

THE PARENTING PRACTICE OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN TURKEY:  
CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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Paper to be presented at the European Population Conference,

Stockholm, June 13-16, 2012

Work in progress

Drawing on 24 interviews to single mothers, this study probes into the various cultural and structural factors facing single mothers and the strategies they devise to handle the hardship of bringing up a child alone as well as standing up for themselves as single mothers in a patriarchal society. Based on this qualitative sample, results demonstrate that single mothers in this study face numerous challenges ranging from the hardship of maintaining authority in the new family setting they formed; struggling to keep the sense of a complete family; handling negative attitudes to single mothers and to their children. We argue that through the strategies they devised these mothers rebuild their families in line with traditional Turkish family system. We draw on the literature on boundary ambiguity and role ambiguity, as theoretical framework for understanding these women's ambivalence in the process.

Keywords: Boundary ambiguity, single mothers; professional women; qualitative method; challenges & strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have shown that the number of single parent families has become increasingly common. Given the rising rate of single parenting and high rate of poverty and child delinquency associated with single parent families it receives particular attention in social science literature. Most of the literature view single parenting phenomenon as a social problem contributing to many of the societal ills such as delinquency (Rankin & Kern, 1994), poverty (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986) and income insecurity (Duncon & Hoffman, 1985); with respect to its effects on child development the literature reports single parenting as a risk factor for school failure (Astone & McLanahan, 1991), dropout rates (Zimiles and Lee, 1991), susceptibility to peer pressure (Steinberg, 1987) and drug abuse (Emery,1988) as well as emotional and behavioral problems (Lee, et al., 1994). Moreover, when assessed in view of parent child relationship, single parenting in general is viewed as “diminished parenting” due in part to lower parental involvement and inconsistent parenting style (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas & Wierson, 1990;Astone &McLanahan, 1991;Patterson, 1986; Steinberg, 1987).

Although most research focus on consequences of single parenting for children (see for instance Weiss, 1979;Peterson and Zill, 1986; Amato, 1987;Hetherington and Arasteh 1988;Krein & Beller, 1988; Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Furstenberg, Morgan and Allison, 1986; Steinberg 1987) there are also considerable number of studies focusing on the single parenting experience per se. In these studies on average women constitute more central place than men since men constitute a minority of single parents (Heath & Orthner, 1999) and as the studies indicate gender matters in dealing with single parenting status for in many respects women are more disadvantaged than men. For example, Duncan and Hoffman (1985) found that the income of single mothers declines to 67% of their income before divorce while the income of divorced men is 90% of their pre-divorce level. Lack of work experience, sex discrimination in labor market and cost of childcare contributes to the economic hardship prevalent to single mothers (McLanahan & Booth, 1989), which has stimulated considerable debate over feminization of poverty. In addition to economic aspects, single motherhood per se is associated with many other negative outcomes some of which include lack of social support and emotional and

psychological distress. McLanahan & Booth, (1989) argue that women are additionally disadvantaged with respect to psychological sources due to their gender; for instance, single mothers have higher level of psychological distress and anxiety than single fathers do. Psychological vulnerability of single mothers is also documented by other research (see Burden, 1986; McLanahan, 1983).

Despite vast array of studies documenting negative consequences of single parenting specifically for children, there are studies, although relatively fewer than studies with negative findings, presenting more positive results. Aquillino (1994) studied the association between family disruption during childhood and parent-child relationship with a sample of over 4500 participants, he found no trace of negative effect resulting from single parenthood. Paterson (1996) in her qualitative study revealed that single mothers did not report any school difficulties that would be associated to single parent family form. The single mothers in her study further emphasized self-confidence gained in the wake of marital separation. Some researchers are even more optimistic about single mothers' ability to struggle with the hardships stating that single mothers are considerably good at integrating into social and kinship networks that would help them find material and social resources to mitigate the difficulties they faced (Stack, 1974; Leslie & Grady, 1985). Gringlas & Weinraub (1995) challenged the notion of diminished parenting stating that child related negative outcomes may be result of marital disruption rather than being indigenous to single parenthood per se. In their study single mothers did not demonstrate difference in parenting practices than from their married counterparts.

Importantly the body of literature documenting positive or negative outcomes of single parent families has focused more on the structural aspect, namely, they designed their studies according to absence or presence of parents in the family and its effects on individual members of family. More recent research, however, involves studies that design investigation emphasizing the interaction within single parent or intact families affirming the view that family processes are more important than the family structure. This research assesses single parent families as heterogeneous group and pay attention to level and quality of interaction between absent and present family members (see Gongla & Thompson, 1987 for an extensive review). As the current research indicates

investigating family members' perception of an exiting or incoming family members and the level of ambiguity emanating from this changing family environment provides a fuller picture for a more thorough analysis of single parent family experience. This current study for this particular reason attempts to investigate the nature of interaction in single mother families. The theory of Boundary ambiguity provides framework for the examination of perception of family membership with its physical and psychological dimensions.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The concept of family boundary ambiguity

Family boundary ambiguity conceptualized by Boss is “a state when family members are uncertain in their perception of who is in and out of the family or who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system” (Boss, 1987; p.709). The concept developed as a heuristic model of family stress theory aims to help understand and explain the effects of family stressor events on the family members. The model is concerned particularly with how family members respond to changes or crises in the family system resulting either from adding or losing a family member. Examples of the types of boundary changes families confront with over a life span includes birth of a child, absence of a parent due to military service, employment, death or divorce to name a few. For the most part, the phenomenon of boundary ambiguity was utilized to clarify states such as psychological father presence PFP (Boss, 1977). Namely, high degree of boundary ambiguity arises in a family where the father in effect is physically absent yet psychologically present or he is physically present yet *missing in action* (MIA) resulting from a father's employment status or busy work schedule or it might emanate from divorce. The ambiguity grows in such situation for the status of a missing parent is not clear, which has a potential “to make the definitional aspect of family interaction especially problematic” (Hansen and Johnson, 1979; p.590). Stress occurs in families facing adding/loss of a family member until membership can be identified and the perception regarding the absent member as well as ambiguity regarding who performs

what roles and tasks were clarified (Boss, 1980a; p.449). While some families are resourceful in responding to change and fixing the ambiguity much more quickly, other families may find it hard to identify the change and fall into crisis. In such families “boundary ambiguity holds the family at a higher stress level by blocking the regenerative power to reorganize and develop new levels of organization” (Boss, 1980a; p.447), which eventually leads to family dysfunction.

Importantly, as Boss & Greenberg, (1984) states boundary ambiguity for a short period may help family members gain time to realize deeply that a certain change has happened and find ways to restructure family system, however, if the process is prolonged high level of boundary ambiguity comes into being leading to heightened level of stress and interpersonal conflict (Emery & Dillon, 1994). In order to restructure functioning of the family, boundary restructuring in a timely manner is essential particularly for the adult members since adult members who fail to renegotiate their spousal and parental roles may impede their children’s adaptation (Ahrons, 1980).

In determining the level of boundary ambiguity faced, external factors are equally important since, as Boss (1999) underscores, sometimes it is the outside situation not the internal personality defects that prevents the ability to resolve an ambiguous loss. In a recent publication Peterson and Christenson (2002) explored factors impacting the degree of boundary ambiguity experienced by male and female individuals two years after divorce. They found that amount of child support exchanged, sense of confidence, and support from former spouse were positively related to boundary ambiguity experienced by females. On the other hand, for the male respondents, only stressful life events were reported as predictive of the level of boundary ambiguity.

One important aspect of the phenomenon of boundary ambiguity is lack of clear social rules or guidance to help guide family members in the event of family stressors specifically in cases of divorce, single parent or step family structure. This is because “existing rituals and community support only address clear-cut loss such as death” (1999; p., 21). Therefore, for the most part the families are left on their own to cope with the loss without the social support and guidance, they have to find a way out to compensate the loss in the family system and to move on to “recovery at a functioning level”(Boss, 1987;

p. 711). Therefore, in order to provide *boundary maintenance*, a term used as an essential task to cope to reinstate family functioning (Boss, 1980a), family members reorganize roles and rules by assigning roles to close kin's or in many cases to intimate friends.

While boundary change may result from disastrous events, it may also emanate from normative conditions (Boss, 1980b). Entries and exits of family members (e.g., due to divorce, births, marriages, adolescents leaving home) across life span are inevitable entailing struggles for boundary maintenance. These struggles to clarify and reorganize family roles and tasks may be influenced by socioeconomic, cultural and religious context. Moreover, as the theory suggests the family member's perception of the boundary change and the meaning they attributed to the absence or presence is also important in determining the level of boundary ambiguity they encounter (Boss, 1987, 1999, 2004).

### Boundary Ambiguity in Single Parent Families

The experiences of loss and ambiguity resulting from marital separation is one of the most studied areas in the Boundary ambiguity research and the main focus has revolved around the assertion that families experiencing marital separation, single parenting and remarriage may have higher risk of boundary ambiguity and eventual dysfunction in the family (see Carrol, et al., 2007). As Boss (1999) denotes this is because divorce complicates family system by changing the number of family members through either loss or an addition of a member to close out the missing member in the family. Some studies focus on post divorce period per se as a phase potentially permeable to ambiguity since many changes occur in spousal relationship and family roles are constantly renegotiated. For example Madden-Derdich, Leonard and Christopher (1999) in their study where they explore the impact of boundary ambiguity on the ensuing parenting conflict in the wake of divorce state that when relationship boundaries between former spouses are not clearly defined after a divorce, in particular when the former spouse is defined as coparent but not as a spouse post divorce conflict surfaces. Another study (Emery, 1994) relate boundary ambiguity occurring in post divorce period to concerns

over child related issues which leads to conflict making reorganization of roles and tasks as well as post divorce adjustment all the more difficult for both parents and children.

Boundary ambiguity may continue years after the divorce as the single parents struggle to restructure their new family pattern in line with the social norms and strive to fit in existing family ideology. As Boss (1980b) states a woman with a strong adherence to traditional sex roles may resist restructuring her new family as a single mother family since she believes a single mother family is a deficient one or she may find it inappropriate to take on sex roles traditionally accorded to men like being disciplinarian, breadwinner, etc. this might lead her to keep the absent father present in the family. In a recent study Margaret Nelson explored single mothers experiences of maintaining their families in the light of the ideal of Standard North American Families (SNAF). The lone mothers in this study shared the burden of child care with their own parents or close kin's yet at the same time they tried to keep boundaries around these relationships, particularly, regarding the issue of child's discipline and attachment. Despite network of survival the single mothers formed, still when it came to who is in and who is out of the family these mothers reserved a place for the fathers of their children to maintain parenting role rather than transferring parenting role to their own parents. In doing so they try to maintain a traditional ideological notions of what a family is and how it should be. Although Nelson employs and extends "doing family" concept as her theoretical framework, it is suggested that (Sarkisian, 2006;p. 804) adding concept of boundary ambiguity helps bring a more accurate and thorough analysis of these women's accounts of family experiences, since what the women in Nelson's study in effect face is ambiguity in reorganizing and redefining their new family pattern. A somewhat similar ambiguity regarding grandparents' assuming the role of a primary caregiver replacing single mother or father is examined in a qualitative study by Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004). In their study Landry-Meyer and Newman found prevalence of a sense of role conflict expressed by many participants emanating from participants' "desire to conform to an idealized portrayal of the American family"(p.1022), for the grandparent-grandchild family pattern is not socially recognized as a validated family structure. While the lack of social support may lead to grandparent caregiver's ambiguity, when they gained the legal custody of

their grandchildren role ambiguity was superseded by clearer prospects concerning boundaries and formation for the grandparent caregiver role and authority.

Due to its complex nature and lack of social recognition, the single parent families are associated with high level of family boundary ambiguity. Despite this emphasis however there is little research investigating this phenomenon in these families with a particular focus on the process of restructuring their lone parent families by adding either their own parents, intimate friends or ex husbands. This study attempts to fill this gap by providing new evidence from a qualitative study from Turkey. The work investigates the prevalence and characteristics of boundary ambiguity in single mother families and aims to gain further insight into how social context affects single mothers' perception of a proper family. We use qualitative methodology to explore the channels through which the participants in this study put great efforts to restructure their families in line with social norms in Turkish setting. Our methodology draws on in-depth interviews. The sample and context of this work allow us to generate cross-cultural discussion on the issue of boundary ambiguity in single parent families. In order to lay the background for a fuller picture of single mothers' survival strategies in Turkish setting, we now turn to discussion of the status of single parent family system in Turkey.

#### SINGLE PARENTING IN TURKEY

Concomitant to the ongoing increase in divorce rates, from 0.46 and 0.52 during 1990s to 1.35 in 2001 and then to 1.59 in 2009 (Turkstat, 2010), single parenthood has become a growing category of family in Turkish context. A recent survey (IPSOS KMG, Household & Consumer Purchase Panels of Turkey) reports that 9,5 percent of over 6500 households sampled in the study are single parent households. Moreover, the most recent demographic and health survey further states that female-headed households constitute 12 percent of all Turkish households (TDHS 2008).

Since the inception of Republic in 1923, Turkey has experienced substantial changes in family behaviors manifesting itself in increasing divorce rates, declining fertility, increasing nuclear families, sex roles shifting toward less male domination and more egalitarian attitudes and declining co residence (Aykan & Wolf, 2000; Aytac, 1998). Despite



this shift, close-knit family relations, solidarity in families as well as social contact among Turkish families continue to be enduring attribute of Turkish family system (Duben, 1982), making Turkish families structurally nuclear yet functionally extended (Kagitcibasi, 1986). Namely, while family members provide material or emotional support to each other, parental involvement and control continue to stand out as a persistent attribute of Turkish families. To elaborate, Turkish parents feel responsible to be involved in their children's lives by giving them help and advise in case of any difficulty the couple faced and this involvement continues throughout individuals lives, even after the children's marriages. More importantly, they get involved in family stresses like divorce and try to help by playing mediatory roles. This very attribute manifests itself on single parent experience in Turkish setting. It is a quite common pattern that after a marital separation couples are expected to turn to their families either for a while or permanently. Moreover, a grandfather or a grandmother compensates for the absence of a nonresidential parent.

Parent's involvement also takes the form of caregiver for their grandchildren. As a result of the increasing women's employment and lack of institutional day care services corresponding to this increase, grandmothers taking care of their grandchildren have become a growing trend in Turkey. According a study 79 percent of childcare activities for Turkish women in manufacturing sector was provided by grandmothers or other female relatives (Ecevit, 1986; p., 314).

Another factor that significantly impacts on single parenting in Turkey is the stigma attached to single parent families particularly intensive for single mothers. Part of the negative approach is related to the attitude to women living alone. In a heavily patriarchal context where male control of female sexuality is a norm and the strong societal norms that require women be married is prevalent, "an unmarried, woman living on her own is regarded as an anomaly"(Muftuler-Bac, 1999; p., 310) since many tend to see an unmarried women as masterless woman, a fair game (Ibid, p., 310). The negative attitudes also concern children. Since it is widely believed that children from single parent households tend to have negative life experiences such as delinquency, drug addiction, etc., divorced women for the most part are blamed for not keeping the family together and causing a family break up. The cultural emphasis is manifested in the Turkish vernacular with such sayings as "man make houses,

women make homes” (*yuvayı disi kus yapar*), “a good woman is a sacrificial mother for her family” (*kadın dediğin ailesi için saçını süpürge eder*), “a good woman keeps her man” (*kadın dediğin kocasını elinde tutar*), thus, in Turkish culture it is not acceptable as such for women to set up their own households specifically in the case of divorce, in many cases, women are expected to “double up with other households rather than setting up their own households” (Koc, 1997; p., 90). The concept of single parent home (*tek ebeveyn*), in the Turkish vernacular, therefore, is not often used; it is relatively new formation and a new notion in Turkey.

## METHOD

### Selection of Participants and Procedure

This study is one component of a larger body of dissertation research that explores professional women's divorce experiences more broadly. The twenty-four interviews discussed in this study are taken from a sample of 31 participants that were interviewed over a two-year period between June, 2007 and September 2009. The twenty-four single mothers discussed in this study are highly educated, professional and divorced women. They were all from urban areas and had full-time professional jobs at the time of the interviews. The Majority of them were living on their own with their children, except for two women who were living with their families at the time of our interview. Since all were also working, they either had child minders or received family/ relative help for childcare.

In-depth interview technique was used to gather the qualitative data used in this study. While one researcher was conducting all the interviews both researchers were involved in data transcription and data analysis processes. The twenty-four interviews, conducted all in person, were carried out in two to three sessions, at the homes of participants or at their work places. The duration of interviews ranged from three hours to eight hours altogether. Using a qualitative research method allowed us to capture subtleties, contradictions, and meanings that surfaced during the interviews. We used the grounded theory approach as an inductive means

of data analysis, deriving analytic categories from the interview data as we coded it. The *Atlas.ti 5.2* software program was used to facilitate coding and analysis process.

## FINDINGS

As a result of data analyses common trends emerged as to the main challenges facing single mothers. These include (i) maintaining authority in the new family setting they formed; (ii) single mother's struggle to keep the sense of a complete family and (iii) handling negative attitudes to single mothers and to children from mother-only families.

### Maintaining Authority in the "Family"

An important aspect encapsulated in parenting experience of the women interviewed for this study was maintaining the parental authority that two-parent families had. The participants provided mixed feeling in regard to maintaining authority; while some participants were simply enjoying full control over their children and stated it as "the single positive consequence of divorce", other participants acknowledged that even if the nonresident fathers were physically absent still it is important that they be psychologically present to provide an authority figure and be involved in parenting process.

In traditional Turkish family system fathers are expected to be stern and distant, they are authority figures and primary disciplinarians while mothers are expected to be affectionate, warm and patient (Kagitcibasi, 1982; p.,12). In many cases mothers play intermediary role between father and son to protect son from fathers' disciplinary acts (Kiray,1976). In line with this fixed parenting pattern many women in this study stressed authority provided by a father. The following participant for instance remarked on necessity of father's authority for her sons' personal development and overall wellbeing:

They (her two sons) respect me and listen to me but still I don't think that I did establish a fatherly authority at home, I simply

cant do that. This is his job! You know, he has to be disciplining authoritarian father but he never does that. He wants to be well liked so he never rebukes or criticizes them. When he visits them at weekend they just hang around and have fun. I am trying, trying to make him seem like an authority figure in his children's eyes but he is so like letting things go (Macide, Finance Manager).

While this participant is pleased that her ex-husband did not lose contact with his two sons at all and very committed to his visitation schedule as well as taking care of them when they are in need, she nevertheless felt ambiguity regarding the parenting role he should be playing. Since despite his presence there is lack of agency for authority and discipline vitally essential for a "proper" family system. Boundary ambiguity regarding role and task a family member should be playing has a lot to do with social norms and expectations as well as individual interpretation (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). In this juncture, the father in this case does not conform to a socially expected father figure in Turkish setting who is supposed to be somewhat distant and serious. Therefore, for the participant, he is missing in action since "the definition of fathering is not only taking them out and have fun together". Her annoyance is all the more aggravated because she no longer attempts to craft a grave father figure for her sons, for they are grown enough to realize that "he is not like a father", her account indicates this clearly:

Every now and then I am telling my sons to be respectful to their fathers. The other day I was eavesdropping their (her son and her ex) telephone conversation and my son was talking like he is talking to one of his friends. The moment he hung up, I could not help stepping in, I told him that he can't talk with his dad like that, this is the case for my younger son specifically. I don't want them to lose respect for their father.

A more common solution to father's absence is making him present as much as possible. One third of the participants acknowledged that the visitation schedule being fulfilled is

of great importance and that whenever the father takes it slow they interfere and prompt their ex-husband to keep up with their visitations.

If it happens that he forgets to take his daughter for the weekend,

I am raising a firestorm over it! (laughs) (Evren, Lawyer).

To make sure her ex-husband subscribed to his visitation schedule; one of the participants (Perihan, Public Relations Expert) gave the legal custody of two children voluntarily to their father despite the fact that the children continued living with her “so he (ex-husband) feels himself responsible for his own kids”. With the same concern in her mind another participant (Sevda, Sales agent) encouraged her 13-year-old son to stay with his father for a while and even register for a school in his neighborhood, which to her was immense sacrifice given the custody battle she undertook for 2 years after the divorce. Two other participants emphasized the necessity of father’s authority in the family. However, unlike Macide who was trying to reinforce the present father’s authority, these two participants were trying to master a new parenting role of authoritarian father themselves by “being both father and a mother to her children” (Mehtap, Administrative Assistant). A potential sense of ambiguity arises in this very context since while trying to be a father, the mothers may dilute their socially expected mothering qualities in the mean time, as is implied in the account of the following participant:

If you are a single mother then you have to be authoritarian, you cannot be a loving compassionate mother, because being a compassionate mother is being open to manipulation. A father has authority and disciplining power over his children, whereas a mother usually is lenient. In our house there is no one to act like a father to tell them that they should listen to their mother, do their homework, keep their rooms tidy, etc., so then, you have to do that, you have to be both. While being tender on one hand, you should stand firm like a rock on the other hand. If you always behave like a compassionate resilient mother, then they may not take you seriously (Ayse, Project Manager).

In the case of this participant the sense of loss was associated with father's bad role modeling. This participant who identifies herself as a devout person expected that a father authority is necessary to make sure children are serious, religious and respectful. To her, however, her ex-husband was far from establishing this order at home in fact, to her, he was ruining the discipline she desires her children to acquire in the family. This was one of the reasons for her to give the decision to divorce and chose hard way toward parenting by being both a father and mother for her two children, which to her was for the best interest of the children. By way of contrast, in this particular context, father's absence turned out as a positive thing for the wellbeing of children:

I consider myself as a faithful person and I want my children to be faithful too, I want them to know and practice some important religious rituals in proper ways, with him (her ex husband) fulfilling this was almost impossible, because he was like very much on his own most of the time, indifferent to children and so insensitive toward religious issues, for example, when the ezan (call to prayer) was chanted I was telling my kids that "Ok kids the imam is citing call to prayer, listen to him respectfully" but he was mocking and telling them that the imam is crying! You see? It is like you have silly putty in your hands; you try to give a shape and he spoils it.

As noted before the family member's perception of the boundary change plays role in how roles are identified and organized and this process is influenced by socioeconomic, cultural and religious context. In this vein, the societal expectations as to being a father was echoed by children who actually experience the boundary change in the family. One participant whose ex-husband lost all contact with her and her son after the divorce related how she and her son experienced disappointment and feeling of loss during the years she was single mother with no emotional or material support from anyone. After her remarriage, however, though the inclusion of new father in the family brought an initial ambiguity for the son, as time elapsed with the step father fulfilling traditionally expected parenting role and even establishing a friendly bond with the step son, the role

ambiguity decreased and turned into clearer role alignments and restructuring in the family. Perhaps surprisingly, the stepson later appealed to the court to change his last name to stepfathers, which demonstrates the level of stability after an initial ambiguity. Definitively, changing to surname to stepfathers was a symbolic gesture to appreciate, rather reciprocate stepfather's parenting effort to perform parenting role and close out the absence of father the son experienced. On the other hand taking on stepfather's surname is quite telling in terms of the societal construct of father and father-son relationship. While a mother son relationship is valuable, a father son relationship framed with loyalty and respect for authority is more important in Turkish setting (see Kagitcibasi, 1982). Moreover since the lineage and the surname are continued through male members of the family, in many ways, a son's rejection of a father's surname stands as social sanction for the original father.

Importantly, in seeking authority figures or pushing the existing fathers to be more authoritative through many ways noted above, these women were solidifying the psychological fathers' presence. By so doing they in a way were trying to "perform families" (Sarkisian, 2006), and cultural expectations play great role in shaping their minds. Namely, although these women chose an unconventional behavior by getting divorced and forming a single parent family structure, they nevertheless were trying to rebuild their families along the lines of traditional gender roles. In doing this they in a way were trying to "fit in" the existing family pattern in Turkish setting, which is in line with what Boss states in the following:

Psychological family in a person's mind and its degree of congruence with the collective family perception is important for healing after loss than the family listed in the census taker's notebook (2004; p., 553).

### The role of grandparent caregiver

Closing out father's absence after divorce was "the hardest strain" the single mothers in this study faced. When the "psychological presence" (Boss, 1977) of nonresident fathers does not yield an authority figure in the family, grandparents stepped in. As well

grandmothers, indeed in some instances (e.g. Isik-Assistant Professor; Ayse-Project Manager) much more than grandfathers, were allowed to play the role of an additional authority figure in the family. They were both substitute authority figures and potential source of childcare help the mothers rely on without any reservation while they were at work. Note that in Turkish culture relying on grandparent for child care is prevalent for two parent families as well, however, as these women's' accounts indicate grandparents in this specific context does not solely act as support for childcare, they also function as substitute authority figure, acting as compensation for the absence of fathers in these newly formed families. Moreover, in this study grandfathers substitute not only the missing parent but also an adult male figure in general that prevent the child from "spending all her time with her mother" (Fulya, Training Manager) in the family. Many of the women interviewed (N=6) tended to accord this role to their own fathers. The following participant evince this tendency:

While she is playing with her friends in the playground her friends' mothers sometimes use this "wait until your father comes" phrase when she hears these things I am just looking at her to see how she is taking it. She does not show an intense reaction, hope she is handling it. But we have grandfather at home the most important thing is to provide a male authority figure, she is spending time with grandfather sometimes with her uncle, I guess we are handling it, I mean so far we are fine (Emine, Quality Manager)

Another participant (Fulya) underscored her father's presence as vitally important substitute and called him as "life saver". Since her ex-husband was both physically and psychologically absent for he left the country after divorce and never saw the daughter for five years. To the participant he was "no different than a dead father". Interestingly, this participant also referred to her male friends and colleagues as proper male figures she needs her daughter to see as examples. For this purpose she told us that she was meeting with her male friends after work or trying to join mixed gathering as often as possible. In fact she reported that she was even inviting her male colleagues over to her apartment so



that her daughter socialize with them as well, even though it is not socially acceptable in Turkish society for a single woman to organize mixed gatherings in her house.

It is important to note that even though these women resort to their parents to close out the loss of father in their families, they do not in effect wanted the father figures in their children's lives be replaced completely by their own parents or friends. The vast majority of the participants, instead, preferred to make nonresident father present in their children's lives as much as possible and exhibit their preferences for the fathers authority provided by the father himself. They may have ceded the parental authority to their parents or may have crafted father images in their newly formed families, yet, they were insistent to believe that grandparents cannot supersede a father's place. The following participants account indicate this:

We have our grandfather and uncle, it worked out well we lived together for four years, it was a big advantage, OK they can never replace a father, but after all there is no father in place and you need to establish an authority at home (Macide, Finance Manager).

### Regaining the Authority: Drawing Boundaries

Importantly, however, performing families through developing several strategies is not fulfilled without any difficulty or challenge. For example, close to one third of the participants presented conflicted feelings regarding ceding parental authority to their parents and emphasized the risk of losing their motherly authority in the process. The tension particularly rested with grandmothers' over involvement in children's lives. Grandmothers in particular trespassing the limits and enacting mother role emerged as source of strain for these women. Therefore the participants were experiencing ambivalence as to the degree to which they should allow their parents to assume the parenting practice for their children. The story of one participant (Tulay, Instructor) who could not manage to handle childcare and work at the same time right after divorce and had to send her daughter to her mother, who was in Northern Cyprus for three years was

a case in point. Although she tried to be present in her daughter's lives and continued commuting between Istanbul and Northern Cyprus every month for three years, she had hard times reestablishing her authority and mother-daughter bond with her daughter. During the interview she reiterated her unhappiness stemming from her daughter's over attachment to her grandmother much more than herself:

She was away from me until she turned 3. We spent the next two years by getting to know each other. She was trying to know me and I was getting to know her because you don't have anything in common, it is like you grabbed a kid from somewhere else and tried to get used to her. Actually being a biological mother does not matter, I was visiting her, she used to know me as a mother but I guess the mother-daughter interaction is different thing. We didn't use to have that during all those times.

Thanks to her mother's help Tulay was able to pull together financially after an unexpected divorce, despite this "incredibly important help", however, Tulay regrets not having thought about drawing boundaries around the relationship between her mother and her daughter by circumscribing her parental role she had to cede to her mother. As she related, due to her daughter's attachment to her mother, her relationship to her daughter has always been overshadowed by her mother's presence and that she could not form a real mother-daughter bond even after ten years from their three-years of separation. As she illustrates:

For instance even now, my mother always comes first in her life, whenever we have a dispute she says "I am gonna go to my grandma". Could it have been any different? I don't know. Of course it is not that we have very severe problems but you manage to build a mother-daughter relation only after she turns 5-6. But it is too late.

As her account indicates Tulay's resentment results also from the fact that her very situation does not fit in the conventional expectation of a mother as such. In Turkish

culture motherhood is an idealized concept, namely, mothers are expected to be there for their children under all circumstances and mothers' making sacrifices on behalf of their children is quite a mundane thing. For the most part, not getting divorced despite a conflicting or unsatisfactory marriage for the sake of children, quitting job, letting go of a career until a child grows up, etc., constitute some of these common sacrifices women usually make. Tulay's divorce on the ground of dissatisfaction from her marriage and sending her daughter to far away for care run contrary to cultural construction of motherhood in Turkish setting. Therefore, the task ahead of her is not only trying to fit in conventional family pattern but to fit in socially acceptable motherhood examples as well. Her attempts to justify the reasons why she couldn't mother her daughter like many other Turkish mothers do indicated the guilt she feels for not conforming to the common pattern, she said:

I couldn't make, I simply couldn't make it and I "had to"(emphasis mine) send her to Northern Cyprus, it was very difficult for me too, I had to live missing her, but what happened was that I was able to build a new life for me and for her, if I hadn't done that it wouldn't have been that easy, I wouldn't have recovered. This was for the best interest of her too.

The issue of discipline and control were another point of tension that mothers and grandmothers disputed over. Another participant (Esra, Lawyer) who was living with her mother at the time of our interview presented the strain she felt due to her mother's domineering behaviors and interference her way of raising her son and even rebuking her "in front of her son". A third participant (Ayse, Project Manager), on the other hand, focused more on the socioeconomic gap between herself and her parents and articulated that many of conflict between her mother and herself emanates from this gap.

I am very different from my parents, many of my friends also say this, this began once I started at university and then I went abroad for graduate study and gap is widened all the more, we have different mindset, different attitudes to events, they cannot even speak a good Turkish.

This participant reiterated her gratefulness to her parents for taking care of her two kids while she was at work, since otherwise she would have had to depend on some child minders whom she could not trust at all. However the fact that her parents were uneducated and overly traditional was not helping her to raise her kids as “faithful, educated and open minded individuals”. This very thought was creating boundary ambiguity regarding to what extend her parents should be in and to what extend they should assume a parental role for her children, which made her think about drawing some limit around the relationship formed between her kids and her parents.

### Keeping the sense of a real family:

“We are no different from them”

While loss or an addition of family member affect whole family, struggling to clarify boundaries and devising strategies to adapt to the systematic change, namely performing boundary maintenance is a critical task needed for refunction of the family (Boss, 1980a). Close to one third of the women interviewed for this study exhibited behaviors like trying to minimize differences from two parent families. By so doing they in away were helping to reduce the ambiguity experienced and maintain the function of their newly formed families.

One interesting strategy to make a single mother family seem like a normal functioning family was crafting a father image. This was particularly case for two participants. When fathers do not fulfill their parenting role by simply not conforming to the visitation schedule or staying out of the picture completely the mothers pretended that they actually were fathering their children. One participant (Tulay, Instructor), interestingly, stated that when the father in question did not call for a long while, she was telling her daughter that her father called and sent her love. Again at times she was buying presents herself and telling that this was from her father. For another participant (Fulya, Training Manager) acting like a father was much more difficult since the father in this case left the country after divorce and didn't ever see the daughter for five years:

In most of the cases that I happen to see in my surround the fathers are there, I mean in one way or another. They see their children once a week or every fortnight, or may be once in a month but my daughter's father does not exist at all. It is like death you know If he died, it would be easier to accept, now she is living with a question, 'when does my father come, will he come or not?'

Withstanding her daughter's trauma stemming from missing her father, this participant vacillated between demonizing and eulogizing the father for a while, and with the encouragement of her therapist she finally crafted a very loving and caring father to make her daughter experience the feeling of having a caring father:

I created a father figure for her and my daughter loves her father even if he does not exist and she does know him at all... I just wanted her to have a father, make sentences beginning with "my father is.."

Moreover, in order to protect their children from feeling marginal or excluded and make them feel that they are as "normal" and happy as other children from intact families; these participants were resorting to different ways. Interestingly, they both reported that they used TV shows that issued single parent families to show their children that there are indeed such families that are like them too:

You know the movie Finding Nemo? That movie really saved my life. She was around 2, and she used to be influenced by the movie a lot. I don't know if she understood or not but she was crying while watching, I told her that Nemo did not have a mother, and it was living with its father, just like her living with me a without father. I just told that "Some children have fathers with them but they don't have their mothers and some children have their mothers but they don't have their fathers. What is worst is that some children do not have any of them, so you are lucky

that I am here with you and I love you". So Finding Nemo became our lifesaver.

Another participant (Tulay) encouraged her 10-year-old daughter to follow one popular TV show [*Two Families*] that issued adventures of two single parent families. She wanted her to understand that "parents may get divorced, live as a single parent and move on with their lives happily without the presence of the other parent".

As one would expect, the hardest strain facing single mothers was finding ways to alleviate the feeling of loss. One participant summed up the views of many:

*It (the distress) was so severe. No matter how strong you are, no matter how hard you try to withstand challenges, trying to make them not feel it was really exhausting. That was the most difficult thing I went through (Perihan, Public Relations Expert).*

## Negative societal attitudes to single mothers and to their children

Importantly, the biggest challenge facing these women in establishing their families as normal families as other two parent families is lack of social recognition. As Boss (1999) states there are no social rituals for clarifying the loss due to a divorce, in this juncture, single parent families being outside of socially recognized family pattern contributes to the level of ambiguity they experience. The women interviewed stressed expressly the negative conception of single motherhood in society and were bitter about the fact that the very phenomenon is renounced, which makes it hard for them to integrate into the society. It is important to note that negative attitudes to single motherhood and to children from these families are related to a great extent to negative view of divorce in society. In Turkish society there is a certain proclivity to hold women responsible for a failing marriage. Upon divorce, women are blamed for not keeping up the marriage and for causing moral decay in society. Therefore, in a society where divorce is not very common, and attitudes toward divorce are not easily distilled, negative view of single motherhood specifically formed due to divorce should not come as surprise. All the women interviewed in this study

presented their distress upon negative attitudes particularly towards their children and they all had specific experiences regarding people's verbal or behavioral approach to themselves or to their children:

Most of the time I see on the news, when someone dies out of overdose of drug or something, if his or her parents are divorced, they write "the person from a broken family died out of overdose of heroine" It is unfair to emphasize on that ground why do you just look at his family background and hold him guilty? Of course it is not good to divorce, I wish no body could divorce, but life does not always turn out the way you plan! (Deniz, Marketing Assistant).

Some participants made it clear that the monolithic definition of the family is marginalizing single mothers families, and they further stress the need for diverse forms of families to be recognized by the population at large. One participant, in particular, stressed how the monolithic definition of the family in books, schools and media is upsetting for people who are actually experiencing it:

In schools they teach a certain image of family, which is made up of a father, a mother, and a child. Of course that is one image, but they should also teach alternative family structures like single parent families, families with father-child or mother-child only. I mean, at least sometimes they should give examples of single-parent families. (Filiz, Sales Executive)

Interestingly, some of the women interviewed were defensive about single parenting, for example, juxtaposing it with unhappy intact families. This in a way was challenging the notion of the existing "the proper family":

As a matter of fact there are numbers of families that are legally intact but in reality shattered inside. Seeing such families makes us realize that maybe we [single mothers] are in a better condition because you cannot provide a secure and peaceful upbringing to the child in a

family with frequently quarreling parents... After all, you never know what is happening behind closed doors (Fulya, Training Manager).

## **DISCUSSION**

Increase in single parent families in Turkey has brought to the attention the shortage of research with theoretical explanation. To fill this gap the current study employed concept of family boundary ambiguity to increase the knowledge of the current condition of single mother family structure in Turkey. Using narrative accounts of 24 divorced single mothers interviewed over two years, this study focused on the experience of single motherhood and the level of boundary ambiguity surrounding these families in a setting where women's living alone without husband is not socially acceptable.

As the past research (e.g., Carrol, et al., 2007; Boss, 1999) indicates single parent families are more likely to be subject to boundary ambiguity since many changes occur in spousal relationship in the wake of divorce and family roles are needed to be renegotiated, the current study lend support to the prior research since the single mother families in this study face wide array of ambiguous circumstances. One of the most important issues frequently surfaced during our talks to single mothers in this study is the ambiguity related to who will restore the paternal authority, in these newly formed families. In a context where parental involvement and control is prevalent and the children obedience is a norm, father's authority emerges as a vitally essential attribute of a proper family. The women in this study were highly solicitous to restore this authority in their families yet they were ambiguous as to who exactly would exercise this highly important task. There was a large degree of consensus among these women that father's authority be provided by the father himself since this is more in line with the existing family system. However, when fathers fell short of fulfilling this important duty the mothers either resorted to their parents or crafted a very positive and authoritarian father image for their children to close out the missing role in the family. In many ways, it is proper to analyze this attitude as an attempt to fit in the existing family ideology through "performing family"(Sarkisian, 2006).



It appeared that the mothers in this study were noticeably committed to establishing traditional gender norms; it might be the case that many two-parent families as well might be violating traditional gender norms. That is, with more women's having access to employment; fathers may take over some of the care giving and be less authoritative whereas mothers can be relatively distant. Yet these women with a feeling to compensate for the violation of one norm (forming a single parent family by getting divorced) were conspicuously conforming to other gendered norms (e.g. trying to establish a paternal authority). As can be recalled from Macide's account, father's maintaining an image of a stern, distant and charismatic stature in their children's mind was immensely important:

He was threatening me to take my younger son from me, one day he came and literally grapped my son from my arms, while he was running he fell on the stairs, it happened in front of my elder son, it was so degrading on his part.

The ambiguity as regards consigning the role of paternal authority does not come to an end with incorporating grandparents to compensate the absence. As much as they emphasized the paternal authority, the women interviewed for this study also underscored exercising their own motherly authority over their children. Since the contours of parenting is not crystal clear, some of the mothers revealed concerns about children's over attachment to their grandparents emanating from grandmothers' enacting the role of the mother. Tulay's regret over leaving her daughter to her mother for three years and the emotional bonding she could not build- unlike her mother- between herself and her daughter in the wake of this experience expressly sumps us the level of strain. In short, the mothers in this study intensively faced with the dilemma of sharing parenting with their own parents and at the same time drawing limits around the relationship between their parents and their children.

Moreover, as the theory suggests the relation between the collective family perception and a family that exists in a person's mind is a significant factor impacting the healing process (Boss, 1999, 2004). In this vein, how the family members respond to being dissimilar to two parent families that are prevalent in the society constitutes a potential

site for ambiguity as regards what a family and how it should be. The mothers in this study had immense effort to prevent their children from feeling of marginality encapsulated by their sense of being different. They devised several strategies to make them feel that they are as normal and happy as other families out there, the strategies devised ranged from crafting a very positive, communicating father who buys gift to using TV shows that illustrate single parent families. These were to serve to mediate the feeling of falling off the edge of the mainstream.

As well, lack of social recognition of single parenting in Turkish setting was equally straining for these mothers. As the quotations reveal, negative approaches to the degree of stigma attached both to single mothers and children from single parent homes, which not only increased women's distress as they do not want their children to face this social pressures and exclusion, it also contributed to ambiguity regarding what a family and how it should be. As mentioned before, as is the case in many cultural setting, in Turkish context too, breaking the bond of marriage a man can start anew, he can be treated as a single person, however, a women after divorce is conceived as a 'divorced women' specifically if she is a mother, a certain dignity is expected from her. So after divorce two socially unrecognized identities were adhered to women, 'divorced woman' and 'single parent'. As expected withstanding these social pressures requires coping strategies, though the strategies only partially mediate the distress.

It is important to note that the strategies these women created aimed to facilitate their conformity to the society and is a sign of acquiescence in the final analysis. To put it in another way, the women in this study chose an untraditional path by not returning to their parental home after the divorce as is socially expected and instead they set up their own households alone. So one can expect that they maintain this assertive behavior by challenging the norms and conventional family behaviors, however, as the narratives indicate the single mothers in this study seek out ways to coalesce into existing family system in Turkish setting. In fact, as stated earlier in an attempt to compensate absent role models in their families they conspicuously attempt to restore traditional gender roles.

Finally, with increasing divorce rate, various forms of family formation patterns are emerging leading to a corresponding increase in frequency of boundary ambiguity;

however, the shortage of data and research attention has made it difficult to document many of the dimensions of single mother families living in Turkey. The current study, thus, aims to fill this gap by providing a starting point for subsequent research as well as implications to create policies to help change many of the negative circumstances that are facing these women. While the current study is trying to provide new evidence from a nonwestern setting, it does not fully account for many other dimensions, therefore, more research both qualitative and quantitative in nature is needed to comprehend various aspects of this phenomenon.

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