experiences are likely to have played some part in their psychological illnesses. Their experiences indicate that some women involved in parentification dynamics may have histories of gender-based violence, which itself has deep socio-political and systemic roots. Feminist scholars view violence against women as a symptom of living in a political context of gender inequality (Lafrance, 2009). Consequently, identifying the context of mothers' poor mental health is essential for shifting the focus from individually implicating mothers, which often occurs in parentification literature (e.g., Leon & Rudy, 2005; Mayseless et al., 2004, McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al., 2012). Emphasising the influence of gender politics on mothers' poor mental health and role reversals with

children enables a thorough understanding of the extent to which gender is relevant to mothers' roles in parentification.

3.6 Childish Behaviour

Many participants claimed that their mothers displayed childish behaviours and attitudes, and that these played a role in their parentification. Describing her mother, Fiona asserted that she was 'incredibly infantile and difficult'. Describing how she came to realise that her mother was childish and immature, Fiona stated:

> Many years after she [mother] died, I found some letters from her written to my father when she was in her early twenties, and reading those letters it came to me, what an absolute infant she was, that she was a woman who actually, I don't know for whatever reason, she didn't grow up. They were really baby sort of letters, she was so immature (pause), you know, like, with a bit of distance, it came to me how immature she was. (Fiona)

Other participants described their mothers in similar ways:

> Everything was quite an effort for her, because, she wanted to be the child, really … she is somebody who has to have somebody looking after her. (Sarah)

> She [mother] wouldn't take a mature attitude to things, she would be like the (pause), she would then become the child, um, who was rebellious or threw a tantrum, so I had to try to pacify her tantrum … I was not able to be a child; my mother thought I had to be an adult. (Ava)

> It was that kind of behaviour of, um, expecting me to behave more like an adult, than a child, and then she would throw tantrums, more like a child than an adult. (Laura)

> And, as things have happened in my life, and I have made certain decisions that she hasn't approved of, she goes into complete, um, child, baby regressed space, like goes to bed for four days and won't talk to me. (Charlotte)

In these statements, the mothers appear to be childish or childlike; it follows that their children were expected to take on adult or parent-type responsibilities. Ava and Laura specified that their mothers would behave as children and, as a result, that they were expected to behave as adults. A similar phenomenon is discussed in role reversal literature (Jurkovic, 1997; Garber, 2011) regarding parents treating children in overly childish and infantilising ways. In the literature, infantilisation is described as a process in which adults aim to keep children in a dependant state (Jurkovic, 1997; Garber, 2011). In 'Parental Alienation and the

Dynamics of the Enmeshed Parent—Child Dyad: Adultification Parentification and Infantilization', Garber (2011) found that infantilisation is commonly seen in parent–child dyads in which parents possess an inability to accept their child's maturing independence. Similarly, Jurkovic (1997) proposed that infantilisation is the opposite of parentification and is associated with adults parenting their children in ways that encourage incompetence. In these situations, parents typically do not expect their children to undertake any emotional and instrumental caregiving responsibilities, unlike the excessive amounts expected of the parentified child (Jurkovic, 1997). The statements made by the participants in this study provide an alternative way of understanding parent–child dynamics, as many participants were positioned into a pseudo-parenting process by mothers displaying 'childish' behaviours.

Some participants described their mothers as helpless (like children) and as lacking a sense of agency. They articulated:

> She [mother] doesn't have much sense of personal agency, or strength, or resourcefulness, she's got this real sort of (pause), learnt helplessness almost, you know. (Chris)

> Her identity was this of, um, being this very sick person, and, who had no agency in her life, she had no choice and, um, she couldn't leave dad, um … I felt she [mother] was very dependent on me and I felt very sorry for her; I thought that she was a victim. (Fiona)

Consistent with these comments, previous research has suggested that mothers who parentify their children experience feelings of helplessness (Solomon & George, 1996; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). As outlined in Chapter 1, helplessness, as measured in Vulliez-Coady's et al. (2013) study, was described by statements such as 'I often depend on my child to teach me about the world' and 'I feel that my situation needs to be changed but I am helpless to do anything about it' (p. 121). These statements are similar to Fiona's claim that her mother was dependent on her and was unable to make decisions in her life. This reinforces the point that some mothers who parentify their children struggle with feelings of helplessness.

While there has been limited research into whether mothers who parentify their children behave as children themselves, some parentification researchers (Mayseless et al., 2004) have described incompetency in mothers. These studies share features with the accounts of mothers behaving childishly in this study. Mayseless et al. (2004) described some of the parentifying mothers in their study as 'psychologically weak'; they were either depressed,

passive, agoraphobic or a combination of these things. Such descriptions resonate with ideas of helplessness and incompetency that overlap with notions of childlike behaviour (Wyness, 2006). For example, when adults are described as children they are often pictured as dependent, helpless and incompetent (Huot, 2013). Although role reversal research (Mayseless et al., 2004; Solomon & George, 1996; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013) tends to support the idea that some mothers who parentify their children struggle to behave as competent adults, it views mothers' inadequacies in terms of individual psychology, as explained in Chapter 1, and not wider social processes.

Rather than viewing women's childish or childlike behaviour in terms of individual psychology, such behaviour can be interpreted through the lens of gendered notions of power. Some participants stated that their mothers were treated like children in their intimate relationships. For example, Chris and Fiona, who described their mothers as helpless and lacking agency, suggested that their parents' marriages involved gendered notions of dominance and control. Chris stated that his father was very directive and told his mother what to do and what not to do. Fiona stated that her father dominated her mother through psychological and physical abuse. Similarly, Natalia indicated that her mother's freedom was restricted by her husband because 'she wasn't allowed to drive or do anything'.

Some of the participants' mothers were involved in relationships involving male dominance and control; when this is linked to mothers behaving in stereotypically childish ways, the role of gender cannot be ignored. Feminist scholars such as Kate Millett (1977) have shown that dominating and controlling behaviours enacted by males towards their female partners reflect social constructions of gender. Dominating and controlling behaviours reflect a form of masculinity that has been constructed over time to keep women in subordinate, helpless and weak positions relative to men (Millett, 1977; Sultana, 2012). This position is similar to that of children (Wyness, 2006). In a qualitative study entitled 'Policing Femininity, Affirming Masculinity: Relationship Violence, Control and Spatial Limitation', DeShong (2015) demonstrated how this played out in intimate relationships. DeShong stated that women involved in relationships characterised by gendered notions of power frequently had their agency policed by their male partners through controlling and violent practices. This resonates with Natalia and Chris' descriptions of their mothers' regulation and control by their husbands. Illustrating the effect that such practices have on women, Boonzaier (2008) found that women typically constructed themselves as passive and helpless in situations in

which male partners' exerted dominance. One woman in Boonzaier's study applied a parent–child analogy, claiming that her male partner adopted the role of 'parent' in her life. Fiona, Natalia and Chris's descriptions of their mothers' relationships with their husbands align with this analogy. According to Fiona, Natalia and Chris, their mothers seemed to be the child in their marriages; their mothers' husbands played the role of 'father' controlling and dominating them.

Another way in which gender may have affected participants' mothers' childish or childlike behaviour is through widespread sociocultural practices that reinforce the idea that women are supposed to remain childish (Carlson, 2010; Huot, 2013). Highlighting a relevant sociocultural practice that reinforces this idea, Erica Burman (2008) argued that women are often seen as possessing the same social status as children, instead of sharing equal status with their male counterparts. Burman (2008) illustrated that this is 'evident in the cry issued in emergencies: "women and children first!"' (p. 180). Critically, Burman (2008) called for the separation of 'women and children' as one social category, as it encourages the treatment of women as if they were children. It is also the case that sexualised images that depict women as infantile are delivered to mass audiences by the mainstream media (Carlson, 2010). Carlson (2010), who conducted a study on the infantilisation of women, argued that, often, grown women are made to look like children by the media (p. 1). According to Carlson (2010), the presentation of women as submissive and dependent is part of a process of 'cultural desensitisation' in which grown women 'acting and looking childish through attire, demeanour, possessions and/or posture' is not viewed as unusual but a necessary standard (p. 1). Carlson (2010) found that students in her study failed to register this infantilisation process in pictures, only experts educated in women's, gender and sexuality studies were able to identify the process. Widespread sociocultural practices such as these do not encourage childlike mothers who parentify their children to flourish; instead, they encourage such women to remain childish and disempowered.

Some of the mothers described in this study may have been encouraged to remain childish through the widespread use of infantilising language aimed at women. In her groundbreaking thesis, 'Language as a Social Reality: The Effects of the Infantilisation of Women', Huot (2013) demonstrated that adult females are often referred to as 'girls' rather than women. Over half of the participants in Huot's (2013) study used the term 'girl', which reduced adult females to the same social status as children. Less than a third of Huot's participants used the

word 'woman' to describe adult females. Huot (2013) compared this to the use of the term 'boys' by Europeans to lower the status of black men in history. In a sociocultural context that finds multiple ways to diminish the status of women, mothers who parentify their children are provided with counterintuitive messages regarding their parenting role. Therefore, sociocultural practices that encourage the infantilisation of women may partially account for participants' descriptions of their mothers as 'childish'.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined the extent to which gender is relevant to participants' accounts of their mothers' and fathers' involvement in parentification. Consistent with quantitative research (Perrin et al., 2013; Peris et al., 2008; Rowa et al., 2001), all participants, with the exception of one, reported mothers as the main parent involved in role reversals. Fathers were generally described as distant. This chapter argued that gendered parenting norms provided mothers with more opportunities to parentify their children and fathers with fewer opportunities, as they were primarily focused on breadwinning or were absent. The chapter closely examined the role of gendered parenting norms, and this approach represents a significant break from most parentification scholarship, which tends to attribute parentification to mothers' individual psychological flaws (Leon & Rudy, 2005; Mayseless et al., 2004, McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al., 2012). Further, participants claimed that their fathers' behaviour also played a role in their mothers' parentification. Analysing this claim meant departing from role reversal literature that has tended to ignore fathers' contributions (Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al., 2012; Titzmann, 2012; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). Participants' accounts of their mothers' mental illnesses and childish behaviour were viewed, in part, as linked to gender politics. This approach was different to studies that have conceptualised mothers' circumstances from an isolated psychological perspective (Mayseless et al., 2004; Solomon & George, 1996; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013). In summary, this chapter indicated that gender is significant in mothers' and fathers' engagement in parentification. The next chapter examines whether participants in both same-sex and cross-sex role reversals perform gender-normative tasks.

Chapter 4:

'Being a Girl Definitely Put Me in This Position'—Examining the Relevance of Gender in Females' and Males' Parentification Tasks in Same-Sex and Cross-Sex Role Reversals

4.1 Introduction

A gender-blind perspective is typically adopted towards understanding the types of parentification tasks performed by children (see Chapter 1). Yet, some studies (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; McMahon & Luthar, 2007) have suggested that the responsibilities of females and males are aligned with broader gender-normative forms of labour (e.g., females provide emotional care, males fix the garden). However, it remains unclear whether the sex formation of the parentification alliance influences whether the tasks performed by females and males are gender normative. This chapter addresses this research gap by examining whether females and males in same-sex (mother–daughter, father–son) and cross-sex (mother–son) role reversals perform gender-normative tasks. To fulfil the purpose of this chapter, a feminist-thematic analysis of the interview data is presented. Six themes were identified to capture whether parentification tasks and responsibilities were, or were not, gender normative: 1) mother–daughter tasks and gender normativity, 2) being female is relevant, 3) father–son tasks and gender normativity, 4) being male is relevant, 5) mother–son tasks and gender subversive, and 6) being male is not relevant. The themes indicate that gender-normative parentification tasks were performed by those in same-sex role reversals and were not performed in cross-sex dynamics. The chapter argues that the gender normativity of parentification tasks depends on the sex formation of the role reversal pairing. Before discussing the analysis of the themes, the chapter highlights the relevance of females being the most common participants in this study.

4.2 Primarily Females

Most of the participants in this study were parentified females. Although individuals of any sex were invited to participate (see Chapter 2), the recruitment process resulted in nine females and three males volunteering to be a part of the study. Consistent with this pattern, a significant body of quantitative research indicates that parent–child role reversals are

experienced by females more than males (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Herer & Mayseless, 2000; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Peris et al., 2008; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012, Walsh et al., 2006). Although with a qualitative study it is difficult to infer whether the greater prevalence of females in this study is a reflection of the broader existence of this sex pattern, it is interesting to note that more females than males volunteered to be a part of this study.

Regarding the sex formation of role reversals in this study, the most common dynamic was mother–daughter configurations. All females in this study reported that they were involved in role reversals with their mothers. Consistent with these reports, research has suggested that when daughters report parentification, their role reversals typically involve mothers (Clerici & Vanin, 2002; Peris et al., 2008; Schier et al., 2015). Peris et al. (2008) found that daughters reported parentification by mothers more than sons, although no reason was given to explain why this was the case. Similarly, Schier et al. (2015) found that daughters, rather than sons, were at risk of maternal parentification. Consistent with the idea that mother–daughter parentification is often the most frequent occurrence, other role reversals in this study were less common; two males who were parentified by their mothers and one male who was parentified by his father.

4.3 Mother–Daughter Tasks and Gender Normativity

The female participants, all of whom were parentified by their mothers, reported performing role reversal tasks that were gender normative. The females stated that the three most common tasks they provided were emotional support to their mothers, caring for their siblings and engaging in household chores (such as cleaning, cooking and grocery shopping). A few females discussed providing financial assistance to their mothers, secondary to the other tasks they performed. The tasks reported by the females fall within the boundaries of Jurkovic's claim that parentification includes anything from serving as a confidant to providing functional tasks that are necessary for the physical maintenance of the family. While there may be some conjecture regarding understandings of parentification, as stated in previous chapters (2 & 3), central to this thesis are the lived experiences of participants and their understandings of parentification. The most common responsibility reported was providing emotional support (emotional parentification) to their mothers. Olivia explained that her mother relied heavily on her for emotional assistance, particularly when she was fighting with her father:

She [mother] relied on me for a lot of emotional support … um, in a, confide (pause), confident kind of way, um, ah, how old would I have been? (reflecting); maybe about (reflecting) nine at that age (pause), that time. I can (pause), I can remember an example where, um, she had decided that the marriage was over, and so she was gonna be leaving my dad. So, she pulled me aside, and she said, um, 'it's over between me and your dad and these are the reasons', and she went into, you know great details, that, in reflection, for a nine year old is a lot to take on. And, um, even at the time, I didn't understand, like, this is a lot to take on, but I remember it giving me anxiety. (Olivia)

Laura also expressed:

Yeah, there was just a lot of micromanaging her [mother] emotions, not doing things that would upset her, or make sure that my brothers didn't do things that would upset her. (Laura)

Later, Laura elaborated that she was expected to 'contain' her mother's emotions:

Well (sigh), I suppose, diffusing situations or trying to prevent them from happening … Um, or suggest things that might calm her down … [B]eing very helpful, um, just (pause), I suppose being very hyper-aware of what was going on for my mum … thinking about what was going on for her, and what I could do to help her. (Laura)

Other female participants shared similar memories about being their mothers' confidantes:

She would disclose to me, you know, all about her misery and being unhappily married. And so I was her confidant, and so I had, you know, access to a lot of information that an 11 year old shouldn't have. And now, as an older woman, um, it's, it's incredible to me that this happened to me. (Fiona)

I felt I needed to look after my mother in many ways, her kind of wellbeing was most, seemed to be most important. I think all my (pause), the way I saw myself was through my mother's eyes, as a child … So if she wasn't happy, I wasn't happy, um, and I would do what I could do to make her, to make her happy. So I kind of (pause), so in a way that's how I think I became quite parentified … and even now it always feels like I'm counselling my mother. (Charlotte)

I felt responsible for her, um, and responsible for her happiness. (Ava)

Like, she'd [mother] cry a lot, and like, I would be the (pause), like have to get her off the floor and stuff like that. (Natalia)

These accounts of female participants providing emotional support to their mothers are consistent with previous research that indicates that mother–daughter role reversals are often centred on daughters providing this type of support (Dolgin, 1996; Mayseless et al., 2004;

Titzmann, 2012). However, apart from a few exceptions (Harrison & Albanese, 2012), this occurrence is often viewed as gender- blind (see Chapter 1). Minimal attention has been given to the similarity between emotional parentification and the broader sociocultural notion that women are often expected to be nurtures and caregivers (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison & Morton, 2012). However, in this thesis, female reports of performing inappropriate levels of caregiving are considered a reflection of conventional ideals that link women to care duties. Consequently, females' accounts of providing emotional parentification are interpreted as gender normative and problematic from a feminist perspective.

From a psychological lens, emotional parentification is viewed as deleterious because it leads to self-sacrifice, as children learn to focus on the needs of adults at the expense of their own interests (Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2007). In this thesis, however, such experiences are seen as particularly problematic for females because links between caregiving and self-sacrifice are also reinforced by gender affiliations (Jack, 1991). In a broader sense, than the parentification experience, sociocultural norms construct the idea that women's care inevitably involves silencing their own interests (Jack, 1991; Hays, 1996). For example, normative ideas of womanhood that permeate our cultural consciousness are envisaged by the selfless and caregiving mother (Hays, 1996). However, suppressing one's sense of self to provide care for others negatively affects women. Feminist authors, such as Jack (1991) and Thompson (1995), have emphasised that women's self-silencing leads to mental health problems such as depression. Therefore, female participants' accounts of proving emotional parentification to their mothers are considered harmful, as caregiving and self-sacrifice are not only present during the parentification process, they are also reinforced through broader gender affiliations and are linked to mental health concerns.

In addition to providing emotional support to their mothers, some female participants also discussed performing instrumental parentification, usually in the form of household chores. Compared with providing emotional support, household chores were not as commonly reported by the female participants. Nonetheless, household tasks were still a significant part of the parentification experience for five females who participated in this study. They explained:

> She [mother] was always taught that women were the ones that helped out around the house, so, not only did she rely on me, to (pause), do (pause), like all the housework, take care of my brothers, and stuff like that, not that she didn't as well,

but she relied on me a lot for that. I was vacuuming, doing my own hair, making my own lunches, sometimes cooking dinner. (Olivia)

She had very high expectations for housework, so there was a lot of making sure that happened, and that things didn't get messed up … [M]y mum expected a lot of housework from me from a very young age; I remember being about six or seven, being taught how to clean the bathroom, and being sent back six times, because I hadn't done it perfectly enough. (Laura)

But it was up to me to prepare dinner, if that makes sense, um, because my mum just wasn't gunna do it. (Natalia)

I always sort of cleaned the house, and stuff, I mean she'd do the shopping and things, but I nearly always cleaned the house, that was always sort of something I did. (Angela)

I cleaned the house. I did the shopping. We [mum and I] made a sort of deal at one stage where, um, which she would drive (pause) me to the supermarket, once a week, or a fortnight, I can't remember, and she would wait in the car, and I would go in and buy all the stuff. She'd give me her (pause), I had her pin number and everything, and then I'd buy the food, take it out, she would drive me home. (Carly)

As reported here, in some cases, mothers would share some responsibility for household chores. However, in most cases, much of the work was left to the daughters. For example, Carly stated that she cleaned the house and did all the shopping, while her mother waited for her in the car. Similarly, Natalia said that she prepared dinner because her mother was not going to cook the nightly meal. Olivia and Angela also indicated that they undertook a large proportion of the housework. Angela said she nearly always cleaned the house, and Olivia said that her mother relied on her a great deal. In contrast, the male participants in this study did not discuss engaging in household chores as part of their parentification roles. This sex pattern corresponds with wider sociocultural expectations that housework is traditionally a gendered activity (Oakley, 2005). Research consistently demonstrates that women do indeed partake in housework more than men (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie & Robinson, 2012; Kan, Sullivan & Gershuny, 2011). Consequently, in this study, the higher incidence of females performing household chores as part of their instrumental parentification is considered a gender-normative occurrence.

According to sociological researchers, the fact that more parentified daughters than sons perform housework is a reflection of wider sociocultural ideals (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; Kwan-Lafond, Harrison & Albanese, 2011). Consistent with this study, Harrison and

Albanese (2012) found that daughters were more active in domestic work of all kinds. The types of parentification tasks undertaken by young females and males in their study reflected 'traditional expectations about the gender division of labour in the home' (p. 13). Studies outside of parentification literature also demonstrate that gender norms shape daughters' and sons' levels of participation in housework. According to Nilsen and Waerdahl (2014), young females perform more household tasks than young males. Arguing that the social construction of gender strongly influences this occurrence, Nilsen and Waerdahl (2014) proposed that children's participation in housework is linked to broader notions of gender, more so than the role modelling provided by parents within the home. In this context, the fact that the females in this study performed more housework than the males is not attributable to parentification experiences alone; the role of gender norms must also be considered.

Importantly, some female participants in this study stated that performing housework was important to them because it provided them with a sense of validation. For example, Olivia stated:

> I can remember it [housework] sometimes being a fun thing, and most of the time doing it because I just wanted that, that sense of love that you get from your parents, and, and feeling like, that, almost like a joy in my heart, like if I do this, you know, if I do this you'll be so proud of me, and, if I do this, you'll be so happy with me, or, if I do this, you'll love me. (Olivia)

Similarly, Angela said:

> Um, it did get to the point though that I'd actually do it to try and get some validation, yeah, because (pause), I thought if I cleaned really well, cause I'm obsessed with cleaning, um, but yeah, if I cleaned really well people would say, 'oh well done', it was like (pause), I'd get recognition, yeah. (Angela)

Angela described how she offered to perform unpaid ironing for a family friend to receive further validation. She recalled:

> I used to do all our ironing, I used to do all our ironing … and then again it was (pause), I, I become a really good ironer, and, and, so people would go, 'wow [Angela's] a good ironer', so mum would say to, to friends, 'oh [Angela] is a brilliant ironer', so then I was ending up doing ironing for … frigging idiot I was, for no money or anything, I'd just do it, because again, I think it was that validation, yeah. (Angela)

These experiences resonate with findings that parentified girls gain a sense of self-esteem through increasing their responsibilities in unpaid domestic work (Kwan-Lafond et al., 2011).

Kwan-Lafond et al. (2011) found it troubling that girls gained increased levels of self-esteem through performing gender role activities that kept their interests subordinated in patriarchal cultures. The accounts of female participants in this study who gained validation through performing housework are equally troubling. They link to broader concerns about the exploitation of women's free labour within the home. Marxist-feminist scholars have long been concerned about the exploitation of women's unpaid domestic labour (Abbott et al., 2005). Therefore, the incidence of parentified females providing excessive amounts of unpaid domestic work is not considered beneficial. In hindsight, Angela identified that doing work without pay was problematic, although, at the time, she found performing such tasks emotionally validating and rewarding.

In addition to emotional parentification and housework, four female participants described how a significant part of their role was providing pseudo-parenting to their younger siblings. They said:

> I think I was babysitting my brothers from the age of seven … My (pause), I've got two younger brothers, and I remember when my youngest brother was a toddler he called me mum a couple of times. (Olivia)

> And, um, there was a lot of (pause), a lot of being expected to look after my brothers or be responsible for my brothers in different ways. And, um, my brothers' call me bossy, even now until this day, just because of the amount of (pause), that kind of responsibility I took on for them. (Laura)

> In terms of roles or responsibilities, I always just took on the responsibilities of being the older good daughter, always looking after my siblings, always making sure mum was okay … So, I was the big girl, and I did look after my brother and sister and I always did the right thing. (Charlotte)

> If I saw that my little brother was going to do something bad, or my sister was doing something bad, I would kind of parent them. Like, 'no, you can't do that', like, my little brother, he did, like, you know, he was gunna get into trouble, and my mum would just kind of bear it, um, he would look at me, be like, and say like, 'do I have to do that', and I'd say, 'yeah, you do'. (Natalia)

These excerpts suggest that female participants provided pseudo-parenting to younger siblings to the extent that they were often considered the parent. According to Olivia, her younger brother even called her 'mum', while Natalia indicated that she was the authority figure for her brother. Like the emotional parentification and housework undertaken by the females in this study, caring for siblings (as part of their instrumental parentification) is also

viewed as a gender-normative act. In contrast, male participants did not discuss parenting and looking after sisters and brothers, despite the fact that two males had younger siblings. This is relevant to gender norms because providing parental care is usually conceptualised as the responsibility of females more than males (Hays, 1996; Oakley, 2005). Therefore, when considering the role of gender, it is not surprising that more female than male participants reported looking after their younger siblings.

Consistent with the finding in this study, Harrison and Albanese (2012) found that females performed more sibling care than males. In their qualitative study, 10 girls and 3 boys described caring for siblings. In contrast, some quantitative research has shown that children's sex is not significant enough to influence caregiving for siblings (Hooper et al., 2015; Mahon & Luthar, 2007). Hooper et al. (2015) found that sex did not carry a statistically significant influence on sibling-focused parentification. Similarly, McMahon and Luthar (2007) demonstrated that when children's characteristics were analysed, it was birth order, not sex, which held the most significance in terms of caring for younger siblings. However, a limitation of this previous research is that qualitative differences, corresponding to sociocultural understandings of gender, were not measured. This current study cannot offer any conclusions regarding whether qualitative differences existed between the ways in which the females and males performed caregiving for siblings. This is because the males involved in the study did not report looking after their siblings. It remains the case that further research is needed to examine whether girls and boys perform sibling-focused parentification in ways that reflect gendered expectations.

Importantly, some of the female participants in this study who acted as pseudo-mothers to their siblings described this as a tiresome experience. Discussing her adult life, Olivia stated that one of the reasons she did not want children of her own was because she had parented her brothers from a very young age. Similarly, Laura said she was exhausted when she became a mother, because she had parented her brothers for most of her childhood. These comments challenge the findings of psychological researchers Fitzgerald et al. (2008) who found, in their quantitative study, that looking after siblings reduced maladaptive outcomes for parentified girls. They stated that caregiving for siblings' builds self-efficacy in females, because caring for siblings corresponds with the psychosocial adjustment of females. The findings of Fitzgerald et al. (2008) are particularly controversial in the context of the feminist concerns outlined earlier by Kwan-Lafond et al. (2011). Kwan-Lafond et al. (2011) found it

troubling that young females gain a level of self-esteem through performing gender-appropriate activities that subordinate their interests in male-dominated cultures. Thus, from a feminist perspective, females' looking after siblings can be viewed as a negative, rather than positive experience; some participants described it as tiring and it influenced Olivia's decision not to have children.

4.4 Being a Female is Relevant

In addition to reports that most female participants performed predominantly gender-normative tasks, female participants also stated that their parentification role was related to being a female. To further advance our understanding of the extent to which gender is relevant to parentification experiences, participants were asked the following question: 'do you feel that being either a female/male had any impact on your parentification role within the family?' As discussed in Chapter 2, this was the only question that directed participants to explicitly reflect on the relevance of being female or male in relation to their parentification experience. Eight of the nine women interviewed felt that being female was crucial to their parentification role. The following statements illustrate this theme:

> Yeah, I think it's sort of [a] cliché really, isn't it, that women are supposed to be nurturing, so I imagine it may have been different if I'd been a male. (Sarah)

> Being a girl definitely put me in this position where I had to look after my mum and be really caring … my brother was not a caregiver, he was, um, always playing sport … it was very gendered, and in our family, it was very gendered, and I was, um, a girl … women have to do everything. (Fiona)

> When I talk about my brother, he hasn't (pause), doesn't have any of those needs to look after other people; he's gone on and he's done very well and he, you know, and he's only really ever concerned about himself. So I reckon (pause), so there is something about being women, um, women care, women look after, women teach. (Charlotte)

Had she been born a boy, Ava felt that she would have had freedom to do the things she desired, rather being responsible for her mother. She said:

> I think, if I had of been a boy, um … I think, it would have been a totally different kettle of fish; I think I would have had more freedom, um, I wouldn't have had to have been perfect, I would've been able to explore the world; I would not have had to be responsible for my mother. (Ava)

Some female participants discussed how their instrumental parentification role was related to being a female. For example:

> I was expected to do more in the house, and my brothers were taught how to mow lawns … I was never taught how to use a lawnmower, even though I wanted to because, you know, that's better for the boys to do that. And, um, I wanted to learn how to fix cars, which just didn't happen, but my brothers were taught how to fix cars. And, so, um, even though we did have certain days we were expected to do certain household chores, I was always most frequently called upon to do things like cooking or housework, or looking after the siblings; it was just an assumption that, um, sometimes I was aware of, sometimes I wasn't, until I was older, but, yeah, definitely, I have definitely seen how being woman, being female has had that effect. (Laura)

> If I was a boy, being the first child (pause), yeah it would've been different dynamics for sure, and that's (pause) because of what my mum was taught, um, that, that women are the ones (pause) that help out around the house, and all of that kind of stuff. (Olivia)

In these statements, female participants indicated that their parentification roles were closely tied to being female; they said that the expectations placed on them were imposed by gender stereotypes. For example, Sarah stated that it was inevitable that her parentification role was linked to being a female, as women were 'supposed to be' nurturing. Likewise, Fiona asserted that her home environment was gendered, and that being a female put her in a position where she 'had' to be really caring towards her mother while her brother played sport. These female participants suggested that mother–daughter parentification was tied to sociocultural notions of what is means to be female.

Exploring the idea that parentification is tied to notions of gender, two female participants highlighted the role of media and religious representations. Carly explained:

> The fact that I was a girl, I thought about the food and the cleaning and washing. You know, I watched, I watched shows, and I always, I always wanted to be like the mums in the shows, you know, home improvement or something, this amazing mum that cooks and does washing, so I always wanted to be like that, those women, in those shows and those movies, yeah. (Carly)

Carly's statement suggests a connection between the activities performed by television mothers and the duties she undertook as a parentified girl. According to psychologists Maier, Gentile, Vogel and Kaplan (2014, p. 240), who specialise in media studies, the mass media is a tool for learning even when one does not engage with the intention of acquiring knowledge. The representations we see in the media influence our understandings of the world and shape

our behaviours (Maier et al., 2014). Thus, Carly was exposed to representations of females performing domestic duties and subsequently performed similar duties in her own parentification role. This provides a useful example of how females' parentification roles are influenced by sociocultural representations of gender in the media.

Representations of women as nurturers as conceptualised by traditional Christianity (Ewing & Allen, 2008) is another way in which gender stereotypes were found in the parentification experience. Laura stated:

> I was just thinking about how, um, part of that particular religious perspective is that woman are more nurturing than men. And I could see how my mum, I don't think she knows even to this day how she leant on me emotionally. But it was interesting that she chose to lean on me, not one of my brothers. (Laura)

She continued:

> That's something that I've noticed in other religious families, that women who have a relationship with their children, similar to what my mum had (pause), there's almost (pause) always [they], rely on the daughters than they do the sons. (Laura)

In these comments, Laura indicated that traditional representations of women embedded in Christianity influenced her parentification role. Supporting Laura's observations, sociologists, Kramer and Beutel (2015, p. 43) found that traditional Christian teachings often perpetuate the notion that women's primary role in society is caregiving. The dissemination of this gender ideal was also noted by feminist scholars Ewing and Allen (2008) who conducted qualitative research to investigate how women narrated their experiences in a Christian environment. Most of the women in Ewing and Allen's (2008) study stated that their primary responsibility was 'to nurture children and care for their husbands' (p. 100). Given this, it is not surprising that Laura felt that a Christian context exacerbated stereotypes about women, in her own, and other Christian families that influenced her parentification role. In Laura's family, it took the form of her mother seeking emotional support from her and not her brothers.

Rather than foregrounding and examining the influence of gender socialisation, psychological researchers have postulated that girls are more likely to experience parentification because of their supposedly 'natural' and 'innate' female qualities, such as empathy (Hooper et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2006). Indeed, according to Hooper et al. (2015), there is a consensus among parentification scholars that females have a greater 'capacity for empathy' (p. 36). Similarly,

Burnett et al. (2006) stated that the females in their study were 'more aware' and 'more sensitive' to unpredictability in their families (p. 186) without mentioning the influence of gender socialisation on the characteristics reported in the females. The females who participated in this study did not describe their parentification role as natural or connected to their biology. Instead, most linked their parentification with the restrictions and limitations of gender stereotypes, such as those found in the media and religious teachings. Why are biological and deterministic explanations more prevalent than studies examining the relevance of gender socialisation on the parentification of females? Worryingly, very few parentification scholars have given the influence of gender on mother–daughter parentification the attention it deserves.

4.5 Father–Son Tasks and Gender Normativity

Like most of the female participants, John—the only participant in this study who described being involved in a role reversal with his father—reported performing parentification tasks that can be identified as gender normative. The main responsibility John had towards his father was instrumental parentification, focused on providing financial and business support. Detailing his experience, John explained:

> Well, first of all, we're not exactly a rich family, so, we're now, like, we struggled a little bit. Um, I had to get a job to help pay for bills, and food sometimes, um, I pay for a lot of stuff, um, when (pause), my dad used to drive a tow truck, and he used to have to bring cars home and we had to pull the engines out, and he had a bad back, so he couldn't do it himself. So I pretty much (pause), myself, my brother and sister helped a little bit, but they were too young to be able to pull apart an engine, so I had to do that, all, pretty much myself. Um, and any of, like trouble that came from it, I had to try and fix … Yeah, but it was really hard, but, I mean like, I'd come home from school and straightaway have to pull apart engines. So if I wanted to get any study done, I had to pretend like my classes were running over time. (John)

In this quotation, John detailed the ways in which he was primarily responsible for providing economic assistance and physical unpaid labour to support his father's business. John indicated that the demands on him as a parentified son were extreme; providing his father with support came at the cost of focusing on his studies. Further, John's main parentification tasks are considered gender normative because traditional ideology supports the notion that males should be primarily responsible for tasks related to breadwinning rather than focusing on caregiving (Schmitz, 2016). By providing his father with instrumental parentification

(focused on breadwinning activities), rather than performing the household tasks discussed by the females, John's experience indicates that wider gender norms were at play in this expression of a father–son parentification dynamic.

The idea that parentification tasks performed by males can be influenced by, and infused with, traditional notions of gender is not often discussed in parentification literature (see Chapter 1). Nevertheless, consistent with John's accounts, some research suggests that males tend to primarily participate in instrumental parentification tasks that align with 'men's work' (Khafi et al., 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). This was also found to be the case when sons were parentified by mothers (Khafi et al., 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). However, these findings are not supported by this study, as the male participants involved in parentification with their mothers provided emotional care, which is identified as gender subversive in this thesis. However, regarding the male who was involved in a role reversal with his father, this study's finding supports the idea that males engage in role reversal tasks based on gender affiliations.

The idea that father–son parentification aligns with traditional notions of gender is implicitly suggested by psychological scholars Jacobvitz et al. (1999). In 'Cross-Sex and Same-Sex Family Alliances, Immediate and Long-term Effects on Sons and Daughters' they argued that fathers may expect their sons to take on household responsibilities related to breadwinning. According to Jacobvitz et al., fathers who parentify their sons may also live psychologically and vicariously through their offspring's athletic, academic and sexual experiences. Their assertion that fathers who parentify their sons focus on activities traditionally associated with males is supported by John's experience, as his father expected him to perform breadwinning tasks. However, John did not suggest that his father lived vicariously through his athletic, academic and/or sexual life. This may have something to do with the fact that John had limited time for activities outside of providing his father with financial and business support.

4.6 Being a Male is Relevant

John felt that being a male was associated with his role reversal. Importantly, John's accounts are similar to most of the female participants in the study (who stated that being female was significant to their role reversals). When asked whether he thought that being male had influenced his parentification role within the family, John considered the role of birth order before stating that:

But, um, if I had a sister the same age, then I probably, I probably would take the same stance because, um, because, I'm a male, like my dad, I guess, um, so yes. (John)

According to John, being a male was relevant to his parentification role because, even if he had had a sister of the same age, he would have taken on the same role because of his sex. John's straightforward and explicit linking of his parentification and his manhood supports the idea that his role reversal experience was significantly gendered.

Recalling his experience of being socialised as a man, John described himself and his father in terms of traditional gender stereotypes. When he first described his father John stated:

My dad kind of, he's kind of like, a guys' guy like, um, you fall on the ground and hurt yourself, 'stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about', that sort of thing. (John)

Describing his father, John said:

And, like, he's quite a big guy, he's six-foot-six, and pretty heavy so it's kind of scary, so I should listen to him. (John)

In a similar way, John detailed his own physical strength in relation to his brother:

I guess [my brother has] a bit of a temper, so, um, if it escalates, I can break it up cause, um, I'm stronger than he is … Um, but when his [brother] temper goes off, I just hold him down until he calms down and we're good friends again. (John)

John's descriptions of his father and himself are aligned with a traditional notion of masculinity, which involves downplaying emotions and emphasising physical prowess (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016). John was the only participant to describe themselves as possessing physical strength over others. He was also the only participant who described an explicit affiliation with hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 2005, p. 77). This indicates that John's alignment with this gender construction likely shaped his discussions about possessing physical strength over his brother.

John indicated that his father's physical strength was something to be taken seriously. This is problematic, as John's father's power and authority depended on his physical strength. According to John's accounts, if he did not conform to his father's wishes, the threat of physical aggression was present. This suggests that the threat of physical danger was a part of this father–son role reversal experience. This resonates with parentification research that

shows that when fathers parentify their daughters, sexual violence is often involved (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Mayseless et al., 2004, Schier et al., 2015). John's recollections did not suggest sexual violence. Nevertheless, his experience, together with this research, suggests that, in some cases, when fathers parentify their daughters and sons, levels of actual and potential violence (sexual or physical or both) are present. This is likely underpinned by a normative account of masculinity in which ideas of physical prowess abound (Haider, 2016).

4.7 Mother–Son Tasks and Gender Subversion

In contrast to participants involved in same-sex parentification, the two males in cross-sex role reversals (mother–son) described performing a parentification task that can be interpreted as gender subversive. These two male participants primarily described the emotional support they provided to their mothers:

> And so I can remember like, you know, with my mum, like being in the room (pause), and I must have been like six or seven or something, and I was almost like, telling her to do, like positive visualisations, you know I was like, you know, 'okay, it's okay mum, like, let's just think about something that makes us happy, you know, let's think about (pause)', and you know she's like crying and hysterical, and I am just like, you know, 'let's think about' (pause) and trying to just sort of make her feel better. (Chris)

> Um, it was quite a lot of pressure there, to be her emotional support, um, yeah, so, yeah, I guess. So there was kind a lot of, um, pressure to make her feel better, make her, feel, feel right. (Brock)

These male participants provided their mothers with emotional parentification. Chris attempted to manage his mother's emotions by offering her advice on creating pleasant visualisations, while Brock felt it was his duty to make his mother feel better. Their attempts at providing emotional support to their mothers are comparable to most female participants' accounts of providing their mothers with emotional care. As emphasised earlier, when female participants undertook emotional parentification, it was considered gender normative because emotional work has broader sociocultural links with females (Hanlon, 2012). In contrast, emotional work is not stereotypically associated with males (Hanlon, 2012). Thus, the males providing emotional parentification to their mothers can be seen as gender subversive.

Chris and Brocks' involvement in emotional parentification was surprising, especially in light of research that shows that males typically perform tasks in line with 'men's work', even when role reversals involve mothers (Khafi et al. 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007). In

McMahon and Luthar's (2007) quantitative study of mother–child dyads, male children performed household tasks associated with their gender socialisation (such as maintaining the yard, fixing items, emptying the garbage and performing unaccompanied shopping). Khafi et al. (2014) also found by examining mother-child dyads that males had a higher level of instrumental parentification associated with 'men's work' than females did.

The accounts made by the male participants (parentified by their mothers) in this study are consistent with other research that shows males also provide emotional support in some instances (Chee et al., 2014; Perrin et al., 2013). However, in Chee et al.'s (2014) qualitative study, it was unclear whether the young males' main parentification task involved providing emotional support for their mothers, as they also showed concern for their mothers' financial situation. Similarly, in the quantitative study conducted by Perrin et al. (2013), young males provided emotional parentification, but instrumental parentification was not measured. Therefore, it is unclear whether emotional parentification was the central manifestation of their role reversal. Within the confines of this study, I contend that the two males who provided emotional care to their mothers as a central component of their parentification are atypical. Whether it is atypical for sons to provide mothers with emotional parentification in the general population is an area that requires further investigation.

4.8 Being a Male is Not Relevant

The males parentified by their mothers found it difficult to make a connection between being a male and their parentification role. This contrasts with those in same-sex role reversals who made clear connections between their parentification experiences and being a female or male. In response to the question, 'do you feel that being either a female/male had any impact on your parentification role within the family?' Chris was unsure. Revealing his ambivalence, he stated:

> Yeah, well, it's interesting. I don't know, I think, I think, more than gender, well gender's part of it; I think it's a cultural thing, like I feel like, I am a guy, in a culture where there's probably more space and more acceptance for a guy to be sensitive. (Chris)

Chris did not feel that being a male was linked to his parentification. In this excerpt, he linked his ability to express sensitivity to his belonging to an accepting culture. Later, he elaborated on this, explaining that he felt that there were pockets of contemporary Australian culture that were tolerant of males showing less traditionally masculine traits:

Well, I just, I just think, it exists in modern day Australian culture. You know and like, um (pause), and I mean you know, it's obviously not, like, mainstream as in like, you know, the footy loving, sort of jock culture, and, and stuff like that. (Chris)

Brock was not able to draw a clear link between being a male and his role reversal either:

Nah, not really, I just think, um, probably more my nature, and my sensitivity, I suppose, um, it's all part of the (pause), um, 'cause dad wasn't home much, and mum, and we had that similarity, I think, in personalities, I think that's what kind of led me into that position. (Brock)

These statements suggest that Chris and Brock were, at best, ambivalent about the connection between being a male and being parentified; for his part, Brock explicitly stated that being a male was not relevant. Brock explained that he was sensitive due to his nature, personality and similarities with his mother. This contrasted with the participants in same-sex role reversals who drew straightforward links between being a female and a male and their parentification. As explained above (see Section 4.7), Chris and Brock both described providing their mothers with emotional parentification that can be interpreted as gender subversive. The notion that Chris and Brock's emotional parentification diverged from their gender socialisation is further supported by their reluctance, or inability, to identify a relationship between being a male and their parentification experiences.

A similarity between Chris and Brock (as seen in the extracts above) is that they both described themselves as sensitive. These descriptions depart from a traditional construction of masculinity (Connell, 2005). Chris and Brock also contrasted themselves with their fathers, who they described as 'traditional' males. Chris explained:

So, I don't know if my maleness (pause), I don't know how it affected it [parentification], but it's, it's definitely different from my father's maleness, and it's allowed me … I think more flexibility in how to relate to people, I think, than what he perhaps has, or knows. (Chris)

Further contrasting himself to a traditional understanding of manhood, Chris described himself as more sensitive than his brother:

I am just more of a (pause) emotional, sensitive, kind of, talkative, kind of a person, you know; he's [brother] a bit more, I guess, classic masculine, sort of a guy, you know. (Chris)

Brock explained that, as a sensitive person, he was often misunderstood by his traditional and stoic father. Brock said:

> Um, my dad's quite stoic, and [a] very traditional man in that way, he doesn't show emotions much, and I was quite a sensitive kid, as well, I'm actually a lot like my mum, so, um, I can be quite sensitive, and, um, yeah, he didn't understand that a lot. (Brock)

In these excerpts, Chris and Brock distinguished themselves from a traditional standard of manhood (Connell, 2005). Chris stated that his 'maleness' was different to his fathers', and that it provided him with more flexibility in how he related to people. Brock described his father as a traditional man who avoided showing emotions—unlike himself who was more like his mother. Consistent with these accounts, Jurkovic (1997, p. 244) stated that when males engage in parentification tasks traditionally associated with females, their affiliation with masculinity is decreased. With the exception of the present study and Jurkovic's (1997) claim, it is difficult to find other scholarship that gives this notion the attention it deserves. This oversight should be addressed, particularly given this study's finding that males who are emotionally parentified by their mothers depart, to some extent, from a traditional notion of manhood.

Although the relationship between males performing emotional parentification and describing themselves in gender-subversive ways is not often detailed in role reversal scholarship, a similar phenomenon has been discussed within gender studies literature (Buschmeyer, 2013; Szabo, 2014). In "I'm a Real Catch": The Blurring of Alternative and Hegemonic Masculinities in Men's Talk about Home Cooking', Szabo (2014) indicated that men who frequently engaged in home cooking contrasted themselves against conventional standards of manhood. Male participants who discussed themselves in less traditional ways 'framed their involvement with domestic work as an indication of some degree of "feminine" character in themselves' (Szabo, 2014, p. 231). In this way, Szabo's (2014) research resonates with the phenomenon described by the males in this study, and shows that a correlation exists between males' frequent engagement in activities traditionally associated with females and a departure from a conventional standard of masculinity. This is considered beneficial to the males who were parentified by their mothers, as masculinity is often considered toxic (Haider, 2016), not least because it devalues activities traditionally associated with women (Hanlon, 2012).

While males parentified by their mothers described themselves in gender nonconforming ways, they still demonstrated tacit alliances with normative accounts of masculinity (see Connell, 2005, p. 70). In comparison to female participants, they either implicitly or explicitly demonstrated difficulties talking about their emotions. Towards the end of his interview, Brock explained that he was worried about his parents' economic wellbeing:

> I'm worried about my parents', ah, future. 'Cause they were recently (pause), you know, went bankrupt, um, I'm concerned about what's going to happen to them in the future in terms of money, so I'm living with mum to save (pause), cut down, costs, and come back home, to take up a full-time job, or to buy a property, um, so now their economic situation like (pause), it forces me in that way, I am trying, trying to be, more responsible like that. (Brock)

During his interview, Brock explained that he had overcome the need to provide his mother with emotional support; however, it seems that he replaced this with concern for his parents' economic wellbeing. This indicates that, as Brock grew older, his concern for his parents became more congruent with expectations traditionally associated with males (Schmitz, 2016). In other words, although Chris and Brock did not align themselves with a conventional ideal of masculinity, they retained secondary and more convert alliances with the limitations and restrictions of customary concepts of manhood. These alliances are further explored in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.9 Sex Formations Are Relevant

The themes outlined in this chapter indicate that the sex formation of the role reversal influenced whether gender normativity was relevant to participants' parentification tasks. For participants in same-sex parentification dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) their role reversals were underpinned by gender normativity. Additionally, participants involved in same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) also explicitly made a clear connection between being a female or a male and their parentification experiences.

Conversely, for participants in cross-sex dynamics (the two males parentified by their mothers), their role was more gender subversive. As detailed above (see Section 4.7), these males reported performing emotional labour in their experiences of parentification, which is less consistent with a customary understanding of masculinity. Supporting the argument that their parentification was gender subversive, these males were unable to clearly identify how being a male was relevant to their experiences. These men also described themselves in ways

that departed from a traditional notion of manhood (Connell, 2005). Further, their descriptions of themselves suggest that their parentification was not as gender normative as it was for the participants in same-sex parentification dynamics. Consequently, for the participants in this study, the question of whether their parentification role was gender normative, and whether they perceived that being a female or a male was significant to their responsibilities, depended on the sex formation of the dyad they were involved in. This leads to the idea that sex-formations matter to the relevance of gender normativity in parentification roles for both females and males.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter examined whether females and males in same-sex and cross-sex role reversals performed gender-normative parentification tasks. It showed that the parentification tasks undertaken by participants in same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) were gender normative. The females parentified by their mothers performed tasks traditionally associated with ideas of 'women's work' (Oakley, 2005), and the male who was parentified by his father performed tasks aligned with masculinity. Conversely, this study found that males who were parentified by mothers performed a parentification task—providing emotional support—that was gender subversive. In short, this chapter indicated that while those in same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) performed gender-normative tasks, those in cross-sex (mother–son) formations did not. Consequently, for this sample, engaging in gender-normative parentification tasks depended on the sex formations of the role reversal. This strongly suggests that parentification tasks are guided by mothers' and fathers' gender needs, rather than their children's gender socialisation. This is indicated by the fact that sons parentified by mothers performed a parentification task aligned with their mothers' gender rather than tasks aligned with their own gender socialisation. The next chapter examines whether gender is relevant to the perception of unmet needs in childhood and adult relationship experiences, as discussed by the females and males who participated in this study.

Chapter 5: 'It's Hard to Say No to People, When They Need You'—Examining the Relevance of Gender in Unmet Childhood Needs and Adult Relationships in the Context of Parentification

5.1 Introduction

Parentification literature suggests that a detrimental outcome of role reversal is the affect it has on one's adult relationships (Baggett et al., 2015; Levine, 2009; Valleau et al., 1995). Of particular concern is the fact that parentified children often enter destructive adult relationships in which they position themselves as the giver rather than receiver of care (Jurkovic, 1997). This understanding is underpinned by the notion that individuals with parentification histories are primed to a life of serving others because they learn to suppress their own needs and focus on the care of adults during childhood (Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2007; Reeves, 1999). However, because this theory is largely gender-blind (see Chapter 1), this chapter sets out to examine whether both females and males experience unmet needs in childhood and problematic adult relationships. Seven themes were identified from the analysis of the interview data: 1) females and unmet needs, 2) males and unmet needs, 3) females and interpersonal relating, 4) males and interpersonal relating, 5) females and self-reliance, 6) females and romantic relationships, and 7) males and romantic relationships. It will be argued that differences are apparent between female and male experiences of unmet needs and adult relationships. More specifically, it will be shown that gender socialisation exacerbates the effects of parentification for females. Conversely, it will be shown that gender buffers the effects of role reversals for males.

5.2 Females and Unmet Needs

To understand how participants were treated in their childhoods, and whether this differed for female and male participants, all participants were asked to describe how their needs, thoughts and feelings were responded to in their families. Most of the female participants indicated that their emotional needs went unmet. This was distressing for most of the women. Demonstrating distress over not having her emotional needs met, Ava commented:

> The emotional side of it, um, thinking about it now, I feel bereft. Makes me sad
> thinking about it now [voice cracks as if starting to cry] 'cause I think I didn't get it

[emotional support], I didn't get it, and so, um, I guess my ability to cope with life as an adult, was diminished. (Ava)

She continued:

I guess I had to be the emotional (pause), I guess I had to be the emotional parent for my mother. Um … I couldn't, I couldn't, um, voice my emotional needs, I couldn't expect my emotional needs to be considered, or fulfilled in any shape or form, but I had to provide the emotional needs for my mother. I had to be responsible for my mother, and I had to give her emotional support at the expense of my own. (Ava)

Reflecting on the relationship she had with her mother, Ava recalled:

I was sad, we couldn't talk about things, um, I don't remember having any deep and meaningful relationship with my mother at all. There was no sharing of concerns, there was no sharing of happiness, um, she was only ever happy with me when I performed well. I (pause) wasn't important to my mum as a whole person. (Ava)

Other female participants expressed similar sentiments. For example:

If I talked about feelings they would often get dismissed; my mum would talk about how feelings were subjective and how she felt this way, and she could sometimes twist things around to be why her feelings [were] more valid than my feelings. Um, as a child, I remember, learning that there were things that you just didn't say, they just weren't safe, you'd get punished for them … there was a lot of stuff I just didn't express, so I don't feel like my mum ever really got to know who I am as a person, because there'd just be, just things where she would say, 'you shouldn't do that, you shouldn't think that'. (Laura)

It took (pause), I feel like it took me an awfully long time to separate out from my parents, because I was still trying to get all this stuff from them that I couldn't get, if that makes sense. So it's almost like, I, I, feel like I was actually chasing my parents, to get my emotional needs met, that hadn't been met throughout my childhood, and so I spent a lot of time, I think, in my twenties, feeling really distressed, and really angry about it. (Sarah)

These excerpts provide evidence of the ways in which female participants' experienced emotional neglect. To demonstrate the strength of this theme, and illustrate how commonly the females explored this issue, further excerpts have also been included:

My emotional needs (pause) were never, ever, even on the agenda. My parents were so self-absorbed (pause), I mean (pause) but, no, they didn't see me. I didn't matter, it's because [Fiona] has no needs, she barely exists, because that's what having parents who, parents (pause), um, parents who parentify you, do to you, they make

you feel like you don't exist … [and] I think I became aware that no-one's looking after me. (Fiona)

I don't know if there was that much room for me to express my deeper thoughts, 'cause it was always more about her [mother], and, and how well she is, or, how well she was, or, yeah … I think that was the worst part of it, actually, was just being alone, I just felt so alone all the time. (Carly)

I also didn't rely, I, maybe in a way it was that I didn't go to her [mother] for emotional support, because I didn't (pause) feel like she was capable of giving that to me, because I was that for her, and she proved to me, a few times, that I … wouldn't get that from her in the way that I needed. (Olivia)

I mean as a little girl, I was absolutely (pause), my feelings were all around needing to make sure she [mother] was feeling okay, as long as that was okay, I felt okay. Um there wasn't really space to express my emotions, I think, in that relationship. (Charlotte)

Charlotte said that she was unable to express herself through words and that her mother did not recognise this as a problem:

I only started to talk when I was about four, which is late, that's late. And when (pause), she [mother], I said 'weren't you worried?' because that's (pause), I would be worried if my child wasn't talking. So I'm wondering did she [mother], well, was it just okay, or it didn't bother her because her needs were being met all the time. It didn't matter that I wasn't really able to express I mean, you know, but in her mind, she didn't even see that, she didn't see that as a (pause), difficulty or an issue. (Charlotte)

The descriptions of emotional neglect made by the female participants in these statements are not unusual in parent–child role reversals. In fact, receiving minimal emotional care and attention is often the hallmark of parentification when seen from a psychological and gender-blind perspective (Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2007). Chase (1999) has described that parentified children learn to sacrifice their own need for comfort and guidance to accommodate adults' needs. Detailing how this develops, Chase (1999) commented: 'because children need their parents, children learn readily to respond to what their parents' need' (p. 5). This is not a problem when the parent offers reciprocal attention and care to their child (Jurkovic, 1997). However, when parental dependency on the child is too great, children may receive the message that their needs are less important (Chase, 1999, p. 5). As discussed in Chapter 1, this theory is gender-blind; therefore, it is unclear whether both females and males experience unmet needs.

In this study, most females claimed that their emotional needs were less relevant than their parents, a finding consistent with parentification theory (Chase, 1999; Hooper, 2007). For example, Laura said that her needs were often dismissed by her mother. Similarly, Fiona said that her needs were never on the agenda because her parents were so self-absorbed that they could not really see her. Although Fiona refers to her parents in relation to not having her needs met, it is important to reiterate that it was her mother who parentified her. Male participants in this study also reported that their needs were unmet as children. However, demonstrating an important contrast, the female participants reported greater levels of distress than the males. For example, Ava said she felt bereft. Sarah reported spending a significant amount of time feeling really upset and angry about chasing her parents, only to have her needs ultimately denied. The female participants' feelings of upheaval are viewed as relevant to gender socialisation. Females are often encouraged to value their emotional life and emotional connections with others (Jack, 1991; Schrock & Knop, 2014; Shields, 2002). Therefore, most female participants likely expressed anguish over their unmet needs more strongly than the male participants because they were encouraged to prioritise their emotional life through their gender socialisation. This demonstrates how notions of gender contributed to shaping and encouraging the females' experience of emotional neglect in their childhoods.

In the above quotations, some female participants also described feeling unable to even articulate their emotions. Ava said that she was unable to 'voice' her feelings. Charlotte also said that she had difficulty expressing herself, literally, as she was unable to talk until the age of four. Consistent with these accounts, previous qualitative research has reported that parentified girls sometimes struggle to assert themselves (Van Parys et al., 2015; Van Parys et al., 2014). For example, Van Parys et al. (2014) interviewed parentified women who grew up with a depressed mother, and found that some female participants were unable to pay attention to their own experiences, or share their feelings with others. In a similar qualitative study, parentified females described feeling out of touch with their emotions (Van Parys et al., 2015). Van Parys et al. (2015) explained that parentified females often had difficulties with self-expression due to a sense of not being allowed to share concerns about the problematic situation in their families. For parentified females, 'reassuring their parents and silencing their own worries can be seen as a way to protect the family from additional harm or avoidance of complicating the situation at home even more' (Van Parys et al, 2015, p. 7). While it makes sense to suggest that parentified females' inability to clearly assert their emotions stems from their family situations, from a feminist perspective, gender socialisation

can actually compound and reinforce this experience. In a broader sense, through gender affiliations, females are often taught to suppress their needs and desires for the sake of others (Jack, 1991). Jack (1991) argued that to maintain intimate partnerships, women often suppress their authentic sense of self. This complies with standards of femininity and accommodating the needs of others, particularly men. Thus, for parentified females, experiencing trouble with self-expression can be viewed as something that is reinforced by the construction of femininity (see Brownmiller, 2014, p. 15) and not only connected to role reversal experiences.

Some female participants in this study also commented that they lacked an emotionally rich and deeply connected relationship with their mothers. For instance, Ava reflected with sadness that she could not share her concerns with her mother, and that she did not have a deep and meaningful relationship with her. Laura also said that because she was not encouraged to express herself, her mother never really got to know her. In a similar sense, Carly commented that she was unable to be herself around her mother, and that she often experienced a sense of loneliness. Similarly, two parentified females in Van Parys et al.'s (2014) study recalled feeling lonely as children. The researchers accounted for this by explaining that the females missed out on meaningful relationships with their mothers. One of the females in their study explicitly stated that 'as a child I never had love and affection' (p. 7). Another female described how her mother was not fully present, which restricted the process of developing a purposeful relationship with her. Therefore, as the present and previous studies have shown, parentification is characterised by a lack of an emotionally fulfilling relationship with mothers accompanied by feelings of loneliness for some females. In contrast, the male participants in this study did not indicate that a fulfilling relationship with their mothers or fathers or both was missing. This further supports the notion that the female participants were more concerned about losses in their emotional lives than the males. This finding can be seen as shaped by gender socialisation, which tends to exacerbate the negative effect of parentification experienced by females.

5.3 Males and Unmet Needs

Although the males parentified by their mothers also reported that their emotional needs were unmet, which is consistent with Chase's (1999) understanding that parentification involves children not receiving enough attention, they rarely discussed this in relation to distress or loneliness. They explained that:

> I don't think she, she, really responded to, to my needs, and, and, that's probably just because I don't know if I really share them, or made them available to them. I guess, you know, um, but I don't think I was ever very open with them about my own feelings and issues, and things like that in a way, um, which I think is hard for people when they're younger anyway, especially guys perhaps. (Chris)

> Mum's feelings were (pause), definitely took priority, mum's feelings took priority a lot. Ah, but I did have, you know, a good upbringing at the end of the day, I still had all the essentials for survival, you know, um, good education, and I was looked after, and all that kind of thing. (Brock)

In contrast to the females in the study, Chris did not necessarily see his mother as responsible for meeting his emotional needs. Instead, he explained that he did not often share his feelings with his parents. Emphasising that this was a gendered occurrence, Chris explicitly stated that opening up and discussing emotions, is difficult for males to do. Similarly, Brock stated that his mum's feelings took priority, although, he dismissed this by insisting that he still had a good upbringing that provided all the essentials for survival. The comments above show that the male participants did not express their emotional neglect in the same problematic terms as the females. This can be explained by a normative idea of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 70). Focusing on one's emotional life is not necessarily seen as congruent with how men should conduct themselves (Hanlon, 2012). Because the males' reports of unmet emotional needs are viewed as underpinned by masculinity (Connell, 2005), this demonstrates another way in which these males made a tacit alliance with this standard, despite describing themselves as departing from this gender norm (see Chapter 4).

In comparison to participants parentified by their mothers, John, the only participant who was involved in a role reversal with a father, discussed his needs in terms of financial and material matters:

> So, for me, it was like, I (pause), my, my needs were not responded to because I didn't tell them about my needs. When I was in high school, and primary school a little bit as well, ah, say, I wanted to go on camp. Um, and, I'd, I'd hide the note in my bag, and my mum would check my bag, and she's really annoying, but um, she would find it a couple weeks later and be like, 'oh, are you going to the camp?' And I would be like 'nup, it's already passed'. I kept doing it, 'cause I thought it was better for (pause), for them 'cause they didn't have the money. (John)

In this quotation, John indicates that his needs were not met because he did not share them with his parents. Providing an example, John stated that he did not tell his mother and father about his desire to attend school camp, as they could not afford to send him. Consequently,

John primarily focused on discussing his needs in terms of financial matters. This is viewed as relevant to gender-normative standards, as males are expected to be involved in financial and breadwinning affairs rather than emotional matters (Hanlon, 2012). Therefore, John describing his needs in terms of finances is another reflection of the strong role that masculinity played in this father–son parentification experience.

5.4 Females and Interpersonal Relating

Most females in this study discussed performing excessive levels of emotional caregiving in their adult lives. This was described in a manner that showed that female participants considered it problematic. For example, Fiona said:

> Responding to other adults in need is something that was very hard for me not to do … I've had a lot of friends, um, who I've been endlessly available for. (Fiona)

Discussing a particular friendship, she elaborated:

> Um, you know, I'd put her on loudspeaker and talk to her while I cleaned the bathroom, because I could not not be there for her. And that to me, the legacy of being (pause), being parentified, that (pause), it's hard to say no to people when they need you. (Fiona)

She continued:

> I'd be in the car park listening to her problems and then I'd be trying to get home and sort of look after my family, and it was that sort of you know, being very easily imposed upon. Not having good boundaries. Yeah, so, um, I've had a number of relationships like that … And then I sort of (pause) felt like I was in this, um, subservient role to her, or something you know … I've had relationships in which I have felt, in retrospect, very used. One was (pause), I had this very close friend for 20 years, um, and she also had a lot of problems, and she, um, would (pause), I could share my problems with her, but it was heavily weighted towards her, um, using me as a confidante. (Fiona)

Similarly, Ava conveyed:

> I always felt I had to be, you know, there for mum, be the one, keeping the connection going with my mother. I transferred that over to friends; I had to be the one that phoned if they didn't, um, I had to be the one that go (pause), went around to see them, even though they didn't do the same thing for me, so I felt the need to keep the connection going. (Ava)

Reflecting further, she stated:

One of my traits now is I have to solve everybody's problem, because I have to solve mum's problems, um, and that, that, was only something that I've you know really started to understand, and I'm sixty now, so it sort of (pause) has had a big impact over my life. I have had this discussion with my cousin, 'cause, we're very close, she's like a sister to me, and she now says, when she tells me something, 'you are not to find a solution to this problem, it is none of your business, I've just told you', because I would take whatever (pause), and I'd ring her up and say, 'oh, I woke up during the night, and I thought about this, you could, you could ask her to do this, or think about that'. (Ava)

Other females recalled similar experiences. For example:

I became that person for everybody, that emotional support, and maybe that's why I want to be in the caring professions. Because I, I jumped into that role for everybody that I met, and I guess in a way I felt like that's what you do when you care for somebody, you become their rock. You start fixing their problems, and that's caused a lot of conflict with my friendships, because I'd tried to fix problems they didn't want fixed. (Olivia)

I think I'm doing the same thing that I did to my mum, I'm trying to parentify my friend like I did to my mum, it's horrible. (Natalia)

I have seen how it has influenced my adult relationships … I am still quite prone to taking on responsibility for other people that I shouldn't, and I am very hyper-sensitive to other people's emotions and their needs, um, in a way that irritates me sometimes because I see other people don't do that … And I know that I don't need to do that, but I can't help (pause), but it's just been honed to such a point that I'm very good at it, but, um, it's not a skill I put on my resume, I'm not proud of it, but um, yeah. (Laura)

These comments are evidence of the ways in which, during their adult lives, most female participants were compelled to take up the role of emotional caregiver. Describing the pressure to perform this role excessively, Fiona stated that she found it very difficult not to be there for others in her life. Similarly, Olivia stated that she provided emotional support for 'everybody she met'. These experiences are consistent with claims made by scholars who emphasise that role reversals often lead to excessive caregiving (Jurkovic, 1997; Meier et al., 2014; Reeves, 1999; Siegel & Silverstein, 1994; West & Keller, 1991). Illustrating how this occurs from a psychological perspective, Jurkovic (1997) stated that parentified children build a primary sense of self that is based on caring for others. Likewise, Reeves (1999) stated: 'the parentified child usually grows into adulthood psychologically groomed for a life of service to others' (p. 179). However, since these findings come from a largely gender-blind perspective, it is unclear whether these experiences are common to both females and

males (see Chapter 1). In contrast, this study shows that females reported more problematic accounts of adult caregiving than males.

Female participants typically described their adult caregiving as arduous and burdensome. Illustrating this point, Fiona revealed that her need to care for others was not something that she viewed favourably. She commented that she was 'easily imposed on' and felt 'used' in a friendship that was based on her providing the bulk of the care. Ava also emphasised detrimental effects, stating that solving other people's problems, as she had done for her mother, had a 'big impact' on her life. Ava suggested she had only begun to realise, in her early sixties, the link between her adult behaviour and her childhood. In a similar vein, Laura stated she was 'not proud' that she possessed a tendency to shoulder other peoples' responsibilities, while Natalia stated that it was 'horrible' that she was now parenting her friend in the same way that she had parented her mother. Since the male participants discussed their adult caregiving in less problematic terms, the female participants' accounts can be seen as linked to gendered notions of care that often implicate women into caring roles.

From a feminist perspective, caregiving is conceptualised as profoundly gendered. Indeed, feminist scholars have been vocal in arguing that caregiving is disproportionately the responsibility of females, underscored by social and political arrangements, rather than natural and biological inclinations (Oakley, 2005; Reskin, 1991). Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, Roets and Peeters (2014) state that women are largely lumbered with care labour both within, and outside, the home. The responsibility frequently placed on women regarding care points to why adult caregiving was described by female participants' as more problematic than the males' explained. Therefore, the adult caregiving performed by parentified females is not only considered an outcome of their parentification, but is also argued to be encouraged and reinforced by collective ideals that women 'should be' responsible for care.

Instead of examining care, and its sociocultural association to women, scholars who have studied parentification often view females' caregiving styles as a pathological condition termed 'compulsive caregiving' (Meier et al., 2014; Valleau et al., 1995; West & Keller, 1991). The gender-blind perspective of much of this literature tends to downplay instances that show compulsive caregiving is more strongly associated with females (Valleau et al., 1995). Despite the established link between females and compulsive caregiving, this label is perilous, especially from a feminist perspective. According to feminist scholars, the coining

of concepts like 'compulsive caregiving' is part of a process of pathologising females for what is essentially women's gender socialisation (Collins, 1993). Such terms place individual blame upon women for what is fundamentally a social and political problem (Collins, 1993). Consequently, in contrast to previous parentification research (Meier et al., 2014; Valleau et al., 1995; West & Keller, 1991), the adult caregiving experiences as reported by the females in this study is not viewed as a form of individual psychopathology. Instead, it is viewed as a reflection of a harmful and problematic social practice, where care is significantly feminised and largely preformed by women (Hanlon, 2012).

5.5 Males and Interpersonal Relating

In contrast to most of the females in this study, the males who were parentified by their mothers described less conflicted versions of adult caregiving; they tended to value the care they provided for other people. However, Brock acknowledged some difficulty with excessive caregiving:

> I'd feel guilty trying to separate myself out. I have friends that, you know, I didn't necessarily want to see, or, but, I feel the pressure to be nice to them, to make, make them feel happy, to, um, even though I didn't necessarily enjoy my time around them. (Brock)

Brock explained that he learned how to say 'no' to people in his late twenties; putting this into perspective, some of the female participants in this study were still struggling with an overwhelming sense they needed to be emotional carers well into their sixties. Brock articulated:

> I won't drop everything, I used to drop everything for friends, you know, you know, friends would be like, 'I've had a horrible day', you know, 'I just really need to go, and have a drink' and, you know, I'd have school on that day, or I had something else, and they'd be 'please, come on man, please, you know', 'alright, I will', I would, but now I say, 'no, sorry this isn't a good time for me'. (Brock)

Despite Brock's early struggles, the two males parentified by their mothers were generally proud of their caregiving skills, which they valued as an asset. They explained:

> I think I'm really good at talking to people about their problems. You know, like I think I have a really high level of empathy, you know, like it doesn't take me much to sort of really connect with somebody, or a story, or something, and, and being moved, and want to help them, and sort of, you know, and that's a really good strength. (Chris)

> I guess I just work well with listening to people, and, being quite open and tolerant of people, um, I like to look after people, I like to make people happy, um, yeah so, I do try and make people happy, try to make people comfortable. (Brock)

These statements indicate a sense of value and pride; importantly, they evince none of the burden that most females reported. Males' offering less conflicted versions of care is significant in the context of gender. Men are not traditionally encouraged to embark on emotional caregiving; therefore, they are not typically overburdened with this task in wider society (Hanlon, 2012; Oakley, 2005; Reskin, 1991). Although the males in this study provided emotional care to others as adults—which is considered an outcome of parentification (Jurkovic, 1997; Reeves, 1999)—gender norms provided a buffer to their experiences, which made their adult caregiving less problematic than for parentified females.

The sense of value and pride that male participants expressed about their care is also significant, as men are often praised and rewarded for performing tasks traditionally associated with women (Evans, 2002). Evans (2002) has pointed out that males involved in care tasks (such as male nurses) are often perceived as 'unique' and 'special' for performing what is traditionally seen as 'women's work'. When considering the positive reaction given to men who perform gender nonconforming tasks, it is not surprising that the males in this study discussed their caregiving skills with a sense of pride.

Because the males found their adult care roles less burdensome than the females, parentification can be seen as beneficial to building social competency in males parentified by mothers. This finding contrasts with previous research that suggests that parentification builds social competency in females because it fits with their psychosocial development (Fitzgerald et al., 2008). Instead, the present study suggests that parentification is more beneficial to males (parentified by mothers) because it departs from their gender-normative development. Emotional parentification provided the males in this study with an opportunity to develop care skills that they valued and that are stereotypically associated with females (Oakley, 2005). This is considered highly valuable because it provided the males with an opportunity to make a break from traditional masculinity, which is typically void of caregiving responsibilities (Hanlon, 2012).

5.6 Females and Self-Reliance

As well as detailing themselves as adult caregivers, some females in this study described themselves as self-reliant. Although self-reliance was not mentioned as often as being an emotional carer, it was still considered a notable aspect of the data. Angela emphasised that:

> I don't need other people, it's like (pause), even if, um, one of my colleagues who I've become, you know, reasonably close to, she said to me, 'oh you know, you know, what do you do on weekends?' What do you mean me? You know, I mean, I can enjoy my own company, I don't have to have people around, in fact, you know, considering I'm an extrovert, a lot of people get surprised with that, but a lot of the time, I don't want people around me. (Angela)

Later, she stated:

> I don't deliberately, um, avoid relationships, I don't want one; I am happy with myself, um, but I think part of me thinks, shit, I (pause), well (pause), I don't know, part of me goes, my god, I could be the same. So, I don't like that teaching, that they've [family] created, so either I don't liking doing it to someone else, or I don't wanna be in that environment, so it's easy to be on my own, so it's (pause), like, I'm not doing it, and saying I'm a victim or anything, 'cause I am actually happy. (Angela)

Other female participants expressed similar sentiments:

> I'm so independent that I could be alone, like, without a relationship … it [parentification] made me really independent, it made me streetwise, so I could at a very young age, say, I could've lost both my parents and all my family and [had] no-one to rely on, and I could have taken care of myself, from a very young age. I do have (pause) this, just knowledge that I can get through, yeah, I can take care of myself, yeah. (Olivia)

> I kept saying, 'I'II do it on my own', and that's kind of the way I am now. I think I'm one of those, like, rare individuals, who have, like, hectic [loads of] self-confidence, because everything I own, I bought, everything, like, I do, like, I got now … You know, if I got really good marks from school, I feel good about that … I just know that, like, everything I've had hasn't been handed to me, I can see, like, I've, friggen, you know, struggled, for it. (Natalia)

These quotations indicate that, in their adulthood, some females were self-reliant and content with the knowledge that they could survive on their own. For example, Angela said she was happy being single and enjoyed her own company. Olivia felt that her parentification experience had made her independent and 'streetwise'. Natalia conveyed that she possessed a high level of self-confidence, especially in regard to achieving on her own. Along similar

lines, some female participants in Gilford and Reynolds's (2011) qualitative study, 'My Mother's Keeper: The Effects of Parentification on Black Female College Students', also identified themselves as strong women who possessed survival skills. Reflecting on her parentification, a female participant in Gilford and Reynolds's study recalled:

> All I went through my whole life, like with my mother and all of my family members, I think it made me a very strong person, to know that I can survive in all types of conditions, whether I am poor, or I am rich and I still have my humility as a person. (p. 71)

This statement is strikingly similar to the details provided by some females in this study who also experienced a sense of strength and self-reliance, which they attributed to their parentification. Consistent with the idea that parentification can lead to some level of growth, Hooper et al. (2008) found quantitative support for the idea that parentification (although a risk factor for negative outcomes) can also predict small levels of post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is the idea that, over time, individuals can gain some benefit from trauma (Hooper et al., 2008). Cognitive changes in belief systems that lead to a decrease in emotional distress are often reported as benefits (Hooper, Marotta & Depuy, 2009). An underlying assumption of post-traumatic growth theory is the idea that making meaning from traumatic experiences is likely to occur as one ages (Hooper et al., 2008). Consequently, Hooper et al. (2008) suggested that their prediction model is likely to become stronger as parentified children age. In the context of this research, the comments of the females in this study who positively described themselves as self-reliant could be interpreted as evidence of post-traumatic growth.

Accounts of self-reliance are also relevant in relation to normative standards of masculinity (see Connell, 2005, p. 70), which may explain why female participants in this study viewed their self-reliance in positive terms. When interpreted from the feminist perspective advanced in this thesis, women's accounts of deriving contentment from self-reliance correlate with Western standards of what it means to be a man (Connell, 2005). Traditionally, manhood encompasses notions of independence and the avoidance of social connectedness as the pinnacle of success (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, Warin, 2007, p. 326). Consequently, individual autonomy is privileged within many Western contexts. For instance, this standard is found within the field of psychology in which developing an independent sense of self is considered the touchstone of healthy development (Impett, Sorsoli, Schooler, Henson, Tolman, 2008). Feminist psychologists have critiqued this paradigm on the basis that it

overlooks women's experiences, which are often embedded in social connectedness (Gilligan, 1982; Impett et al., 2008). Despite feminist criticisms, independence is still valorised in Western psychology and the broader society. Therefore, it is significant that some females in this study were positive about independence, which is typically celebrated as masculine (Connell, 2005), and negative regarding their adult caregiving roles, which tends to be affiliated with femininity (Brownmiller, 2014).

5.7 Females and Romantic Relationships

Most female participants described their romantic relationships as including features of their childhood parentification; they maintained that their intimate relationships were similar to their parentification experience in the sense that they provided emotional support with little in return. Sarah explained:

> Also, it's meant that I've, often, in my own relationships, as an adult, so in romantic relationships, I've often, taken a caregiving role, or, um, people who were anxious personalities, or maybe had some kind of mental health issue. (Sarah)

She added:

> Um, so yeah, I feel like I've been involved with quite a few, sort of, quite self-absorbed, quite messy, people, who have not (pause), not (pause), that haven't really been able to meet, my needs, it's really been more about me taking care of them … I don't always recognise it until I am over-involved, and then I think, oh, actually, um, they (pause), they are needing quite a lot from me, or they (pause), there is an issue here, with this person being psychologically unstable in some way, but I (pause), because I am so use to that, it, it really wasn't something that I recognised from the word go. (Sarah)

Ava made a similar point when she commented that:

> Offering emotional support is difficult for him [husband], and so, therefore, I'm, I'm sort of (pause) bereft in some respects of emotional support, again … I'm sort of back, like I was as a child, I'm supporting somebody else. (Ava)

She continued:

> I have to actually ask for a cuddle when I feel I need it. He [husband] has said, 'if you need a cuddle, you have to ask me, cause I won't know'. He has said, 'if you need a cuddle, come and get it from me' … I feel like I (pause), having to support someone else's needs to get my own needs met, and that that need with him, is that he doesn't notice, so he has to be told. (Ava)

Reflecting on her romantic relationships, Olivia stressed:

> I'm emotional support to them a lot and then as soon as I need that, all of a sudden, the relationship is over. (Olivia)

Describing one romantic relationship, she continued:

> I was almost like his counsellor, and then, about four (pause), or coming towards the end of the relationship I, um, started to feel a little bit funny at work, and started feeling a bit depressed and insecure. Um, situational depression, but saying to him, 'gosh, I think I might be depressed', and it was a couple of weeks later that he broke up with me, and he was like (pause), and he literally said, 'you're not (pause), this isn't what I signed up for'. (Olivia)

In these excerpts, Sarah, Ava and Olivia expressed how their male partners were unable to meet their needs. Extending this theme, Sarah and Olivia said that their partners nonetheless expected emotional support from them. Similarly, Laura emphasised that her first husband expected her to be responsible for him. Discussing that relationship, she explained:

> I can see that while I'm not responsible for his behaviour, I could see that he was attracted to me because I was such a responsible person, that was very intuitive, my emotional responsibilities for other people, 'cause that was very much the dynamic that we had, and that he expected from me … he just would not, he would not be responsible for anything in his adult box, it was always my fault, or something I should do, or, you know, house work was woman's work, kind of thing. (Laura)

Elaborating on her current situation, Laura added:

> More specifically, with my current partner, um, I take on responsibilities that I don't need to take on, and I get very frustrated sometimes that that is a part of me. I have to work really hard not to do that, but, I get really frustrated that that is now part of me, so it's a part my sense of self that I don't like. (Laura)

As these accounts demonstrate, most female participants felt that their romantic relationships included characteristics of their childhood role reversals in which they provided support without adequate reciprocation. For instance, Sarah, Ava and Olivia spoke about providing emotional support to male partners and receiving little in return. Most female participants' descriptions of parentification included accounts of providing support to their mothers with little reciprocation. Further, Ava made an explicit connection between her parentification and her adult life. She stated that when she had to ask her husband for a hug it felt like her childhood again; because she was supporting someone else in an effort to have her own needs met. In a similar way, Laura explained how she felt responsible for her first husband and her

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current partner. Throughout her interview, Laura emphasised that her mother expected her to be responsible for her emotions—that is, Laura's mother's emotions; Laura's mother failed to teach Laura how to manage her own emotions.

Links between parentification and difficulties in romantic relationships (Baggett et al., 2015; Peris et al., 2008) have been made. However, as explained in Chapter 1, parentification literature predominately uses a gender-blind approach when examining why parentification continues in adult romantic relationships. Problems in the adult relationships of parentified children are often explained in terms of individual psychology. For instance, referring to parentified adults, Olson and Gariti (1993) stated that 'their inability to seek, find, and maintain balanced relationships is centred at the core of their development within their earliest learning environment: the family' (p. 206). Also adopting a genderless perspective, other scholars have suggested that the development of compulsive caregiving effects future relationships (Valleau et al., 1995 West & Keller, 1991). Baggett et al. (2015) also claimed that parentified daughters may develop insecure and avoidant attachment styles, which are then carried into intimate relationships, but they failed to link this to gender roles or socialisation, and make suitable comparisons with males. In contrast to previous scholarship that underplays the relevance of gender, this study demonstrates that it is females who predominately continue parentification in their intimate relationships, and gender norms are significant to explaining these reports.

The continued parentification evident in female participants' adult relationships is not viewed as the result of role reversals alone. Instead, it is viewed as resulting from role reversals *and* the unequal gendered arrangements of care typically practised within heterosexual relationships (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). Gender roles are often played out in romantic relationships, and they frequently determine how caregiving is negotiated and carried out between the sexes (Knudson-Martin, 2012). Women often provide more nurturing and emotional support than they receive from their intimate male partners (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). In 'Gender and the Culture of Heterosexual Marriage in the United States', Loscocco and Walzer (2013) found that women are often more responsible for providing emotional care within marriages. They explained that women perceive emotional support as significant to their role within the marriage in ways that husbands do not. Importantly, Loscocco and Walzer (2013) stated that women

often bear responsibility for care within intimate relationships in ways that transgress racial identity and social class:

> Women of all racial/ethnic and social classes are socially constructed as more emotionally adept than men, a wife is more likely to bear responsibility for the emotional quality of a relationship and for helping her husband to understand both her emotional responses and his own. (p. 6)

Although not all female participants in this study were married or in long-term relationships, shouldering responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of their male partners manifested as a significant theme for most heterosexual female participants. Crucially, their recollections are not only relevant in the context of their parentification. Indeed, the same pattern is found more broadly within heterosexual relationships (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). Therefore, female participants' accounts are considered to have been encouraged by gendered notions of care, commonly practised in heterosexual relationships, and not parentification experiences alone.

Some female participants commented that they pushed their own needs aside during their intimate relationships, such as Fiona who felt that she lacked a sense of entitlement:

> I've had a number of major relationships with men, and they haven't been successful … But, you know my relationships with men, um, were very unhealthy because I didn't have a strong sense of entitlement. (Fiona)

Discussing her current situation, she explained:

> Like, you know, with my current husband, like, I still put his needs before my own, in a whole lot of ways, but it is balanced like … he's got his own interests, I have got my own interests, and he doesn't impose on me, at all, like I'm allowed to (pause), I shouldn't say that, um, you know we allow each other to, to, spend a lot of time doing what we do. (Fiona)

As previously mentioned in this chapter, Charlotte commented that she was not often able to express her needs. This inability led to a marriage that she did not want. She reflected:

> Oh it shouldn't have happened, and I did that purely, I didn't want to marry (pause), get married, I didn't want to marry him and I married him … And, um, I did all of those things, but I didn't want to marry him; I didn't want to be with the man and it was horrible. I didn't want to do it, and I did it and I felt bad that I did it, and I couldn't say what I wanted, and I felt terrible because he did want it, and, and, and um, didn't even know (pause), he didn't even know what I was thinking, that I was even thinking half of those things, you know. (Charlotte)

Contemplating her past, she added:

> I realised how I could put my (pause), I could absolutely put my own needs away, and live with a facade. Um and that frightened me (pause) it just didn't feel right I mean, that I could have done that, I could have done that, I couldn't believe that. Well, I guess I realised something about myself, I realised how I don't speak, and struggle to find that internal voice. I should never, never have got married, and I don't know why, I still wonder, why did I. (Charlotte)

In these interview extracts, female participants' experience of self-sacrifice is evident in their relationships with male partners. For example, Fiona often put her husband's needs before her own and Charlotte married a man because she could not say 'no'. From a gender-blind perspective, suppressing one's own needs through a process of self-sacrifice is described as a core feature of the parentification process (Chase, 1999; Giles, 2014; Jurkovic, 1997). Chase (1999) suggested that parentification entails the suppression of individual needs, while Giles (2014, p. 19) found that parentified children often present an altruistic and self-sacrificing face to the world. Along similar lines, Jurkovic (1997) claimed that parentified children often develop a fused and undifferentiated sense of self, which indicates blurred psychological boundaries between the self and others. The male participants in this gender-aware study did not discuss self-sacrifice in the context of their intimate partnerships. Therefore, rather than view the female participants' accounts of self-sacrifice solely in terms of parentification, self-sacrifice is viewed as also stemming from stereotypes of what it means to be a 'woman' in a traditional, romantic relationship (Jack, 1991).

Feminist authors support the notion that gender is relevant in explaining why some females self-sacrifice in intimate relationships. For example, feminist psychologist Dana Crowley Jack (1991) explained how a sociocultural climate of male domination encourages female self-sacrifice and compliance within relationships. In *Silencing the Self*, Jack (1991) noted that 'power imbalances within heterosexual relationships also directly influence women's tendency to fall into compliant relatedness as a means of ensuring connection with their partners' (p. 41). Jack argued that 'silencing the self'—that is, suppressing one's own views to maintain relationships with men—plays a role in women's experience of depression. Self-silencing theory suggests that women learn to suppress their needs and desires because expressing them (i.e., asserting themselves) is incompatible with what is traditionally expected of women (Jack, 1991; Norwood, et al., 2011). Consequently, self-sacrificing strategies have been identified as a broader problem for some females within relationships. This supports the proposition that normative gender standards encouraged self-sacrifice in

some female participants, and explains why the male participants in this study did not report similar experiences.

5.8 Males and Romantic Relationships

In contrast to most female participants, the male participants in this study reported less parentification in their romantic relationships. Importantly, the male participants parentified by their mothers did not report providing unreciprocated emotional support to their romantic partners. In fact, unlike the female participants who described considerable frustration in their romantic relationships, Chris found his relationship to be a distinct benefit, by supporting him to be more emotionally expressive:

> I started opening up more to her because it wasn't easy for me to open up about (pause), I could talk about difficult things, but it was hard for me to talk while I was upset, or down, or angry or stuff like. And that's something I got better with, with, because she also is just a really good listener, and really patient and stuff like that. (Chris)

For Chris, having a relationship enabled him to open up and talk about his emotions. The initial difficulties he faced in expressing his feelings are not surprising. Research in the area of family sociology confirms that, due to gender socialisation, women are more likely to express emotions in intimate relationships than men (Umberson, Thomeer & Lodge, 2015). However, with his girlfriend's assistance, Chris was able to make progress towards rectifying this issue. Therefore, it can be argued that any difficulties that Chris experienced in his romantic relationship had less to do with his original parentification and more to do with the harms and restrictions of a normative notion of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 70).

Conversely, Brock directly attributed his relationship difficulties to his close alliance with his mother. Nonetheless, unlike most female participants, Brock did not describe experiencing high levels of caregiving with minimal care provided in return. Instead, his difficulties stemmed from an inability to trust, as he explained:

> I have a lot of trust issues. I'd find when I was in romantic relationships, I'd actually behave a little bit like my mother, yeah, so, um, yeah, just very distrustful. I guess, if people like me, why they would like me, you know, and that's where that distrust came in. (Brock)

In this statement, Brock linked his trust issues to the way his mother behaved towards him. Consequently, he attributed his relationship difficulties to his alliance with his mother.

However, he did not experience excessive caregiving in his relationships, which makes his experience different from the female participants in this study. Therefore, it can be argued that, for the male participants in this study, notions of gender safeguarded them from performing excessive amounts of unreciprocated care in their romantic relationships.

Like the males parentified by their mothers, the male parentified by his father did not mention providing excessive levels of caregiving in his intimate relationship. To the contrary, he remarked that he was sometimes neglectful:

> Oh, well, my girlfriend's a bit annoyed at it, because, ah, any time he [father] (pause), any time he [father] needs something, I'm straight there. Um, but, any time my dad needs money or my mum needs money, I give it to them straightaway, so I never have any money to do anything. And, I mean my girlfriend's not annoyed that I don't have money, because she makes more money than I do anyway, so she pays for me to have a lot of stuff, but, um, I get a bit annoyed because she's spending money on me so it's kind of a loop; it's a bit stupid. (John)

John's treatment of his girlfriend, as detailed in the above quotation, is viewed as partially explicable via gender norms. According to gender stereotypes, women are expected to perform more emotional caregiving within intimate relationships than men (Jack, 1991; Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). Specifically, John explained that his girlfriend was often neglected because he frequently offered his father assistance. John's descriptions are indeed, in part, reflective of a normative standard of masculinity (Connell, 2005), in the sense that providing financially and materially for his father was prioritised over his intimate relationship. Within his intimate relationship, John stated that his girlfriend had to pay for him; a circumstance which he seemed to have little control over since he was required to regularly provide money to his father. Interestingly, receiving money from his girlfriend was annoying to John. The precise reason for this remains unknown. However, we can infer that perhaps this was the case because it impeded on his sense of manhood- since it was a break from traditional gender roles. Thus, to some extent like the males parentified by their mothers, and unlike the females, notions of gender seemed to provide a buffer to ensure that John was not positioned as the caregiver in his intimate relationships.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter examined whether both females and males experienced unmet needs in childhood and, subsequently, problematic adult relationships that stemmed from this. Although both female and male participants disclosed that, as children, their needs were often

neglected, the female participants found this more distressing than the males. This highlights an important gender difference that corresponds with the central argument of this thesis. Further, the differences between female and male accounts of unmet needs sheds new light on parentification scholarship—the majority of which is undertaken from an uncritical gender-blind perspective (Jurkoivc, 1997; Hooper et al., 2008)—by showing that notions of gender are relevant and play a significant role in perceptions of unmet childhood needs. This chapter also demonstrated that females reported excessive and problematic adult caregiving experiences. Conversely, males parentified by their mothers reported that their adult caregiving was something they valued and took pride in. The differences in these accounts were explained in terms of care being more broadly constructed as women's work (Hanlon, 2012, Oakley, 2005). The female participants also reported more parentification-related experiences in their romantic relationships than male participants. This theme is underpinned by gendered practices of care, which are often found within traditional relationships (Jack, 1991; Loscocco & Walzer, 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2012). In summary, this chapter indicated that notions of gender exacerbated the effects of parentification in terms of unmet needs and adult relationships for the females, and buffered the effects of these for the males. Nonetheless, the idea that gender norms buffered the effects for the males in this study needs to be treated with caution, considering the small sample size involved in this study. Further research with males is needed to substantiate this claim. The next chapter examines whether notions of gender are important to descriptions of poor mental health, and whether both females and males seek professional psychological assistance and choose careers in the caring professions.

Chapter 6:

'I've Suffered Badly from Depression for Decades'—Examining the Relevance of Gender in Poor Mental Health, Seeking Psychological Assistance and Career Choice in the Caring Professions

6.1 Introduction

Parentification is considered an interruption to normal childhood development (Castro et al., 2004; Jurkovic, 1997). The joy and freedom associated with childhood is lost for those who experience role reversals (Dial, 2014; Jurkovic, 1997). Equally concerning are the deleterious psychological consequences involved. Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and even suicide have all been documented as outcomes of parentification (Abraham & Stein, 2013; Hooper, DeCoster, White & Voltz, 2011; Hooper & Wallace, 2010; Sandage, 2010). However, links between parentification and poor mental health have been made without considering the influence of gender socialisation (see Chapter 1). Further, scholars have rarely investigated whether both females and males seek psychological assistance regarding their mental health concerns (see Chapter 1). Research has suggested that parentification is an important motivation for pursuing careers in the caring and mental health sector. This has been interpreted as an effort on the part of parentified adults to mitigate some of the damaging effects of role reversal experiences (Braunstein-Bercovitz et al., 2014). However, whether both females and males pursue these types of careers is unclear.

This chapter examines whether notions of gender influence female and male participants' reports of poor mental health, whether female and male participants have sought psychological assistance and whether female and male participants have chosen careers in the caring sector. To fulfil the aim of this chapter, a feminist-thematic analysis of participants' interview data has been used. Seven themes were identified: 1) lost childhoods, 2) females and mental health, 3) males and mental health, 4) females and psychological assistance, 4) males and psychological assistance, 5) females and caring professions, 6) males and caring professions, and 7) males and Science, Technology, Economics and Mathematics (STEM) professions. These themes indicate differences in females' and males' reports of poor mental

health and seeking psychological assistance. There was less of a difference between females and males regarding career choice. Consequently, this chapter argues that gender plays an important role in the relationship between parentification and poor mental health and whether females and males seek professional psychological assistance. Regarding career choice, it is argued that gender plays a role for females who choose to work in the caring professions, but not males.

6.2 Lost Childhoods

During their interviews, most of the female participants and the male parentified by his father referred to their childhoods as 'lost'. The males parentified by their mothers did not describe their childhoods this way. In this section, it is argued that reports of lost childhoods occurred in same-sex role reversals (i.e., not the mother–son dynamics) because more gender normativity was present in their parentification roles (see Chapter 4). Rather than a description of their parentification, which was done in chapters 3 and 4, outlined in this section are quotes from the participants expressing their sense of a lost childhood. Sharing thoughts, Ava remarked:

> Um, if I was a child, then I was a naughty child, I had to be an adult in the family to be acceptable. Um, and that meant I had to not be a child. Um, she [mother] would tell me that you know, I was naughty, if I, if I was a kid. Um, she would (pause), if I was naughty as a kid, um, and didn't do kind of adult behaviour, she would threaten to go and tell the nuns [at school] just how bad I was, cause they thought I was, really well behaved, and, you know, um, a very mature child. So I really don't (pause), I think that's, that's basically, the, the bottom line, [it] was difficult to be a child. (Ava)

Discussing how this affected her, she continued:

> And so, um, I did have trouble, socialising with people my own age; I was much more comfortable going out, when I went out, being with the parents of my friends, rather than my friends. (Ava)

Other female participants made similar comments:

> If you had to take a lot of responsibility, very young, you miss out, in some way, on some of the freedom, or innocence of childhood, perhaps … Um, yeah well, I, growing up, I often felt like I didn't necessarily have very much in common with people who were my age; I often got on with much older people. (Sarah)

I really don't feel like I got to be a child. I really struggled with this sense of feeling, I suppose, totally un-relatable, I, I did not feel like I could relate to other people my age. And, as I got older, it's been easier; I've made friends with people who tend to be considerably older than me. (Laura)

I was always told 'oh you're an old soul, you've been here before, you get it, you're ready to hit the ground running'; you know, like, so I was never allowed to chuck a tantrum, or just be a kid or make mistakes, because I was supposed to be [a] mature young adult, and I was always told, 'mature young adult', yeah … Um, but then, I was inhibited as far as my creativity goes, and things like that, um, because I would be tired from the things that I had to do around the house. Um, and also, I wasn't encouraged to explore those things, and so if (pause) I remember having these whims, sometimes like I wanna go draw a picture, like I'm really excited, let's, you know, do that. And it wasn't encouraged, and it was, 'ah, but hang on, you need to do A B and C for me first'. (Olivia)

And I remember watching *Psycho* when I was probably about six, so unsuitable. But somehow this didn't enter her [mother] mind, what children need, and she didn't read me children's books … I read *Winnie the Pooh* when I was 16, so I don't know how all that happened, but yeah it was sort of through (pause), I guess, and then you know having my own children that I sort of discovered what a world of childhood there was. (Fiona)

Like many female participants, John, who was parentified by his father, also referred to a lost childhood. He explained:

I have this joke with a couple of my friends that I had a neglected childhood, cause I haven't been anywhere that they have, like all my friends have been overseas and stuff like that. We joke about having, me having a, a neglected childhood, because I have never been anywhere. I wish, I wish I had my friend's childhoods, being able to go to places, and do things, and I'd never been rollerblading or ice skating; I've never done anything cool like that. (John)

These statements indicate that most participants who were parentified by the same-sex parent (mother–daughter, father–son) recalled the experience of losing their childhoods. This aligns with parentification literature that claims that role reversals inevitably impinge on the joy and freedom associated with a Western understanding of childhood (Dial, 2014; Jurkovic, 1997, Pollack, 2002). However, as in other areas of parentification research, it is unclear whether this is experienced by both females and males. Nevertheless, some qualitative research has detailed narratives recounting lost childhoods by females. For example, female experiences were detailed by Dial (2014) in her qualitative doctoral dissertation. In Dial's study, female participants explained the loss of their childhood in relation to their burden of work. Dial noted that when female participants spoke about the responsibilities and duties associated

with parentification, it was like the fun of childhood had ended and business had begun. This resonates with the accounts provided by females in the present study. For example, Ava insisted that her mother expected her to behave like an 'adult' and that when she behaved as a child she was told she was 'naughty'. Similarly, Olivia, who was told that she was an 'old soul', was not allowed to throw tantrums or make mistakes. She also claimed that her creativity was inhibited, partly because she was tired, but mainly because she was actively discouraged from creative pursuits due to the responsibilities associated with undertaking domestic work.

As a result of losing their childhoods, research has shown that some parentified females have a lifelong wish to remain a child (Pollack, 2002). Exploring the burden of family caregiving, Pollack (2002) researched parentified females who were second mothers to their siblings during the period 1900–1970. Pollack examined psychological records and found that parentified females who cared for their siblings experienced lifelong desires to remain children. For example, a woman in her forties explained that she was so obsessed with becoming a child that she came to believe she was five years old again. The women in Pollack's study acknowledged that their desire was unusual, as their own childhoods were so burdensome and unhappy. In contrast, the female participants in this study did not evince any desire to return to their childhoods or remain as children. A common outcome of their childhood experiences was an inability to relate adequately to people of their own age. Ava, Sarah and Laura all stated that, as children, they had experienced difficulties relating to their peers and preferred to be in the company of older people.

Although some qualitative studies have detailed accounts of parentified females losing their childhoods (Dial, 2014; Jurkovic, 1997, Pollack, 2002), in this study, this same loss was reported by most of the female participants, and the one male who was parentified by his father—that is, participants in same-sex parentification dynamics. The participants in same-sex dyads (mother–daughter, father–son) performed a parentification role that was largely gender normativity (see Chapter 4). In contrast, the sons involved in role reversals with their mothers, performed a parentification role that was not conventionally related to gender. That the males parentified by their mothers did not report a loss of childhood indicates a less restricted parentification role in comparison to those in same-sex dynamics. The mothers who expected emotional parentification from their sons potentially placed fewer expectations on them because their primary parentification task was not traditionally associated with males

(see Chapter 4). Crucially, this indicates that when parentification is congruent with notions of gender, greater losses are generated, which was the case for those in same-sex dynamics who reported lost childhoods.

6.3 Females and Mental Health

Over half of the female participants disclosed that they experienced poor mental health symptoms. However, few had been formally diagnosed as suffering from a mental health condition. Nonetheless, the common psychological conditions they self-reported were depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Speaking about her mental health, Ava stated:

> I suffer from depression and anxiety. I've suffered badly from depression for decades and um, I still now go to the psychologist and we've been working on, on issues, and a lot of it had to do with the mum stuff, my mother's stuff. (Ava)

She continued:

> I mean she (mother), I guess did the best she could, um but, I needed, I needed, emotional support, and maybe that's why I suffer from depression and anxiety; one of the reasons I suffer from depression and anxiety [is] because I was never able to balance my emotions, I had to neglect them, I had to not only neglect them, I feel, but I had to put them aside, that they (pause), I couldn't consider them, and therefore, kind of (pause), my emotional needs didn't exist. (Ava)

Similarly, Olivia explained:

> Um, I actually ended up, because of (pause) everything, that went on with my parents, I think the fact that she relied on me, I ended up having obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression quite badly. And, as a reaction, my parents made fun of it, cause I don't think they knew what to do, so, yeah, so when I would (pause) what they call ticking, when I would tick, with obsessive-compulsive disorder, they would laugh about it and go, 'Olivia's ticking again', and joke about it. (Olivia)

Discussing how her obsessive-compulsive disorder developed, Olivia explained:

> It was a process, um, it started with, um, being really anxious when my parents would, um, fight, and my mum would come and confide in me, and, and do all that. And then I started saying, 'well, if there (pause)', you know, to God, as I believed when I was a kid, 'God, if I just do this, this and that, or if I'm a good girl, or if, something like that, um, will you make sure that my family stays together?' And then they fight again, and I say 'obviously I'm bad, obviously I didn't do, something, right, and it's my fault', so then that became obsessive-compulsive

disorder, and then it started making me feel depressed, because I was being a really bad person. (Olivia)

Olivia also reported suicide attempts:

I was suicidal and everything as well, yeah, and attempted a couple of times, and they didn't really take that seriously, either, yeah. (Olivia)

Laura did not claim to suffer from depression; however, she said that she felt miserable almost every day. Recalling her experiences, she said:

I couldn't put the feelings into words as a child, but, looking back I really felt trapped, and I felt miserable almost every day, and there were days where I just remember telling myself, you know, I just have to get through this day, when I am 18 I can leave home. (Laura)

Carly recalled seeing many therapists:

I was [an] anxious kid and I'm an anxious adult, and I've seen like, loads of therapists about anxiety, so, and I think that stems from being worried, you know, I was like twenty-four-seven, just worried. (Carly)

She continued:

I had all this trouble sleeping, because I was [a] pretty anxious kid. I was petrified of her [mum] committing suicide, like my whole (pause), until this day I'm always worrying about it. That was (pause), I think that was, like that was what (pause) what I identified as the reason why I couldn't sleep, cause I was so petrified, that I'd wake up in the morning and she would be dead. (Carly)

After explaining her formal diagnosis, Carly said:

I still have it, but it's, um, yeah, I've seen heaps of people about it, and, um, it's pretty, pretty big … but only, I only started to realise and acknowledge it when I was about twenty-one, it was only when I moved out of home. Um, but I, looking back I think that I was always very anxious, but I started having full-blown panic attacks when I moved out, and then got, you know, diagnosed with a panic disorder and things. (Carly)

Other female participants said:

I was having sort of (pause) anxiety and panic attacks and feeling incredibly nervous. Eventually, I saw someone who worked a lot with families of (pause) people with alcohol issues, and that guy helped me a lot, because he was able to sort of, um, put my experience in some sort of context, and that helped me make sense of it. (Fiona)

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I was a very anxious little girl, and then I (pause) I had this year of not sleeping. They [parents] didn't really wanna (pause) they weren't able to (pause), it was just 'oh, she's just tense'. So things presented in my body, or they presented in ways where I would not sleep, or I would get completely anxiety ridden about separating from my mother, you know there was lots of stuff. I don't think they [parents] could think about what might be happening in the family, or not, or between them, and between them and me, or my mother and me, they (pause) they weren't able to explore that, I don't think they had that capacity. (Charlotte)

And then, then what happened, when I was 13, 14 it might have been, 13, um, I tried to commit suicide. It was serious. I'd taken an overdose. If my sister hadn't gotten me up, I wouldn't have woken up; I'd taken an overdose of pills. Um, and I often think about, that, I, I there was a few reasons, um, the key one was, I, um, I felt so alone and isolated, and I guess I'd just had enough. And so part of it was a thing (pause) um, that isolation, and not having anyone to talk to myself, but also, I think, and I don't know, maybe I am wrong, but I am thinking that, that was the model that I've been seeing, because mum had been (pause) she, all through that, still, she was trying to commit suicide. And then when I tried to suicide, she, she, I don't know, she got really angry, and she never even asked, you know, why or anything. (Angela)

The comments made by these female participants are supported by well-established evidence that shows that parentification can lead to a range of poor psychological outcomes (Abraham & Stein, 2013; Hooper et al., 2011; Hooper & Wallace, 2010). However, many of these studies have failed to make it clear whether poor mental health affects both females and males (Hooper & Wallace, 2010; Abraham & Stein, 2013); although, Hooper and Wallace (2010) stated that their sample was largely female. There is also some evidence to indicate that females experience more psychological distress (i.e., depression), in relation to parentification, than males (Giles, 2014). Certainly, the female participants in this study reported more mental health concerns than the male participants, including suicide attempts, sleep difficulties and self-esteem issues, which were not discussed, or discussed less, by the males.

The most common psychological conditions reported by the females were anxiety and depression. Carly, Fiona and Charlotte described experiences of anxiety and panic attacks. Ava and Olivia stated they suffered from depression and Laura said that she had felt miserable almost every day as a child. Consistent with these descriptions, parentification literature supports the idea that depression is related to parentification (Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Meier et al., 2014; Williams & Francis, 2010). However, this research is limited because it is unclear whether depression is experienced by both females and males. Despite this limitation, some research indicates that the relationship between parentification and

depression is stronger for females (Giles, 2014). This study is unable to confirm this finding, as the male participants who were parentified by their mothers also reported experiencing depression and anxiety.

Importantly, the female participants discussed their psychological distress in the context of relational concerns. For example, Ava noted that the absence of a strong emotional bond with her mother contributed to her depression and anxiety. She explained that she received minimal emotional support, which ultimately led to her inability to balance her emotions. Olivia recalled how her obsessive-compulsive disorder manifested in the context of her fear of her parents separating. Feeling anxious and concerned about her parents' fighting, Olivia would pray to God, pleading for them to stay together; she blamed herself when they continued to fight. Charlotte also connected her anxiety to fears of relationship separation. She described how, during her childhood, she was overcome with anxiety in response to being separated from her mother. During her interview, Charlotte described having a terrible time separating from her mother to attend school. These findings resonate with feminist understandings that women's psychological distress is often embedded in relational concerns (Jack, 1991; Ussher, 2011).

The female participants' descriptions of their psychological distress, in the context of interpersonal concerns, complements parentification studies that have implicitly described gendered accounts of poor mental health (Giles, 2014; Jelastopulu & Tzoumerka, 2013). Giles (2012) showed that the nexus between poor relational attachment and depressive symptomology was stronger for females than males with parentification histories. Further, a role reversal qualitative study conducted by Jelastopulu and Tzoumerka (2013), which examined the effects of the economic crisis in Greece, showed that participants linked depression with different factors based on notions of gender. While Jelastopulu and Tzoumerka's (2013) study was informed by a gender-blind perspective, their qualitative methodology included responses that highlighted differences between the sexes. Their analysis showed that depression was one of four major themes discussed during participants' interviews. A female participant expressed how, instead of being happy, she was often crying and feeling stressed. She linked this to the fact that she had repressed her own needs over a number of years; other research has identified links between depression and suppressing one's needs, which is commonly associated with females' gender socialisation (Jack, 1991). A male participant in Jelastopulu and Tzoumerka's study, who also described feelings of fear

and despair in the context of his parentification role, clarified that he was expected to be 'the man of the house'. Following on from this, the present study, together with Giles (2014) and Jelastopulu and Tzoumerka's (2013) work, demonstrates that gender socialisation plays a role in participants' accounts of poor mental health. It may be inferred that the relationship between parentification and poor mental health is not straightforward because notions of gender intersect and influence this correlation.

As reported above, in this study, two female participants recalled suicide attempts. Suicide is considered a possible outcome of parentification (Byng-Hall, 2002; Jurkovic, 1997; Sandage, 2010). Similar to the limitations regarding other psychological conditions, it is unclear whether this occurrence is reported by both females and males (see Chapter 1). Nevertheless, a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological study by Sandage (2010) provided a rare glimpse into suicide in a father–daughter parentification dynamic. Based on Sandage's research, it was proposed in Chapter 1 that father–daughter role reversals may pose a greater risk for suicide than mother–daughter configurations, especially as suicide is often associated with males (Burns, 2016; Coleman et al., 2011). However, it was two females involved in mother–daughter role reversals who disclosed suicide attempts, and there were no father– daughter parentification dynamics with which to draw comparisons. Further, none of the males involved in the study made similarly life threatening claims.

Angela, who may have died if not for her sister's timely intervention, stated that her suicide attempts were, to some extent, related to interpersonal concerns, which she described as driven by feelings of isolation and loneliness. During her interview, Angela described how the little affection and acknowledgement she received from either parent made her feel neglected and alone. Similar themes were found in a qualitative investigation of suicidal behaviour in young immigrant women in the Netherlands by Van Bergen et al. (2011). In this non-parentification study, Van Bergen et al. (2011) attributed suicidal behaviour in young immigrants to a lack of affection and connection to their parents. Although the female participants' in this study, who engaged in suicidal behaviour, experienced a different context from the immigrant women in the Van Bergen et al. (2011) study, the commonality they shared was feeling isolated from their parents. This can be explained, in part, by gender socialisation, as females are often encouraged to value emotional connections with others (Jack 1991; Gilligan, 1982).

Some of the female participants in this study reported experiencing low self-esteem. For example:

> Well I (pause) look I (pause) I had very poor self-esteem, for years, and I, I feel like (pause), I feel that that was due to that parentification situation, for sure … Look it kind of manifested in romantic relationships actually, feeling that people wouldn't want to be with me. But it wasn't based on anything rational, like I didn't (pause) I couldn't connect the dots, I wouldn't be able to say why, yeah, so it was sort of (pause) [an] irrational kind of belief, I suppose, about my lack of validity in the world, or something. (Sarah)

Sarah reflected on her mother's attitude towards her, which, she argued, contributed to her low self-esteem:

> She [mum] was quite, ah, she was actually quite negative to me, for a number years, about myself. As if it was, you know, very disappointing, not to have a beautiful daughter. So she was always on at me to lose weight and to stop touching her, and that she wasn't going to give me another cuddle, I just needed to get myself a boyfriend. She had grown up with everybody telling her how beautiful she was and that's what she traded on, that was, that is, and has been, her kind of main thing in life, and it's a bit of a defence mechanism, or a fall back strategy, really. (Sarah)

Similarly, Ava articulated:

> Um, growing up, I felt I suffered from poor self-esteem, I was a nobody, a (pause) not that I was a nobody, like you're somebody or you're a nobody, I was a, a nothing, nobody, I, I was on the periphery of everything. I was on the periphery of conversations. Um, and, I'm, the sort of person that nobody remembers, um, even people that have met me once or twice, and they met me again, don't remember me. Um, and so that's why I say I am sort of like a nothing, nobody, um. Um, I, was never, I never quite made mum's standards. And, therefore, I always saw myself as never quite reaching anybody's standards, so I was never really, totally, good at anything. (Ava)

Continuing to discuss these feelings, Ava elaborated:

> Um, I felt worthless, um, and useless, and all the less, less things, that you can possibly think of, um, if somebody said to me, give me five good things about yourself, and give five (pause) bad things about yourself, I'd be able to quickly tell them twenty-five bad things about myself, and I would have trouble with one good thing; I didn't (pause), I couldn't identify anything good about myself; there was nothing good about myself. (Ava)

Similarly, Fiona stated:

> I had incredibly low self-esteem, I was incredibly, um, put myself last all the time, all that sort of stuff. I've spent a great deal of my life feeling like I was of very little account … I felt like a fake; I felt like I couldn't really be (pause), like people might rave on about how marvellous and wonderful I was, um, but, you know, I had this sense that if people really knew me they'd just see how worthless I was. (Fiona)

In line with these accounts, parentification literature has connected low self-esteem with role reversals (Byng-Hall, 2002). In 'The Significance of Children Fulfilling Parental Roles: Implications for Family Therapy', Byng-Hall (2008) explained how low self-esteem develops in parentified children. He stated that children cannot effectively undertake all the adult responsibilities given to them and, despite external appearances of competency, internally, parentified children feel inadequate and suffer from low self-esteem. The perception that one is not living up to parental expectations inevitably leads to a personal identity built on 'being nothing or feeling empty' (Byng-Hall, 2008, p. 150). Like most other parentification literature, Byng-Hall's descriptions are made from a gender-blind perspective in which minimal distinction is drawn between females and males with parentification histories. Nevertheless, Byng-Hall's descriptions resonate with the accounts made by some of the female participants in this study: Sarah said that she felt as though she lacked validity in the world; Ava emphasised that she often felt like a 'nobody'; and Fiona stated that she had experienced incredibly low levels of self-esteem, and spent a great deal of her life feeling like she was of little account.

Although few scholars have documented whether low self-esteem is experienced by parentified females more than males, some studies have indicated that there is no difference between females' and males' in this regard (Castro et al., 2004; Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson & Stanwyck, 2004). In their quantitative study, 'Parentification and the Impostor Phenomenon: An Empirical Investigation', Castro et al. (2004) found that parentification was correlated with impostor phenomenon, which, according to them, is associated with low self-esteem. Impostor phenomenon is 'an internal experience of intellectual phoniness in which a person feels fraudulent and unworthy despite objective evidence of success in the form of academic or professional achievements' (Castro et al., 2004, p. 207). Castro et al. (2007) stated that impostor phenomenon was originally thought to be associated with females more than males. However, they found no difference between the sexes. While Castro et al. (2007) reported similar levels of impostor phenomenon in both females and males, they did not examine whether qualitative differences existed. In contrast, qualitative differences between female and male reports of low self-esteem are indicated in this study. For example, while

some female participants grappled with low self-esteem for years, the male participant who experienced similar difficulties overcame them early in his life.

Gendered forms of socialisation can influence females' reports of low self-esteem. In 'Self-Esteem and the Intersection of Age, Class, and Gender', sociologists McMullin and Cairney (2004, p. 77) stated that research (outside of parentification scholarship) had consistently highlighted the fact that females generally report lower levels of self-esteem than males. Reflecting this broader sex pattern, more females in this study reported lower levels of self-esteem than males. Although this is a qualitative study comprising a small sample size, and although conclusive statements about empirical links between these factors are yet to be confirmed, the fact that more females than males reported somewhat severe experiences of low self-esteem highlights the importance of considering the role of gender socialisation.

One gendered explanation for why women experience lower levels of self-esteem than men rests upon the scrutiny that women face over their physical appearance (Franzoi, et al., 2012; McMullin & Cairney, 2004). Showing how this affected her directly, Sarah commented that her appearance was often criticised by her mother. Sarah's mother's comments reflect many elements of the sociocultural and gendered climate in which women are led to believe that their value rests upon their level of physical attractiveness (Jovanovski, 2017). Sarah's account demonstrates how an idealised female appearance, as depicted by her mother, played a role in her low self-esteem. Highlighting the relevance of gender differences, male participants did not discuss low self-esteem in the context of their physical appearance. Sarah comments echo previous research linking role reversals to feelings of unattractiveness in children (Black & Sleigh, 2013). Black and Sleigh's (2013) quantitative study, of which 66 per cent of the sample were female, showed that emotional parentification was related to decreased levels of self-esteem and feelings of attractiveness. Surprisingly, Black and Sleigh did not analyse whether this was the case for both females and males. This oversight is quite remarkable, especially given that levels of attractiveness have more sociocultural significance for females than males (Franzoi et al., 2012). It is hoped that future researchers will consider how gender stereotypes and ideals of beauty and attractiveness affect parentified females' and males' levels of self-esteem.

Contrary to the testimony of female participants in this study, some scholars have suggested that parentification bolsters self-esteem in females (Fitzgerald et al., 2008; Wolkin, 1984). Fitzgerald et al. (2008) suggested that parentification builds self-esteem, particularly in cases

in which girls provide care for younger siblings. However, as highlighted in Chapter 4, feminist sociologists Kwan-Lafond et al. (2011) argued that young girls who gained inflated levels of self-worth through excessively performing gender-normative activities may inevitably find their interests subordinated in male-dominated cultures. Therefore, from Kwan-Lafond et al.'s (2011) perspective, methods of building self-esteem that reflect gender stereotypes need to be approached with caution. Fitzgerald et al.'s research (2008) can be viewed as flawed, as it fails to consider the relationship between females' reports of high self-esteem and the performance of stereotypically feminine activities. This study contradicts the idea that parentification encourages high self-esteem in females, as some female participants reported low levels of self-esteem.

6.4 Males and Mental Health

The male participants parentified by their mothers reported some of the psychological conditions detailed by the females in this study. Specifically, these males reported experiencing depression, anxiety and some levels of low self-esteem. In relation to his psychological health, Chris explained:

> I was a bit depressed during my teenage years. And now I look back, knowing my parents and stuff, and like, of course, you were fucking depressed, like look at the crazy shit you were putting up with, like who wouldn't be in that situation. I have panic attacks, sometimes, you know, like, not often, but I have panic attacks. (Chris)

He continued:

> I mean no family's perfect, so I'm not gunna say like (pause), this is like, you know, awful or anything, but, you know, I, I certainly felt that like, you know, I was always pushed to do more, like, you know, like, it was rarely that I was doing enough. It's always like, yeah, and what's the next thing, you know, like what's the next sort of goal, or, or achievement. Because I was always striving, there was always a sense of anxiety. There was always like that, sort of anxiety, drive and, and I think it's exhausting. I think that sense of disconnection from just being, you know that kind of restful, sort of place … I think that disconnection is just exhausting; I think it caused a lot of mental, um, well just, anxiety and stress, and, and maybe even a bit of depression, and stuff like that, I think, you know. (Chris)

Similarly, Brock stated:

> I had depression when I was 16. I couldn't go to school for six months. I struggled with anxiety a lot when I was younger, so I think depression came from the anxiety.

So, if the anxiety got too much, then the depression would come on, I realise that now that I'm older. (Brock)

Continuing, Brock explained:

I was quite [a] perfectionist, I was trying to measure up, you know, there was that pressure that I was trying to measure up, but (pause), I was trying, I'd say [to] over-achieve, and I think it, it just hit me, really hard when I got to 16, cause it was all just too much. I think it all just got too much for me, and I just completely shut down. (Brock)

As with female participants' accounts, these statements indicate that the males parentified by their mothers suffered depression and anxiety. Chris stated that he had experienced depression when he was 16, as well as anxiety and panic attacks. Brock also said that he experienced depression when he was 16. Brock's depression was particularly debilitating, as he was away from school for six months. Despite discussing similar psychological conditions to the females in this study, the males spoke about their psychological symptoms in the context of achievement issues, which can be interpreted through the lens of gender socialisation. For example, Chris noted that his parents often placed significant pressure on him to achieve. This resulted in him striving to please them, which resulted in anxiety. Similarly, Brock stated he was trying to 'measure up', presumably to standards set by others, which resulted in him completely shutting down with depression at the age of 16. Scholars who have studied the relationship between gender and mental health argue that men's experience of depression is initiated, in part, by factors that are relevant to male socialisation (Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013). Men's depression is often externalised in aggression or risk-taking (Rice et al., 2015; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013), whereas women report more relational distress (Jack, 1991; Meyer et al., 2008). Although the males in this study described similar psychological symptoms to female participants, they reported poor mental health in the context of achievement pressures; therefore, their psychological distress was linked to different factors, reflecting differences in gender socialisation. This supports the idea that the link between parentification and poor mental health is neither straightforward nor free from the influence of gender.

Like some female participants, Brock described grappling with low self-esteem. Although his experience was somewhat comparable to female participants, he was able to overcome this issue during his mid-twenties. In contrast, some of the females in this study struggled with low self-esteem well into their middle and later years. Brock explained:

I had a history with feelings of self-worth and that kind of thing. Um, so, I took a lot of personal responsibility for mum, and, ah, I always (pause), always wanted to help her, I have learnt to let that go, and take that responsibility away from myself, and take that self-blame away, and guilt. (Brock)

He elaborated:

And then being able to travel, and being able to make friends and, you know, finding that people like me, and, that kind of thing (pause); I got along well with people, allowed me to, yeah, get those feelings of, you know, I'm a good person, and people like me, you know, it's not (pause), yeah, I am not this, this bad person, in a way, cause I felt that a lot when I was a kid. (Brock)

During his interview, Brock stated that he was often told that he was a 'bad child' if he did not conform to his mother's wishes. In later life, he often felt like a bad person. Brock emphasised that these feelings of low self-esteem began to change when he travelled. He started to realise that people liked him, which enabled him to feel like a good person. Importantly, in contrast to female participants' accounts, it was relatively easy for Brock to challenge his low self-esteem. This can be explained from a feminist perspective, as poor self-esteem in women often reflects sexist practices (Spencer-Rodgers, Major, Forster & Peng, 2016). Even when the female participants in this study left their family homes (i.e., where their parentification started), they carried a subordinated status as women that may have continued to encourage and support their low self-esteem. As a male, Brock was afforded more social privilege; perhaps this made it easier for him to challenge his poor levels of self-esteem?

In contrast to the female and male participants parentified by their mothers, John, the male who was parentified by his father, did not discuss poor mental health symptoms. Given the influential role of masculinity in his parentification, this was hardly surprising (Connell, 2005, p. 70). Traditional attitudes about manhood may have prevented John from discussing his psychological distress. John stated during his interview that his father restricted emotional expression in him by responding to him with statements such as 'stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about'. In addition, John's father told him that being emotional was like 'being a girl' or 'not growing up'. In this context, it would have been difficult for John to reveal experiences of psychological distress—which is not to say that he did not have any. Scholars have suggested that a traditional understanding of manhood is related to downplaying expressions of vulnerability (Courtenay, 2003; Evans, Frank, Oliffe & Gregory, 2011). Whether John was unaffected by psychological distress or was simply unwilling or

unable to disclose it is unclear. However, there was no evidence of it in his interview; this again shows how gender plays a role in links between parentification and mental health.

6.5 Females and Psychological Assistance

In addition to discussing poor mental health symptoms, many female participants discussed their use of professional psychological or counselling services to mitigate the adverse psychological effect of their role reversals. Seven female participants discussed receiving psychological or counselling assistance to help them recover from their childhoods. Their interviews contained strong and consistent evidence of psychological help over many years. For example:

> I still now go to the psychologist and we've been working on, on issues, even (pause) and a lot of it had to do with the mum stuff, my mother's stuff. I had to learn things through going to psychologists. (Ava)

> I have done a lot of therapy. I've also read a lot of different books like *Psychology Bankrupt* and a lot of things like that, so I understand a lot of the dynamics that went on in my childhood and how they carried on into my relationships. (Laura)

> I've had years of therapy. I went to a counsellor, and I didn't even know it, but she was using narrative approaches, and it kind of contextualised stuff for me in a new way, and it actually did help me to re-story my identity. I saw my identity as separate to my experience of (pause) bad parents who tortured me in a way. They use externalising practices, so you're not the problem, the problem is the problem. But this actually helped me to feel worthy, as a human being. (Fiona)

> Then it was in my first marriage, I went into crisis and I went into therapy. And I have to say since then (pause) I've been in and out of therapy, probably, all that time. But even just in my own therapy, and I am in therapy at the moment, is that even weekly, I struggle to say what is first on my mind. (Charlotte)

> I saw a therapist myself, and stuff, and I did reading, and started studying in the area … I think it was just a personal journey, like a personal growth kind of thing. I have learnt things through therapy, yeah, so talking to therapists. (Carly)

These accounts demonstrate the extent to which the female participants in this study undertook psychological or counselling assistance and engaged in self-help to process the detrimental impact of their parentification. There have been minimal studies examining the extent to which adults seek psychological assistance to recover from parentification (see Chapter 1). The present study demonstrates that seeking ongoing psychological or counselling assistance was more common among female participants than males, indicating

the importance of gender in shaping this occurrence. This theme is consistent with research outside the field of parentification studies that suggests that psychological assistance tends to be accepted more readily by females than males (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Yamawaki, 2010; Yousaf et al., 2015). For example, in 'Age, Gender, and the Underutilization of Mental Health Services: The Influence of Help-Seeking Attitudes', McKenzie et al. (2006) found that women had a more positive attitude towards help seeking than men, regardless of their levels of education. Conversely, education increased men's receptiveness to help seeking; suggesting that being educated enabled men to appreciate its benefits. Traditional notions of gender, which tend to associate emotional vulnerability with women, can be considered responsible for women's greater acceptance of professional psychological assistance (Shea, Wong, Nguyen & Baghdasarian, 2017; Shea & Wong, 2012). Therefore, it is likely that gender norms encouraged the female participants in this study to seek ongoing professional assistance to mitigate the adverse effects of their parentification experiences.

6.6 Males and Psychological Assistance

The male participants in this study made minimal reference to seeking ongoing therapy for the psychological harms associated with their parentification. This was surprising, especially as the males parentified by their mothers reported psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety. Chris was the only male who indicated that he had attended counselling: a session with the high school psychologist, which occurred during his teenage years. The males in this study were generally reluctant to discuss receiving psychological help.

Confirming a conflicted relationship between normative gender standards and men seeking psychological help, Vogel et al. (2011) pointed to the incongruency between seeking psychological assistance and the image of men as 'stoic, controlled and self-sufficient' (p. 368). Vogel et al. explained that although not all Western men conform to these gendered ideals, they are still exposed to messages such as 'boys don't cry', which inevitably effects their capacity to acknowledge any weakness and vulnerability. The comments made by Vogel et al. help to explain why the male participants in this study did not describe seeking ongoing help. This does not mean they did not need it; they may have required ongoing assistance, but were reluctant to receive it, or they may have avoided disclosing that they were receiving assistance. This is another way in which the males parentified by their mothers demonstrated

tacit and secondary alliances with a traditional understanding of manhood, despite describing themselves as departing from this gender standard.

Regarding the idea that masculinity plays a role in restricting men's ability to seek or discuss receiving psychological assistance, the fact that John—who was parentified by his father— did not report receiving such assistance, was least surprising. John did not mention experiencing any of the psychological symptoms described by the other participants in the study. As discussed earlier, John's father prevented emotional expression and vulnerability in him. For example, he was also told to stop being a 'girl' if he cried. To uphold masculine standards, John either avoided seeking psychological assistance, or was reluctant to disclose his need for assistance during his interview.

6.7 Females and Caring Professions

Most females in this study reported performing paid work and/or study in the caring or welfare sector. For example:

> I think it's quite a sad thing to have seen someone that unwell, all the time, so, um, I think it's made me a bit of a person who seems to see sadness a lot, or something, I don't know, or I (pause) as well (pause), I wanted to get into a profession where I could work with people, and, maybe it's just made me more empathetic or understanding. (Carly)

> I have a job in the (pause), in the (pause), community, in the welfare sector. And, um, you know, I, I guess my, sort of professional life has helped me put my own psychological demons, or emotional difficulties, into perspective, really. I've often been involved in, you know, I guess, sort of, family, semi-family, mediation roles, or um, working with quite distressed young people, um, or working with families that weren't particularly operational. I'm not, I'm not excusing my parent's behaviour, and I don't think they were very good parents. But I'm a lot less blaming these days, and um, I guess, I've sort of (pause), it normalises it a little bit more when you, when you, realise that actually there's an awful lot of people out there struggling with imperfect family situations. (Sarah)

> But being in the [caring professions] has been very good for me, as I said, working in the [caring professions] was good, and working in community services where (pause) you really have to get boundaries because you realise that there's an endless pit of suffering in the world and you can't fix it. (Fiona)

During her interview, Olivia explained that she was pursuing a career in the caring professions because she was an emotional support person for everybody in her life. Charlotte noted that she was working in the same area, and Ava and Natalia both said they had studied

welfare during their tertiary education. Ava explained that her education encouraged her to form her own opinions; this was something she had been unable to do in childhood, as her mother suppressed her sense of self:

> I guess going to university, and being in tutorials, where you had to say something, made me understand that I had to say some things, um, and so that gave me a little bit of encouragement (pause), well it didn't really matter if I looked a fool or not, um, so I (pause) I became quite outspoken, um, so I guess, in some respects, I'm quite [an] outspoken person, now … [at] school you really don't have an opinion, you're just told what to say and do, at home, I couldn't have an opinion, I was told what to say and do; at uni, okay the lectures you just listened, but in tutes, you (pause) you had to participate. Participating in the tutorials, um, gave me confidence to state my opinion even though other people might disagree. (Ava)

Female participants' descriptions of pursuing careers in the caring/welfare sector, either through paid work or study, reflects research that has identified parentification as a motivation for entering caring fields such as psychotherapy and counselling psychology (Nikcevic et al., 2007). In support of these findings, Olivia and Carly made direct links between their parentification experiences and their involvement in the caring/welfare sector. Fittingly, DiCaccavo (2002) proposed that the motivations of parentified children to enter professions such as counselling psychology and social work are directly related to childhood roles in which they developed the skills necessary to respond to the needs of others. Other psychological explanations for entering the caring professions include vicariously reworking personal hurts and disappointments through clients and gaining validation for performing a caregiving role that was insufficiently recognised or acknowledged in early life (DiCaccavo, 2002, 2006). However, whether both parentified females and males pursue careers in the caring/welfare sector has remained largely unexamined (see Chapter 1). In this study, the female and the male participants who were parentified by their mothers pursed these types of careers. Seen from a feminist perspective, it is likely that gender played a role in the females' career and study choices. Research suggests that caring professions are typically filled with females; this is consistent with gender-normative ideology that females are more nurturing and are better suited to caregiving (Hanlon, 2012; O'Connor, 2015; Warin, 2014). Thus, in addition to their parentification experiences, gender probably encouraged the females in this study to pursue careers in the caring/welfare sector.

While caregiving was often seen as burdensome in their private lives, the females in this study expressed more positivity towards caregiving in a professional capacity. For instance, Fiona stated that her career was useful for her as she learnt to set boundaries around her

caregiving. Although the professional lives of the females seem to provide better, or healthier, experiences of caregiving, it is still important to consider the problematic role gender plays at a broader level in naturalising women into these fields in the first place".

6.8 Males and Caring Professions

The male participants who were parentified by mothers also discussed their involvement in the caring professions:

> I am fucking studying in the [caring professions] for one, like, don't they say everyone [in the caring professions] wants to save his mother (laughs), so I'm totally the cliché (laughs). (Chris)

> Um, studying [in the caring professions] helped, a bit, I think, we start to psychologise everyone, and get an understanding, I think everyone um, you go through that phases where you start … you know, analysing everything everyone does and (pause), you can pick why, why, why, because of your parents. (Brock)

These comments provide details of male participants' involvement in the caring professions through study. The fact that Chris and Brock both chose to enter careers in the caring professions, as did most of the females in this study, is consistent with previous research that suggests that parentified children enter careers that mimic their childhood roles (Nikcevic et al., 2007). Chris, in particular, drew a direct link between his childhood and his career choice when he joked about the correlation between his mother and his chosen profession. Seen through the theoretical framework adopted in this study, Chris and Brock's decisions to enter the caring professions, which are typically female dominated (Hanlon, 2012; O'Connor, 2015; Warin, 2014), were not influenced by gender. Instead, their parentification experiences alone likely encouraged their career choices.

6.9 Males and STEM Professions

In contrast to female and male participants parentified by their mothers, the male participant who was parentified by his father was involved in pursuing a career in the STEM field. John explained:

> Um, until I started getting into mid-high school, yeah, um, I kind of wanted to do gaming, instead of [STEM], but, the whole money thing … pretty much dad said it was a bad idea to do something like gaming 'cause there's no money in it. But, at the same time, he's contradicting himself, because he always told me he doesn't

care what I do as long as I am happy. And when I told him I wanted to do gaming, he was pretty annoyed, so, that's why I am doing [STEM]. (John)

John's decision to enter a male-dominated field like STEM (Riegle-Crumb, Moore & Ramos-Wada, 2011) indicates that masculinity played a role (Connell, 2005, p. 70). According to gender studies scholar Cheryan (2012), STEM careers are gender stereotyped, being typically viewed as occupied by males who are socially isolated and interested in technology. Consequently, John's career choice was probably influenced by gender standards and perhaps his parentification role, which, as discussed in Chapter 4, was heavily influenced by gender normativity. John's experience departs from previous research that suggests that people with parentification histories generally pursue careers in the caring professions (Nikcevic et al., 2007). His experience indicates that this may not be the case when parentification is strongly influenced by gender normativity in father–son dynamics. Nonetheless, a limitation of this finding is the small sample of males involved in this study. Future research is needed in this area to substantiate this claim.

6.10 Conclusion

This chapter examined whether notions of gender influenced reports of poor mental health and whether both females and males sought psychological assistance and chose careers in the caring sector. It was argued that gender influenced the female and male participants' reports of psychological distress. Females linked their psychological symptoms to relational concerns. Conversely, the male participants linked their psychological symptoms to achievement pressures. This gender difference highlighted that the association between parentification and poor mental health is not a straightforward one; on the contrary, the relationship is influenced by sociocultural standards of what it means to be a female and male. Gender norms also played a role in encouraging the female participants and discouraging the male participants to engage in professional psychological help. This suggests that gender impedes the ability of parentified males to seek help to mitigate the negative psychological effects of their experiences. This is important because practitioners can use such information in their future therapeutic, or public health promotion goals, to encourage parentified males to seek help. Both the female and male participants who were parentified by mothers pursued careers in the caring sector. Although gender played some role in the females' career choices, it is argued that gender did not influence the males' choices.

Conclusion

This thesis examined the extent to which gender is significant to the phenomenon of parentification from a feminist perspective. It focused on exploring how important notions of gender were in participants' accounts of their role reversal experiences. The necessity of exploring the role of gender arose from the realisation that most of the literature has investigated role reversals from a gender-blind perspective (see Chapter 1). To address this limitation, which tends to overlook whether gender is important, I chose to prioritise and question the significance of gender. This study was guided by the question: 'how relevant are notions of gender in parentification experiences?' My analysis of interview data showed that sociocultural standards of gender influenced and shaped most areas of the participants' experiences. The only exceptions were reported by males in cross-sex role reversal dynamics for whom parentification was, to some extent, a gender-subversive process and experience. Nevertheless, this thesis concludes that parentification is gendered in many critical ways.

The Role of Mothers and Fathers in Parentification

In this study, mothers' and fathers' roles in parentification were understood as gendered. Far from being free from the influence of social expectations, gendered parenting norms played an important role in mothers' and fathers' involvement in parentification. This finding addressed the first objective of this study, which aimed to examine the significance of gender in participants' descriptions of their mothers' and fathers' roles in parentification. With one exception, participants in this study reported parentification by mothers, not fathers. This reflected previous quantitative research that has reported a similar sex pattern (Mayseless et al., 2004; Perrin et al., 2013; Peris et al., 2008; Rowa et al., 2001). However, few scholars have questioned why more mothers than fathers parentify children, and whether this is influenced by gendered parenting norms. In Chapter 3, it was argued that these norms do play a pivotal role in women's greater reliance on her children. In line with traditional and gendered parenting norms, mothers were positioned as the primary caregivers within their families. This ultimately provided them with more opportunity to expect and receive pseudo-parenting support from their daughters and, at times, sons. Implicating the role of gendered parenting practices challenges the approach taken in most parentification scholarship, which focuses on mother's contributions and emphasises their psychological defects and individual circumstances (Nuttall et al., 2012; Mayseless et al., 2004; McMahon & Luthar, 2007;

Titzmann, 2012). Rather than continue to search for explanations at an individual level, this thesis demonstrated that gendered parenting ideals operating at a collective level contributed to mothers' greater involvement in seeking emotional parentification from her children. In this way, this thesis sheds a new—and more sympathetic—sociocultural light on why mothers are more likely to parentify their children than fathers.

Further emphasising that parentification is a gendered occurrence, the thesis showed that gendered parenting norms, notably the idea that fathers need to focus on breadwinning rather than partaking in primary care for children, influenced participants' accounts of their fathers' indirect involvement in role reversals. This study found that fathers were not typically at the forefront of parentification dynamics. It was argued that adherence to gendered parenting standards prevented fathers from taking a more direct role, as they were often involved in paid work, rather than child care (see Chapter 3). Identifying the role played by gender standards of parenting helped to explain why fathers were less prominent in role reversals than mothers. Evidence connecting gendered parenting with fathers' lesser involvement in role reversals is rarely found in parentification literature (see Chapter 1). Further, although fathers in this study were not primarily involved in parentification dynamics, the data indicated that they nevertheless contributed to mothers' involvement in role reversals. According to some participants, their parentification was partly a reaction to their fathers' disrespectful behaviour towards their mothers, as well as their fathers' absence (see Chapter 3). Therefore, it was emphasised that fathers were a contributing factor to mothers' parentification of their children. This finding challenges existing parentification scholarship that has largely deemed the examination of fathers to be irrelevant (Macfie & Swan, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Nuttall et al. 2012; Titzmann, 2012; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013).

Participants also identified mothers' mental illnesses and childish or childlike behaviours as contributing factors to their parentification. Indeed, some participants indicated the role of gender politics in their mother's lives, which provided a context for their reports of maternal mental illness from a feminist perspective (see Chapter 3). This provided an alternative to the individualistic and psychological approach found in most parentification literature, which tends to ignore the influence of gender politics, even though feminist scholars argue that gender inequality is often connected to poor mental health in women (Jack, 1991; Ussher, 2011). Furthermore, rather than remaining at an individual and psychological level, this study argued that mothers' regressive behaviours were underpinned by a patriarchal society that has

traditionally aimed to infantilise women (Millett, 1977). This infantilising process ensures that women share a similar status to children rather than acquiring an equal status with male counterparts. Some participants described situations that located their mothers in interpersonal relationships characterised by male dominance and control. The mothers in these situations were described as helpless and lacking in agency, conditions that were interpreted as being connected to gendered notions of power. Adopting a feminist approach allowed this study to surpass previous research (Solomon & George, 1996; Vulliez-Coady et al., 2013) that has viewed reports of mothers' helplessness in individualised terms and not as a reflection of gender inequality.

Daughters and Sons Parentification Tasks and Responsibilities

Both female and male participants in same-sex dynamics (mother–daughter, father–son) performed parentification tasks that were interpreted as gender normative (see Chapter 4). This was not the case for the males in cross-sex dynamics (mother–son) who performed tasks that were considered gender subversive. These findings addressed the second objective of this study, which was to examine whether both female and male participants performed gender-normative tasks in both same-sex (mother–daughter, father–son) and cross-sex (mother–son) role reversals. As noted in Chapter 4, while most parentification research treats the parentification of females and males as gender-blind, a few studies (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; McMahon & Luthar, 2007) have made inroads into the gendering of parentification by suggesting that females and males perform gender-normative tasks. Nevertheless, it was unclear in the previous literature whether this was true for those in both same-sex and cross-sex dynamics. This study provided a novel contribution and insight by demonstrating that the performance of gender-normative tasks depends on the sex formation of the role reversal. This strongly suggests that the tasks expected from parentified children are informed by their mothers' and fathers' gender needs rather than the children's own gender socialisation (see Chapter 4).

Outcomes of Parentification: Unmet Needs in Childhood and Problematic Adult Relationships

Chapter 5 indicated that the ways in which females and males perceived their unmet needs in childhood, and their subsequent adult relationships, were different. This finding addressed the third research objective, which aimed to examine whether both females and males

experienced unmet needs in childhood and provided accounts of problematic adult relationships. While both females and cross-sex parentified males discussed unmet needs in terms of emotions, the female participants felt this emotional neglect more deeply than the males. This was understood as a reflection of the fact that females are socialised to pay more attention to their emotional life than men (Schrock & Knop, 2014; Shields, 2002). Female and male participants also gave different accounts of adult caregiving. Although problematic caregiving in adulthood is often viewed as exclusively influenced by early parentification experiences (Jurkovic, 1997), this thesis argued that gender socialisation also plays a role. Gender socialisation determined how adult caregiving was perceived by the participants in this study: as problematic by the females and something to value and take pride in by the males. Female participants also described parentification experiences in their adult romantic relationships, while males described minimal links between their childhood roles and later romantic lives. Therefore, this study marks a significant departure from previous literature, which has provided a gender-blind account of unmet needs in childhood and subsequently problematic adult relationships. Rather than parentification leading to similar outcomes for females and males, it is argued that gender exacerbated the effects of parentification for females and buffered the effects for males.

Outcomes of Parentification: Poor Mental Health, Seeking Professional Psychological Assistance and Career Choice in the Caring Professions

Gender socialisation was also found to be relevant in female and male participant's reports of poor mental health and seeking professional psychological assistance (see Chapter 6). This finding addressed the fourth research objective that aimed to examine the relevance of gender in accounts of poor mental health and whether both females and males sought professional psychological assistance. Although females and cross-sex parentified males both discussed poor mental health outcomes, the females reported relational concerns while the males described achievement pressures. This contrasts with previous scholarship that details a strong connection between parentification and poor mental health yet fails to indicate whether this occurs for both sexes (Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Hooper et al., 2012; Hooper et al., 2012; Giles, 2014; Meier et al., 2014; Williams & Francis, 2010). Importantly, this study provides a nuanced understanding by indicating that the relationship between parentification and poor mental health is not straightforward; gender socialisation plays a role in the intersection between role reversals and deleterious psychological symptoms.

Gender socialisation, also, influenced whether female and male participants' sought professional psychological assistance to mitigate the effects of their parentification. Female participants sought assistance, while male participants reported seeking minimal help. This difference was supported by non-parentification literature that showed that males are less likely to seek psychological assistance than women (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Yamawaki, 2010; Yousaf et al., 2015). A reluctance to seek help by males is underpinned by a traditional construction of manhood that attempts to conceal vulnerability and signs of weakness (Vogel et al., 2011). Therefore, this thesis argues that gender socialisation plays a detrimental role in parentified males' ability to seek professional help, a troubling finding since parentification has connections to adverse psychological conditions (Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Hooper et al., 2012; Hooper et al., 2012; Giles, 2014; Meier et al., 2014; Williams & Francis, 2010).

Rather than focusing on whether those who have experienced parentification seek help, previous research has tended to emphasise the connection between experiencing parentification and pursuing a career in the caring professions (Dicaccavo, 2002, 2006; Jurkovic, 1997, Nikcevic et al., 2007). As important as they are, these findings have been made from a largely gender-blind perspective; therefore, it is unclear whether both females and males pursue such careers (see Chapter 6). In this study, it was reported that females and cross-sex parentified males chose careers in the caring sector. Conversely, the male parentified by his father chose a career in the STEM field. This indicates that gender socialisation played some role in the career choices of those involved in same-sex role reversals and a minimal role for the males involved in cross-sex formations.

Parentification: Detrimental to Females

This thesis concludes that parentification was most detrimental for the females who participated in this study. It was important to examine whether parentification was deleterious or beneficial because this is a long-standing debate found within parentification scholarship. As outlined in Chapter 1, some claims have been made that parentification can be beneficial, especially for females (Fitzgerald et al., 2008, Walsh et al., 2006, Wolkin, 1984). This study contests this claim by noting that gender socialisation shaped females' role reversals in many crucial ways (see Chapters 4–6). The gender socialisation of women is viewed as detrimental in this study because of the recognition that gender processes are socially constructed and inevitably connected to a harmful hierarchy that supports women's oppression (Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989). Similar concerns have been raised by feminist

sociologists Kwan-Lafond et al. (2011) who stated that parentification is harmful for daughters who may gain a sense of worth from performing gender-normative roles that inevitably keep their interests subordinated in male-dominated societies. This thesis argues that the harms of gender have not been considered within much parentification literature, as it tends to be produced from an individual and psychological perspective. Therefore, this thesis offers a relatively unexplored feminist consideration of the role of gender in the parentification of young females.

The female participants in this study reported more negative outcomes than the male participants, which further supports the claim that parentification was most detrimental for them. For example, some female participants reported that caring for their siblings was a tiresome experience (see Chapter 4); the male participants did not report caring for siblings and, thus, did not experience this same burden. The females also reported slightly more mental health symptoms and lower levels of self-esteem than the males (see Chapter 6). This was explained in terms of gendered pressure; the Western obsession with women's physical appearance. Therefore, gender inequality may have exacerbated female participants' low self-esteem in ways that did not affect male participants.

Female participants also experienced more problematic adult relationships than the males. It was argued in Chapter 5 that gender socialisation influenced the different nature and content of females' and males' reports, with gender socialisation exacerbating the negative influence and result of unmet childhood needs and subsequent adult relationships for females. Females also reported a lost childhood, which is considered a negative consequence of parentification (Jurkovic, 1997). Although the male parentified by his father reported similar experiences, the males parentified by their mothers did not detail lost childhoods. In contrast to the largely negative experiences of most female participants, some females did express positivity regarding their independence, self-reliance and strength; qualities that they gained as a consequence of their childhoods. Chapter 5 drew connections between these experiences and what is typically celebrated in society as 'manhood'. It was illuminating to find that female participants' positive experiences with regard to the effects of their parentification could partially be explained via links to the dominant gender. The only advantage the female participants reported over the males was that most sought professional psychological help to mitigate the negative effects of their parentification; however, in general, their struggles were significant and, for some, their recovery spanned many decades.

Parentification: Detrimental to Males in Father–Son Dyads

This study concludes that the second most damaging type of parentification occurred in the father–son dyad. Parentification was viewed as harmful to the one male participant in this category because, like the females, gender socialisation heavily influenced and shaped his role reversal and outcomes in several significant ways (see Chapters 4–6). His parentification was tied to a traditional notion of manhood; therefore, his role reversal was considered deleterious by limiting his early life to engaging in gender-normative activities and encouraging harmful attitudes aligned with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Importantly, his conformity to masculinity, as reported in Chapter 4, possibly prevented him from revealing whether he experienced any negative psychological effects. Supporting this, Zimmerman (2016) has noted that masculinity often harms men as they inevitably deny emotional suffering.

Further demonstrating how the father–son parentification was deleterious, the male in this dynamic discussed losing his childhood, as most females did. In Chapter 6, it was argued that because the tasks performed by those in same-sex role reversals reflected gender stereotypes, their parentification was considered more demanding than for the males parentified by their mothers. Crucially, this theme indicated that when parentification is congruent with notions of gender, this generated greater childhood losses for those in same-sex dynamics. Thus, when considering the role that gender normativity played in this father–son role reversal, this male experienced a more harmful process than the males in cross-sex dynamics. This finding needs to be confirmed, as this study included only one male participant who was parentified by his father.

Parentification: Least Detrimental to Males in Mother–Son Dyads

Parentification was least detrimental to male participants who were parentified by their mothers. In contrast to those in same-sex dynamics, parentification provided these males with an opportunity to depart from gender normativity. These males reported performing parentification tasks that were gender subversive and described themselves against a traditional standard of manhood (see Chapter 4). This finding supported Jurkovic's (1997) claim that when parentification is based on tasks traditionally known as 'women's work', alliances with masculinity decrease (p. 244). Because the parentification of these males provided them with an opportunity to move away from gender normativity their

parentification is considered gender subversive. However, this finding needs to be treated with caution, as these males still showed tacit and secondary alliances with masculinity, which inevitably influenced the outcomes of their parentification experiences (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Substantiating the claim that parentification was least detrimental for males parentified by their mothers, the two male participants in this category described less problematic adult relationships than other participants. In fact, their parentification seems to have provided them with a platform to develop interpersonal skills that they valued and took pride in (see Chapter 5). They also experienced less parentification in adult romantic relationships than female participants. One male described his romantic relationship as beneficial, in that it provided him with an opportunity to learn to express his emotions better; typically, an inability to express emotions is associated with masculinity (Zimmerman, 2016). Further, the male participants in this category did not report a lost childhood. It was argued in Chapter 6 that these males were afforded more freedom because perhaps their mothers placed fewer expectations on them, as their primary parentification task (i.e., providing emotional support to their mothers) was not traditionally associated with males. This likely permitted a less restricted childhood than for those experiencing same-sex dynamics, and consequently more gender normativity.

The males parentified by their mothers also chose to pursue careers in the caring professions. This was another way that parentification produced a positive outcome for them. As noted in Chapter 6, for these males, the choice of a career in the caring professions was influenced by parentification rather than gender. Consequently, the males' childhood roles further influenced their departure from gender ideals and stereotypes, as they chose to work in a sector that tends be dominated by women. Although these males experienced fewer deleterious outcomes regarding gender normativity in comparison to those in same-sex dynamics, they nevertheless reported serious mental health consequences. Moreover, neither reported seeking ongoing professional psychological assistance. Consequently, I do not make light of their parentification experiences; I only emphasise the benefits they gained from the gender-subversive aspects of their parentification, which can be interpreted as post-traumatic growth.

Rethinking Parentification: Towards Developing a Feminist Perspective

This thesis has shown that parentification is largely a gendered process with exceptions only reported by males in cross-sex dynamics (mother–son). Consequently, the findings of this study highlight the inadequacy of continuing to use a gender-blind paradigm in discussing and researching parentification. The results of this study show that mothers' and fathers' involvement in parentification was largely shaped by gendered parenting norms. Thus, to continue to discuss parents in gender-blind ways downplays and overlooks what a feminist perspective can offer. A feminist perspective can uncover sociocultural and political factors that may help to explain why parentification occurs in the first place. Consequently, I argue for the necessity of developing a feminist perspective that continues to acknowledge the different sociocultural meanings attached to mothers and fathers, and how these influence the occurrence of parentification. Mothers' individual psychology and personal circumstances can also be viewed from a feminist perceptive as connected to gender politics.

A feminist perspective is also necessary to fully appreciate the role that gender plays in the tasks and responsibilities performed by parentified daughters and sons. Adopting a feminist lens in the future will ensure that females and males are not discussed in terms that downplay the significance of gender socialisation. When viewed from a feminist perspective, there is an understanding that parentification tasks are not usually separate from gender socialisation, particularly for those in same-sex dynamics. A feminist approach will also acknowledge that the parentification of females is associated with the harms of gender. Thus, caution should be taken when females report high levels of self-esteem in relation to excessively partaking in gender-normative roles and activities. A feminist perspective also recognises that when males report parentification by fathers, this reporting is underpinned by a masculinity that restricts emotionality and produces deleterious attitudes regarding male privilege and power.

Future feminist researchers may also recognise that some parentification experiences provide departures from gender normativity. For instance, in this study, mother–son dynamics provided a platform for some resistance to traditional gender standards. Nevertheless, tacit and secondary alliances with masculinity were still found. Therefore, from a feminist perspective, gender resistance should be treated with caution. Future research may focus on uncovering links between parentification and covert alliances with gender standards.

By examining parentification from a feminist perspective, scholars will also find that the outcomes of role reversal, formerly considered gender-blind, are likely to be influenced by gendered expectations of women and men. It is hoped that future feminist researchers will consider the role of gender in links between parentification and the problematic adult relationships that, in this study, were shown to be different for females and males. Further, it is hoped that gender-aware scholars may be interested in how poor mental health and help-seeking behaviour are also influenced by gender socialisation and not only the experience of parentification. Continuing a gender-blind approach to the study parentification is redundant. Instead, this thesis suggests applying a feminist perspective that foregrounds further examinations of how gender influences parentification and the repercussions of this at both an individual and collective level.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study provides a much-needed account of the ways in which notions of gender can influence and shape parentification experiences. However, like all studies, the results need to be considered in the context of its inherent limitations. As explained in Chapter 2 male participants were difficult to recruit and only 3 males offered to be a part of the study. This did not seem unusual considering that most parentification research (e.g., McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mercado, 2003; Schier et al., 2015; Titzmann, 2012) asserts that males are parentified in fewer numbers than females. Nonetheless, with such a small male cohort, the findings in relation to them need to be treated with caution. Further research is needed to substantiate the claims made about the males, and as a qualitative study, the applicability of the themes should not be generalised beyond the participants of this study. Additionally, although the participants provided substantial details regarding their mothers and fathers, obtaining details directly from mothers and fathers themselves would have enabled data triangulation (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), a method not used in this study. Therefore, this is an important direction for future research. Another limitation was the notable absence of father–daughter parentification. This occurred as a result of the recruitment process; no females parentified by their fathers volunteered to participate in this study. Although it was not the aim of this research to recruit participants from each of the four dyads (mother-daughter, father-daughter, mother-son, father-son), a comparison across all dyads is an important area of future investigation

The sample of participants involved in this study was diverse in relation to age, however, they were all white (with a variety of different cultural backgrounds) and most were educated, either higher education students or with completed degrees. This is a potential limitation as people of colour and those with less education may have different recollections of parentification. The field of parentification would benefit from future research that aims to understanding how gender plays out in role reversals for people of colour and for those with less education.

Since the results of this study cannot be generalised beyond the participants involved, further quantitative research is necessary to increase the level of generalisability of its themes. The findings of this study provide useful hypotheses that can be tested in future feminist and quantitative research projects. For example, researchers can test the hypothesis that gendered parenting norms influence mothers' and fathers' involvement in parentification by recruiting mothers and fathers to participate in a study. Other suitable hypotheses for quantitative studies are that same-sex parentification mediates the influence of gender-normative parentification and that cross-sex (mother–son) dyads moderate the influence. Further hypotheses can be generated based on the findings of this study regarding the role of gender in adult relationships, poor mental health and seeking psychological assistance. As this thesis has shown, ignoring the influence of gender in parentification research produces knowledge that fails to reflect the lived experiences of those involved.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment Poster

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

College of Arts

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED

For a study on adults who felt responsible for looking after their parent/s while growing up.

Did you often feel that:

- one or both parents brought their problems to you.
- you were the only one your parent/s could rely on.
- you were your parent/s 'mate' or source of emotional support.
- you had to solve your parent/s problems.
- you had to take sides or resolve arguments for your parent/s.
- you had to organise the household for your parents by doing a lot of the housework and looking after your siblings.

If you answer yes to one or more of the above, are you interested in participating in a study examining this role reversal and its impact on your life?

This qualitative psychology PhD research project is being conducted on 'parentification', a process of role reversal where children take on caregiving roles for their parents(s). This research is being conducted with adults who believe they experienced this process while growing up. The projected is being conducted by PhD student, Melanie Thomas, under the supervision of Associate Professor Gavin Ivey and Associate Professor Julie Stephens from Victoria University.

What will my participation involve?

You will be interviewed about your experiences of parentification and the impact this has had on your life. Your participation is completely voluntarily and your information will remain anonymous and confidential. The audio recorded interviews will be approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length and audio recorded.

If you are interested in partaking in this study please contact Melanie Thomas by email melanie.thomas@vu.edu.au for further details. This project has received full approval from the VU human research committee. Approval number: HRE13-029

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring people's lived experiences of 'parentification'. This project is being conducted by a student researcher, Melanie Thomas as part of a PhD study under the principal supervision of Associate Professor Gavin Ivey and co-supervision of Associate Professor Julie Stephens from the College of Arts at Victoria University.

Project explanation

The focus of this research is 'parentification', a role reversal that involves children providing emotional care and support to the adult(s) in the family. The aim of the project is to interview adults who experienced this process while growing up, exploring what this was like for them and what impact it had on their lives.

What will I be asked to do?

Participants will be asked to volunteer their time to be a part of one or more face-to-face audio-recorded interviews to talk about their experiences of parentification. Interviews will be approximately 60 to 90 minutes. It is possible that a follow-up interview will be requested to clarify details emerging in the first interview. Interviews will be conducted by PhD candidate Melanie Thomas and will be audio-recorded for the purpose of compiling results. Participants' interview responses will remain anonymous and confidential.

What will I gain from participating?

There is no monetary payment for participating in this research. However, interviewees may find it to be a thought provoking and interesting experience. On request, interested participants will be provided with a summary of the research findings once the PhD degree has been awarded.

How will the information I give be used?

The interview data will be transcribed and analysed to generate and illustrate significant themes relevant to the experience of parentification. The results will be reported in a psychology PhD thesis and, possibly, in journal articles and/or conference presentations. When direct quotes from interviews are used, care will be taken to make sure that these are anonymous and will not include any information that may identify you to potential readers.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project?

It is possible that recalling childhood experiences may bring up uncomfortable feelings. If participants experience any distress, they will be able to decide if they would like to continue the interview, reschedule for another time or discontinue the interview process entirely. Participants who are students of Victoria University can access the free student counselling service if required. Other participants who feel that that need psychological assistance will be referred to Romana Morda (Registered Psychologist and Victoria University staff member) on 9919 5223 or romana.morda@vu.edu.au.

How will this project be conducted?

Participants will be given a consent form and interview schedule outlining the questions that will guide the interview process. Prior to conducting interviews it is required that the consent form is signed. Following this an appropriate time and place to conduct the interview will be arranged. The interviews will be audio- recorded with the participant's consent. The recordings will be transcribed verbatim and analysed for themes to compile results for a PhD thesis.

Who is conducting the study?

Principal Supervisor: Associate Professor Gavin Ivey Email: gavin.ivey@vu.edu.au

Co-Supervisor: Associate Professor Julie Stephens Email: julie.stephens@vu.edu.au

Student Researcher: Melanie Thomas Email: melanie.thomas1@live.vu.edu.au

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Research Ethics and Biosafety Manager, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 or phone 03) 9919 4148.

Appendix 3: Schedule

Semi- Structured Interview Schedule

Please note this interview schedule is flexible. Participants may speak outside the scope of these questions in order to convey their own experiences as freely as possible. Please provide as much detail as possible.

General childhood history/ background (Parentification):

1) Why do you feel that you experienced parentification while growing up? (i.e., what experiences, roles and responsibilities make you identify with this description and how did you experience this).
2) Can you tell me what your relationships with parents were like and how you felt/feel about them?
3) Did you have any siblings? If so, could you describe your relationship with them? (what were their roles in your family)
4) Can you tell me what your parent/s relationships were like with your grandparent/s? (did this have any bearing on your care giving role)
5) Do you have any children? If so what is your relationship like with them does your childhood role influence this?

How participants experienced their need to be cared for and how this has impacted their later life:

6) Could you describe how your own needs, thoughts and feelings were responded to in your family? (inner world)
7) Did you feel free to explore your own thoughts, feelings, talents and desires when you were growing up? (inner world)
8) Thinking about your parentified role has this influenced how you felt about yourself growing up and how you feel about yourself now? (inner world, developing a sense of self).
9) Thinking about you parentified role, do you feel this impacted or currently impacts how you relate to other people, including friends and people you have close relationships with? (Please provide some examples)

Contextual (sociocultural) factors

10) Do you feel that being either a female/male had any impact on your parentification role within the family? (Please describe if there were any particular roles that the females and/or males preformed in your family relating to care giving).
11) Thinking about your family's cultural/religious background do you feel this influenced your care giving role in any significant way?
12) Do you feel that your family's economic circumstances contributed to your role as a caregiver in any way?

Interview process:

13) Could you describe your thoughts and feelings about talking to me about these issues today?
14) Is there anything related to your experience of parentification that I have missed or that needs further clarification or discussion?

Appendix 4: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study exploring 'parentification', a role reversal between parent and child that involves children providing emotional care and support to adult(s) in the family. The primary aim of the project is to interview adults who feel they have experienced this process whilst growing up. Participants will be asked to volunteer their time to be a part of one or more face-to-face audio-recorded interviews to talk about their parentification experiences.

CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I, _____

of _____certify that I am at least 18 years old and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the PhD study exploring 'parentification' being conducted at Victoria University by Melanie Thomas under the supervision of Associate Professor Gavin Ivey and Associate Professor Julie Stephens.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by Melanie Thomas and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

Audio recorded face-to-face interviews with the researcher Melanie Thomas to talk about my childhood experiences of parentification.

I certify that:

- The risks of participating have been explained to me
- I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered
- I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.
- I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher on 0450 741 218

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Research Ethics and Biosafety Manager, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 or phone (03) 9919 4148.