ABSTRACT

PARENTIFICATION AND SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION IN SIBLINGS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS OR DISABILITY

By

Danielle Ilyana Benveniste Stevens

Advisor: Steve Tuber, Ph.D.

Well siblings of children with an illness or disability constitute a population of growing interest in psychological research. Past research suggests that these individuals may be likely to adopt increased caretaking responsibilities, or a parentified role, within the family. However, to date, few studies have examined the experiences of well siblings as they relate to late adolescent development. This study extends the well sibling research to the period of emerging adulthood and examines the degree to which 18 to 25 year-old well sibling and control groups report different levels of parentification and endorse different patterns of adolescent separation-individuation. In addition, this study explores the relationship between two constructs—parentification and separation-individuation—that have been linked in theory but rarely, if ever, been explored in research.

Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who were enrolled in a CUNY undergraduate or graduate program were eligible for participation in the present research. Participants were recruited from the following City University of New York campuses: Bronx Community College, Brooklyn College, City College of New York, Graduate Center, College of Staten Island, Hunter College, Laguardia Community College, Queens College, Queensborough Community College, and York College. Participants completed the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986), the Filial Responsibility Scale-
Adults (FRS-A; Jurkovic & Thirkield, 1999), and a series of questions regarding demographic and biographical information.

*T*-tests identified that well siblings endorsed increased emotional and overall parentification relative to controls but did not indicate that they differed significantly with regard to patterns of separation-individuation. Hierarchical regression analyses determined that perceived unfairness of parentification predicted problematic separation individuation, and that instrumental parentification predicted more adaptive, but potentially conflicted, negotiation of the separation-individuation process. These results provide evidence for the emotional parentification of well siblings beyond the childhood and early adolescent periods. In addition, this study indicates that parentification is meaningfully related to the developmental tasks of separation and individuation that characterize emerging adulthood.

*Keywords*: well siblings, parentification, separation-individuation