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Does Parentification Place Mexican-heritage Youth at Risk for Substance Use? Identifying the Intervening Nature of Parent-child Communication about Alcohol

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Abstract

Past research on parentification suggests that adopting adult responsibilities to the point at which the child plays a parental role places children at risk for poor mental and behavioral health outcomes. Since family relations are particularly important in Mexican culture, two hypotheses were posed to examine the indirect effects of parentification on Mexican-heritage youths' substance use via parent-child communication about alcohol, while examining the moderating effects of parent-child closeness. Mexican-heritage youth ($N = 697$) from 23 public middle schools in Phoenix, AZ completed surveys at three waves. Structural equation modeling results provided partial support for the hypotheses. Mexican-heritage youth experiencing problem-solving parentification were more likely to talk with a parent about alcohol and, in turn, less likely to use substances. This mediation effect, however, was not found with respect to adult parentification, and parent-child closeness was not a significant moderator. Implications for the beneficial effects of problem-solving parentification are discussed.

Keywords

parentification; parent-child communication about alcohol; substance use; Mexican-heritage youth; parent-child closeness

Family practices play a central role in the physical and mental health of youth (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Buist, Dekovic', Meeus, & Van Aken, 2004; Dekovic', 1999). Among these practices, past research identifies parentification as placing youth at greater risk for distress, substance use, and other problem behaviors (Byng-Hall, 2008; Carroll & Robinson, 2000). Parentification occurs when youth fill parental roles that are seen as developmentally inappropriate from a Western perspective (Chase, 1999; Dornier, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008; Well & Jones, 2000). Proponents of the Western perspective believe that parentified youth are more likely to experience emotional burnout and

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psychological distress, which is harmful to their development. Yet, other researchers argue that parentification does not necessarily result in negative outcomes, but instead, may play a positive role for youth development (Stein, Rotheram-Borus, & Lester, 2007; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009; Thastum, Johansen, Gubba, Olesen, & Romer, 2008). Research suggests that cultural influences and values as well as family processes determine whether parentification has positive or negative effects. Consequently, this paper examines parentification among Mexican-heritage youth, focusing on parent-child communication about alcohol and closeness as key family practices.

Parentification and youth developmental outcomes

Role theory (Ashforth, 2001) suggests that each family member has a certain role within the family structure and is expected to behave appropriately according to that role.

Parentification takes place when a role reversal occurs between the parent and child, thereby resulting in the child prematurely accepting adult responsibilities and interacting with family in adult roles (Kam, 2011; McQuillan & Tse, 1995). While one might expect this role reversal to manifest negative consequences, family research demonstrates that the effects of parentification lie on a continuum ranging from adaptive to maladaptive (Chamorro, 2004).

Parentification may become problematic when excessive burden is placed on the child, which hinders their emotional and cognitive age-appropriate development. Some types of parentification seem particularly burdensome. For instance, emotional parentification, which refers to providing emotional support, making decisions, and solving problems for the family often results in greater conflict in family process and consequently places children at greater risk for emotional-behavioral problems (Champion, Jaser, Reeslund, Simmons, & Potts, 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mickelson & Demmings, 2009; Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008). Similarly, adolescents who care for a parent or sibling are more likely to experience negative behavioral outcomes including risky sexual behaviors, substance use, and conduct problems (Stein, Riedel, & Rotheram-Borus, 1999). Wells and Jones (2000) explain these negative consequences by noting that parentification “requires a premature identification with the parent’s expectations and needs, at the expense of the development of the child’s true talents and gifts, often leaving the child feeling ashamed of the true self’s unrewarded striving” (p. 19).

From this Western developmental perspective, scholars believe that emotional parentification may be problematic due to the burden imposed by age-inappropriate responsibilities such as providing emotional support to parents, dealing with family problems, and making decisions on behalf of the family instead of receiving care from parents. Parentified children become an adult figure in a family, and consequently, family members treat them as an adult, which places excessive psychological burdens on parentified youth during the developmental period of adolescence. Overwhelming responsibilities within family can negatively influence youths’ psychological and behavioral functioning (Champion et al., 2009; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Mickelson & Demmings, 2009; Peris et al., 2008).

In contrast, other scholars assert that parentification is not always related to youths’ psychological maladaptation (Fitzgerald, Schneider, Salstrom, Zinzow, Jackson, & Fossel, 2008) nor to risky behavior such as substance use (Stein et al., 2007; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009; Thastum et al., 2008). For example, Tompkin (2007) and Stein et al. (2007) both report beneficial effects of emotional parentification among children whose mother was infected by HIV. Parentified youth reported higher social competence and less substance use than adolescents with no parentification experience. Although these findings suggest that children who served as emotional caregivers for HIV positive mothers benefitted from

parentification, the positive effects may be limited to this specific family context. In any case, it appears that at least for some children, emotional parentification does not inevitably produce negative outcomes.

It is clear, then, that both positive and negative effects can be found for emotionally parentified children and that research has not, as yet, clearly explained when to expect each type of outcome. Several factors may be at work. First, there appears to be at least two types of emotional parentification: problem-solving parentification (i.e., having family rely on youth to solve their problems) and adult parentification (i.e., feeling like the adult in the family rather than the child) (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morell, 2001; Mika, Bergner, & Buam, 1987). However, little attention has been given to the various aspects of emotional parentification research (Kam, 2011).

Second, previous research rarely considered culture. It is clear, however, that family values and practices have a cultural dimension (Jurkovic, Kuperminc, Perilla, Murphy, Ibanex, & Casey, 2004). For instance, Hooper (2007a) argues that “among racially and ethnically diverse families, what may be maladaptive family functioning in one culture may be adaptive family functioning in another culture” (p. 331). As a result, researchers recently have encouraged the incorporation of different cultural perspectives into parentification studies (Burton, 2007). Third, it may be that protective family processes, such as parent-child emotional closeness and parent-child communication, ameliorate negative effects on parentified youths’ emotional development (Tompkin, 2007). Protective family processes such as parent-child closeness and parent-child communication about alcohol may explain the varying effects of emotional parentification and are examined in this study. We turn next to a discussion of culture and family practices.

Mexican-heritage youths’ experiences with parentification

Most studies on parentification have been conducted among families from European and African American backgrounds, with only a limited number of studies investigating parentification among Mexican-heritage families (Kam, 2011; Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Casey, 2009; Orellan, 2003; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). It is plausible to assume that parentification may not be detrimental to Mexican-heritage youths’ development due to their culture’s emphasis on family closeness and harmony (Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Jaccard, Johansson, Bouris, & Acosta, 2007), which requires more familial responsibilities of Mexican-heritage youth.

Emotional parentification, then, may be an accepted practice among Mexican-heritage families where adopting adult responsibilities and contributing to family functioning may reflect the interdependent nature of families rooted in Mexican cultural values (Dorner et al., 2008). The limited number of studies investigating parentification among Mexican-heritage families show positive effects on parentified children’s psychological well-being (Kuperminc et al., 2009; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). In addition, a recent study (Kam, 2011) found that emotional parentification did not exhibit a significant effect on Mexican-heritage youth substance use, which is contrary to the findings from the developmental perspective common to US American families. Therefore, the present study aims to fill a research gap by providing a better understanding of Mexican-heritage youths’ parentification processes. We turn next to a consideration of the role family processes may play.

Family processes and parentification

Family interaction theory (Brook, Brook, Gordon, Whiteman, & Cohen, 1990; Brook, Saar, Zhang, & Brook, 2009) argues that parent-child closeness and communication can protect youth from negative influences such as substance use. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that the

effects of parentification may be strongly influenced by these processes among Mexican-heritage families whose cultural values emphasize family harmony and closeness (Dorner et al., 2008; Gloria & Peregoy, 1996; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). Given this cultural value, it seems logical to start by examining whether family closeness plays a role in parentification among Mexican-heritage youth.

Parent-child closeness

Past studies suggest that parent-child closeness and support function as protective factors that alleviate parentified youths' emotional distress and discourage problematic behaviors (Earley & Cushway, 2002; Hooper, 2007b). Among Mexican-heritage families, the notion of *familismo* (closeness within the family) is a core value associated with parent-child relationship (Gloria & Peregoy, 1996; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the degree of closeness may vary among individual families since not all will adhere identically to the over-riding cultural value (Walsh, Shulman, Bar-On, & Tsur, 2006). In this respect, we assume that Mexican-heritage adolescents may have different levels of closeness to their parents in the family context of parentification.

Empirical studies have documented inconsistent evidence regarding the relationship between parent-child closeness and parentified children. For example, some studies found that parentified adolescents reported lower levels of parent-child closeness than non-parentified children (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009), while others reported that there was no significant difference on parent-child closeness between parentified youth and their counterparts (Walsh et al., 2006). Moreover, the effects of parent-child closeness remain unclear in diverse family contexts and ethnicities; it is plausible that the level of parent-child closeness in the parentification context may differently contribute to the likelihood of parent-child communication given the mixed findings of parent-child closeness among adolescents experiencing parentification. For this purpose we also turn to parent-child communication.

Parent-child communication

To date, it is well recognized that parent-child communication promotes positive youth development (Fasula & Miller, 2006; Henrich, Brookmeyer, Shrier, & Shahar, 2006; Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosma, 1998). Family scholars have indicated that parent-child communication reduces risky behaviors (Brody, Murry, McNair, & Chen, 2005; Cottrell, Yu, Liu, Deveaux, Lunn, Bain, & Stanton, 2007; Davidson & Cardemil, 2009) and drug use (Miller-Day & Dodd, 2004; Schinke, Noia, Schwinn, & Cole, 2006). More specifically, there is evidence that parent-child communication about substances may decrease youth substance use (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Miller-Day, 2008; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Rangarajan, & Kelly, 2006). It is reasonable, then, to expect that communication may mediate the effects of parentification since it appears that the crucial determinant is whether parentification is normalized or seen as an inconsistent role for children. Moreover, since substances use is the targeted outcome in this paper, we examine communication specifically about this topic. Miller-Day and colleagues (2004, 2008, 2010) contend that targeted communication about alcohol between parent and child functions as a protective factor for youth substance use. In addition, adolescents engaging in parent-child communication about drug use and rules were less likely to use substances than their counterparts with no parent-child communication (Pride Surveys, 2009).

Although past studies have highlighted the positive impact of parent-child communication on youths' behavioral development, it is unknown how parent-child communication about substances influences parentified youths' substance use nor is it clear how these processes operate among Mexican-heritage youth. Since alcohol is the most frequently used substance among Mexican-heritage youth (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2011), we

focused on talk about this substance. Given our discussion of parentification literature and family interaction theory, we argue that parents may be inclined to treat their parentified child as an adult figure and indeed, rely on their parentified child more heavily to discuss family problems and to ask for decision-making within the family. This nature of parent-child relationship may foster various conversational topics including issues associated with family members and problems encountered by parentified youth. In addition to the general characteristics of family relationships between parent and parentified child, Mexican-heritage adolescents in particular may be apt to communicate about broader topics with their parents due to their cultural values.

Research hypotheses

Given the contradicting findings of the previous literature on parentification and the lack of research among Mexican American families, we considered the roles of parent-child closeness and communication about alcohol as protective factors for youth outcomes in order to investigate whether parentification protects Mexican-heritage youth against substance use. We hypothesized that parentification indirectly effects youth substance use via parent-child communication about alcohol and posit that this mediation effect differs depending on the level of parent-child closeness. Based on the literature on parentification, parental closeness, and parent-child communication we posed the following hypotheses (see Figure 1):

H1: Parent-child communication about alcohol mediates the effect of parentification on substance use such that as Mexican-heritage youth experience parentification they are more likely to report talking to a parent about alcohol, and in turn, they are less likely to use substances.

H2: Parent-child communication about alcohol mediates the effect of parentification on substance use differently, depending on parent-child closeness.

- a. Mexican-heritage youth high in parent-child closeness are more likely to report parent-child communication about alcohol as they experience parentification. In turn, they are less likely to use substances.
- b. Mexican-heritage youth low in parent-child closeness are less likely to report parent-child communication about alcohol as they experience parentification. In turn, they are more likely to use substances.

Method

Participants

Data for the current study were collected as a part of the randomized prevention trial evaluating a school based substance use prevention program entitled *keepin' it REAL* (kiR). kiR is an intervention consisting of 10, 45-minute lessons with five entertainment videos teaching youth knowledge, motivation, and communication skills to refuse drug offers (Eleck, Wagstaff, & Hecht, 2010; Hecht & Krieger, 2006; Hecht & Miller-Day, 2009). Project personnel recruited schools by meeting with superintendents and principals. Twenty-three participating schools were randomly assigned to three conditions: multicultural intervention, acculturation enhanced intervention, and control condition. Intervention schools received the curriculum materials and training for teachers who implemented the lessons. Control schools received \$1,000 for their participation.

Adolescents from 23 public middle schools in Phoenix, AZ completed surveys in 5th through 8th grades. This study examined data from Mexican-heritage youth in waves 4–6 collected during 7th and 8th grades. Waves 4–6 were chosen because they contained the

measures needed to test this study's hypotheses. In Wave 4, there were 697 Mexican-heritage youth (77% of the total sample at Wave 4), 605 in Wave 5 (72% of the total sample at Wave 5), and 526 in Wave 6 (59% of the total sample at Wave 5). The large amount of missing data is likely due to the transience associated with low SES as well as movement between schools outside the study that we were unable to track. The sample was 53% female and 47% male, with the average age being 12.31 years ($SD = .58$). Of the Mexican-heritage youth, 67% self-identified as Mexican American and 33% as Mexican. Among Mexican youth, 73% were born in the U.S. and 27% born in Mexico. The majority of the adolescents had a mother who was born in Mexico (72%), followed by the U.S. (23%), did not know (3%), and another country (2%). Similarly, the majority had a father who was born in Mexico (74%), followed by the U.S. (18%), did not know (6%), and another country (2%). Most adolescents (63%) reported living in the U.S. for all their life, 13% more than 10 years, 13% between 6 and 10 years, 11% between 1 and 5 years, and 1% less than 1 year.

Procedures

After consenting parents and obtaining assent from the students, survey data were collected at wave 4 (September–December, 2006), at wave 5 (February–May, 2007), and at wave 6 (January–March, 2008). At each wave, students completed a questionnaire in homeroom, science, or health classes, while a trained proctor was present. The survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete. One side of the survey was in English and the other side was in Spanish. Rogler's (1989) method of back-translation was used to increase the translation accuracy. Because only 4% of the students completed the survey in Spanish at Wave 4, separate analyses could not be completed to assess significant differences based on which language was used to complete the survey.

Measures

Parentification, parent-child closeness, and prior substance use were measured at Wave 4, targeted parent-child communication about alcohol at Wave 5, and last 30-days substance use at Wave 6. The sample was comprised of adolescents in a school setting, so items were modified to make them age appropriate. In addition, shorter scales were used to meet the time constraints imposed by the schools (see Table 1 for bivariate correlations).

Parentification (W4)—This study measured two types of emotional parentification. Two items from Jurkovic et al.' (2001) scale operationalized adult parentification and two items from Mika et al.' (1987) scale operationalized problem-solving parentification. One of the adult parentification items was, "I often feel more like an adult than a child in my family" while one of the problem-solving parentification items was, "When my family has a problem, they come to me for advice." All four items were responded to using the same 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). To assess the dimensionality, a 2-factor CFA was conducted, correlating adult parentification with problem-solving parentification, while loading their corresponding items on each factor. This model fit the data well: ($\chi^2[1] = .65, p = .42$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00, 90% CI = .00, .10). Afterward, a 1-factor CFA was examined, loading all four items onto one factor ($\chi^2[2] = 67.26, p < .05$; CFI = .83; RMSEA = .23, 90% CI = .18, .27). The -2 log likelihood difference test ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}}[1] = 50.34, p < .05$) provided on the *Mplus* website (Mplus, 2009) yielded support for separate adult ($M = 3.03, SD = 1.0, r = .60$) and problem-solving parentification ($M = 2.80, SD = 1.1; r = .50$) factors.

Prior substance use (W4)—Students reported the amount using alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana in the last 30 days using three items from Graham, Flay, Johnson, Hansen, Grossman, and Sobel (1984). The items were "How many drinks of alcohol have you had in the last 30 days?" ($M = 1.51; SD = 1.04$), "How many cigarettes have you smoked in the last

30 days?" ($M = 1.21$; $SD = .76$), and "How many hits of marijuana (pot, weed) have you had in the last 30 days?" ($M = 1.28$; $SD = .97$). Students used a 7-point scale to report alcohol consumption (1 = none to 7 = more than 30), cigarette use (1 = none to 7 = more than 20 cigarettes), and marijuana hits (1 = none to 7 = more than 40 hits).

Parent-child closeness (W4)—Four items from the Parental Socioemotional Support for Adolescents Scale (Upchurch, Aneshensel, Sucoff, & Levy-Storms, 1999) were modified to provide a more readable scale for the youth in this survey. Sample items included: "My mom or my dad..." to which students responded, "... really understands me" and "...lets me know she (or he) cares about me". Items were responded to on a 4-point scale (1= strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) and displayed strong psychometric properties ($M = 3.37$; $SD = .64$; Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Parent-child communication about alcohol (W5)—Three items were used from the targeted parent-child communication about alcohol (Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Miller-Day & Dodd, 2004). The introduction asked students, "How much do you agree with the following for *at least one* of your parents?" Students responded using a 5-point scale (1 = disagree a lot and 5 = agree a lot). The items were: "At least one of my parents..." "...has talked to me about how to handle offers of alcoholic drinks," "...has warned me about the dangers of drinking alcohol," and "...asks about my thoughts and opinions about drinking alcohol" ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 1.1$; Cronbach's alpha = .90).

Last-30-days substance use (W6)—Students reported the amount of using alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana within the last-30 days using three items from Graham et al. (1984). The items were "How many drinks of alcohol have you had in the last 30 days?" ($M = 1.93$; $SD = 1.5$), "How many cigarettes have you smoked in the last 30 days?" ($M = 1.22$; $SD = .84$), and "How many hits of marijuana (pot, weed) have you had in the last 30 days?" ($M = 1.44$; $SD = 1.3$). Students used a 7-point scale to report alcohol consumption (1 = none to 7 = more than 30), cigarette use (1 = none to 7 = more than 20 cigarettes), and marijuana hits (1 = none to 7 = more than 40 hits).

Analysis summary

To examine the hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using *Mplus* 5.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). The full information maximum likelihood method (FIML) was used to handle the missingness across waves (Graham, Cumsille, & Elek-Fisk, 2003). Further, the maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors (MLR) was used, which is robust against non-normally distributed data (Muthén & Muthén, 2007).

When considering potential covariates, this study found that nativity, time spent in the U.S., age, and gender were not significantly related to any of the variables in the model; therefore, they were not included as covariates. We also examined the correlations of language preference with family (0 = other language; 1 = Spanish) and language preference with friends (0 = other language; 1 = Spanish) with the outcomes, but there were no significant associations. Both types of language preferences were not significantly related to adult parentification, problem-solving parentification, substance use, or parent-child communication. Thus, we did not include language preference for family or friends as control variables in our model.

Because students were nested in schools, this study took into account the multilevelstructured data. Intraclass correlations (ICC) for each variable ranged from only 0.0 to .02. Nevertheless, the multilevel-structured data were still accounted for by using TYPE = COMPLEX, which calculates the standard errors and a chi-square test while

considering the non-independence of observations (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). Given that data came from an intervention trial with a potential for program effects, a multi-group analysis was performed with the mediation model. The chi-square difference test ($\chi^2_{diff}[14] = 10.91, p = .69$) between the restricted and unrestricted models was not significant, that is, neither condition exhibited a significant effect.

To examine mediation, Preacher and Hayes (2008) suggest modeling indirect paths from the independent variables to the mediating variables, along with direct paths from the independent variables to the dependent variable. Hence, this study examined indirect paths from parentification to last-30-days substance use through targeted parent-child communication about alcohol, along with direct paths from parentification to last-30-days substance use. All variables were treated as latent variables in the analyses. Because the multilevel-structured data were accounted for using *Mplus* code, the bootstrapping method could not be incorporated, as recommended by Preacher and Hayes. Consequently, PRODCLIN (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007) was used to examine the indirect effects. PRODCLIN handles the non-normality in the product of coefficients' distribution and computes asymmetric confidence intervals. A separate SEM analysis was conducted to assess moderated mediation. Parent-child closeness was included as a latent factor along with an interaction latent factor that was indicated by the cross-product terms of targeted parent-child communication about alcohol and parent-child closeness.

Results

The first hypothesis suggested that parent-child communication about alcohol would mediate the effects of problem-solving and adult parentification on substance use. The SEM model, as seen in Figure 2, fit the data well: ($\chi^2[56] = 93.21, p < .05$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = 0.03, 90% CI = .02, .04; SRMR = .05). The model explained 8% of the variance in parent-child communication about alcohol and 47% of the variance in substance use, when taking into account prior substance use. More specifically, neither problem-solving (standardized $\beta = -.006, SE = .101, p = .952$) nor adult parentification (standardized $\beta = .044, SE = .096, p = .645$) were significantly directly related to past 30-days substance use. Adult parentification also was not significantly related to parent-child communication about alcohol (standardized $\beta = -.0022, SE = .073, p = .766$); however, problem-solving parentification was positively related to communication about alcohol (standardized $\beta = .304, SE = .065, p < .001$). In turn, parent-child communication about alcohol was negatively related to substance use (standardized $\beta = -.142, SE = .052, p < .01$). Based on the bias-corrected CIs, parent-child communication about alcohol fully mediated the association between problem-solving parentification and substance use (95% CI = $-.08, -.01$). As Mexican-heritage youth experienced problem-solving parentification, they were more likely to report having conversations with a parent about alcohol. In turn, they were less likely to use substances. This mediation, however, was not found with respect to adult parentification (95% CI = $-.02, .03$). Consequently, the first hypothesis garnered partial support.

The second hypothesis predicted that parent-child closeness would interact with parentification to predict parent-child communication about alcohol. When examining latent interactions in *Mplus*, only the log likelihood, scaling correction factor, number of parameters, AIC, BIC, and unstandardized results are provided. The moderated mediation model had the following model fit statistics: log likelihood = -12542.953 , scaling correction factor = 2.78, number of parameters = 69, AIC = 25223.91, and BIC = 25537.34. As seen in Figure 3, parent-child closeness did not significantly moderate the effects of problem-solving parentification or adult parentification on parent-child communication about alcohol. The second hypothesis was not supported. Nevertheless, parent-child closeness exhibited a positive significant main effect on parent-child communication about alcohol

(unstandardized $\beta = .445$, $SE = .090$, $p < .001$). As Mexican-heritage youth felt close to a parent, they were more likely to report engaging in parent-child communication about alcohol.

Discussion

Based on the longitudinal data analysis, the present study investigated the effects of parent-child communication about alcohol in mediating any potentially harmful effects of emotional parentification on substance use among Mexican-heritage youth. Specifically, two types of emotional parentification (e.g., problem-solving and adult parentification) were examined with regard to substance use behavior via parent-child communication about alcohol. Contrary to past research mainly focusing on the negative effects of parentification (Byng-Hall, 2008; Carroll & Robinson, 2000; Hooper, Marotta, & Lanthier, 2008; Peris et al., 2008), this study demonstrated the hypothesized beneficial effects of problem-solving parentification on decreasing Mexican-heritage youths' substance use when there was parent-child communication about alcohol. Mexican-heritage youth whose parents relied on them to solve their problems (problem-solving parentification) were more likely to report having conversations with a parent about alcohol, and in turn, less likely to use substances. This finding is consistent with previous literature suggesting that parentification does not necessarily result in negative outcomes including substance use (Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski, & Tomek, 2012; Stein et al., 2007; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009; Thastum et al., 2008), particularly among members of this cultural group.

Our predication with regard to adult parentification, however, was not supported. The result showed that reports of feeling like the adult in the family (adult parentification) were neither significantly related to the likelihood of parent-child communication about alcohol nor to Mexican-heritage youth substance use. There might be several explanations for this non-significant mediation effect of adult parentification. In the current study, adult parentification referred to feeling mature and feeling like the adult in the family. This operationalization may imply that youth with higher levels of adult parentification feel more self-confident, more competent, and more independent of their parents. As a result, adolescents experiencing higher degrees of adult parentification may not perceive a need for their parents as much as those reporting lower levels of adult parentification. In a similar vein it may be that these parents do not think they need to talk to their children about alcohol because they believe their children are *mature* and require little supervision. Parents may not recognize the need to advise their adult parentified children because both the parents and the children see the youth as the adult in the family. Consequently, parents may assume that adult parentified youth are too busy being the adult figure in the family to have time to engage in substance use. Lastly, we speculated that this role may be normalized within the Mexican American families adhering to their cultural values and family practices; Mexican-heritage youth may not perceive themselves as parentified if they play adult roles and thus this particular type of parentification may not profoundly influence youth substance use directly among members of this cultural group.

Finally, this study predicted that parent-child communication about alcohol would differ depending on parent-child closeness. The results did not support the moderating effect of parent-child closeness on the mediation effect of parent-child communication about alcohol. Rather, it was found that parent-child closeness had a positive direct effect on parent-child communication about alcohol. It appears that closeness is a highly salient variable whose effects transcend specific processes such as parentification. Future research should address whether conversations about alcohol between parents and Mexican-heritage adolescents are conducted differently within families varying in closeness. In particular, studies should

investigate if conversations can effectively reduce substance use even when the parent-child relationship is not accompanied by close bonds.

Practical implications

Findings have important implications for family-based interventions targeting substance use by Mexican-heritage adolescents. Findings show that parent-child communication about alcohol is protective for Mexican-heritage youth, particularly in the context of problem-solving parentification. The current study shows that negative effects of parentification are not inevitable and may not generalize to all cultures and all families. Our findings also demonstrate that parent-child communication about alcohol can ameliorate negative effects of parentification. Moreover, the study indicates that a certain type of parentification, such as problem solving parentification, can be beneficial, decreasing Mexican-heritage youths' substance use when there is talk about alcohol with a parent. Based on these findings, we suggest that prevention scholars and family interventionists should take account of types of parentification and design family-based interventions that promote parent-child communication about alcohol for Mexican-heritage families.

Limitation and directions for future research

Although this study has significant research and practice implications, it is not without its limitations. The measurement of parentification is one limitation. The current study only investigated two types of parentification including problem-solving parentification and adult parentification using existing measures. Previous contradictory findings note that experiences of providing emotional support to parents and solving family problems is more beneficial for adolescents to develop a sense of mastery and competence, whereas responsibilities of caring for siblings is related to higher incidence of youth psychological symptoms (Walsh et al., 2006). Therefore, future research should specify various tasks in parentification and explore the effects of different parentification types and tasks on youth developmental outcomes. Although recent research of Hooper and colleagues (2011) presented a statistically validated parentification measure accounting for multidimensional roles and processes of parentification with consideration of familial, cultural, and ecological context, more research is needed to focus on parentified adolescents' psychological and behavioral well-being in terms of different roles of parentification.

In conjunction with diverse types of parentification and its effects on youth outcomes, family scholars need to consider family contextual factors (Thastum et al., 2008). The notion of parentification may differ depending on the family's culture of origin (Hooper, 2007a). Some parents rely on their children more than is culturally prescribed and developmentally appropriate than others (Kuperminc, et al., 2009). Therefore, qualitative research delves into the notion of parentification and childhood expectations from the perspective of family's culture of origin and further provides insightful understandings of parentification processes in families from diverse cultures. Based on the qualitative investigation of family culture, comparative research is needed to develop family-based intervention targeting diverse family contexts.

The potential role of acculturation also needs to be investigated in future research. The present study did not take into account of the role that acculturation may play in the parentification process, which may in turn, affect the outcomes. Prior analyses showed that none of the proxies for acculturation (nativity, time spent in the U.S., and language preference) included in the survey were significantly related to the dependent variables (parentification, parent-child communication about alcohol, and youth substance use). As a result, we did not include acculturation in our model. However, if it is truly Mexican American culture that protects against negative effects of parentification, it is important to

consider the role of acculturation in future studies. More specifically, acculturation needs to be examined not as proxies of the process, but through multidimensional indicators (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). The roles of cultural identification (e.g., country of origin), values (e.g., collectivism, interdependence, and familism), and practices (heritage language and heritage-culture foods) may provide more insight into understanding if and how acculturation influences parentified youths' developmental outcomes (for review see Schwartz et al., 2010).

Lastly, in spite of the fact that this study was not able to find evidence to support the moderating effect of parent-child closeness on parent-child communication about alcohol and Mexican heritage youth substance use, we suggest that future research examine alternative family processes. For instance, recent research indicates that setting a rule about drug uses and communicating to adolescent children about the rule significantly influenced youth substance use (Pride Surveys, 2009). Parental influences on youth substance use can be further understood by investigating various aspects of parent-child relationships.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the complexity of parentification in youth development and the need for culture to be considered in theory, research, and practice. Youth from different family cultures may respond in different ways to the demands thought to be associated with parentification. At the same time, family processes such as communication about substances need to be considered to understand the effects of parentification.

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Figure 1.
A Conceptual Model of Moderated Mediation

Figure 2.

H1: A Structural Equation Model of Parentification's Indirect Effects on Substance Use

Note: As seen in this figure, prior substance use at Wave 4 was accounted for by examining a path from this factor to substance use at Wave 6. The multilevel-structured data also was accounted for when testing this model: ($\chi^2[56] = 93.21, p < .05$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = 0.03, 90% CI = .02, .04; SRMR = .05). Path coefficients are completely standardized. All significant ($p < .05$) paths are highlighted by boldface and marked by asterisks.

Figure 3.

H2: A Structural Equation Model Representing Moderated Mediation

Note: Prior substance use at Wave 4 was accounted for in this model by examining a path from this variable to substance use at Wave 6. The multilevel-structured data was accounted for when testing this model. Path coefficients are unstandardized. All significant ($p < .05$) paths are highlighted by boldface and marked by asterisks.

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. ADULT	--				
2. PROB	0.45**	--			
3. CLOSE	0.05	0.15**	--		
4. TALK	0.13**	0.24**	0.27**	--	
5. ATOD	-0.01	-0.04	-0.04	-0.16**	--

Note.

**
 $p < .01$,*
 $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

ADULT = adult parentification, PROB = problem-solving parentification, CLOSE = parent-child closeness, TALK = targeted parent-child communication about alcohol, and ATOD = last-30-days alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use.