PERCEPTIONS OF BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY AND PARENTIFICATION EFFECTS ON
FAMILY SATISFACTION, FAMILY SUPPORT, AND PERCEIVED STRESS IN YOUNG
ADULTS OF DIVORCED FAMILIES

by

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Abstract

Using a sample of 109 students at a Midwestern university with divorced or separated parents I explored a) how sibling order and young adults' age at parental divorce or separation impacted their experience of boundary ambiguity, parentification, stress, and family satisfaction and support, b) whether parentification mediated the effects of boundary ambiguity on stress, family support and family satisfaction, and c) whether sibling order moderated the relationship between these variables. I found that the child's age at parental divorce/separation was positively correlated with boundary ambiguity, and negatively correlated with parentification, stress, family satisfaction, and social support. First or only children reported higher rates of parentification, specifically taking on a spousal role with their parents than younger siblings. Further, in divorced/separated families boundary ambiguity was positively related to young adults' stress and negatively related to their levels of family satisfaction and family support both directly and indirectly through parentification. However, sibling order was not found to moderate the relationships between boundary ambiguity, parentification, family support, family satisfaction, and stress. Implications for theory and intervention are discussed.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

It is estimated that half of the current marriages will end in divorce (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). In 2013 alone, approximately 19 out of 1,000 marriages ended in divorce according to the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (Payne, 2014), accounting for approximately 11% of adults over the age of 15 experiencing a divorce or separation that year (U.S. Census Bureau). Also, 18.1% of the men and 40.1% of the women who became divorced within the past year had a child under the age of 18 living in the household. Unfortunately, it has been found that children of divorce are not as emotionally and socially well-adjusted as those with married parents (Rosenburg & Gultman, 2001). For example, adolescents who have experienced a parental divorce demonstrate less self-control, and higher aggression, anger, and hostility than those with married parents (Hamama & Ronen-Shenhav, 2012).

Minuchin and Fishman (1981) argued that a hierarchical structure with appropriate family relationships is important to help create a sense of belonging and to help each individual grow. Divorce or separation may cause the family to enter a crisis as their structure is reorganized (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Sometimes the break in the spousal subsystem also causes a break in the parental subsystem and leads to boundaries becoming unclear between children and parents (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Boundary ambiguity in families is related to poorer long- and short-term adjustment in children, including lower self-control (Hamama & Ronen-Shenhav, 2012), greater relational depression and anxiety, and lower relational esteem (i.e., a more negative outlook on their ability to be in a serious relationship; Perrin, Ehrenberg, & Hunter, 2013). Sometimes this lack of clear boundaries between children and parents leads to an older, first born, or only child moving up within the hierarchy to the same level as the parents (termed parentification; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). These parentified children are more likely

to demonstrate negative adjustment compared to children who are not parentified (i.e., developmental problems and psychological symptoms; Noble-Carr, 2002; Koerner, Jacobs, & Raymond, 2000; Perrin et al., 2013; Shaffer & Egeland, 2011). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the associations of boundary ambiguity with parentification on young adults' family relationship satisfaction, family support, and perceived stress, while controlling for their age at parental separation or divorce and sibling order.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

When families go through a divorce, children may find the balance of their family in upheaval and become confused about who is in the family and who is in charge. It has been found that children of divorce are significantly less likely to perceive their families as hierarchical (30.9%) compared to children with married parents (45.3%; Rosenburg & Guttman, 2001). According to Minuchin's structural family theory (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), if boundaries are unclear, children may not feel safe or secure in the family system. This is very important for younger children because security and predictability help them feel safe to explore and grow (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Older children are more equipped to handle more power in the family hierarchy, but according to structural family theory, this power should still be regulated by the parents (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Divorce shifts the structure of families, potentially leading to boundary ambiguity between parents and children, which may result in children experiencing feelings of being "caught" between their parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Perrin, et al., 2013).

According to Minuchin and Fishman (1981), when a break happens within the spousal subsystem through divorce, there can also be a break in the parental subsystem. Diffusion of boundaries between the parental subsystem and the sibling subsystem can result in children gaining power and moving higher in the family hierarchy, potentially getting to the point where a child is at a level equal to or above the parents (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981). Parentification often involves the child taking on responsibilities that are typically left to parents and can be damaging when those responsibilities are not developmentally appropriate and the environment is not secure (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981). This may lead to higher stress, lower satisfaction in the family, and a lack of familial support (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981). Within these families,

the age of the child and their place in sibling order at the time or parental separation or divorce may have an effect on their experiences of boundary ambiguity and parentification. First and only children have been found to be the children most turned to by parents for emotional support following a divorce (Hetherington, 1999).

Boundary Ambiguity

It appears that little is known about the effects of boundary ambiguity on children of divorce. This may be due to the difficulty in defining boundary ambiguity because of its close connection with other constructs such as enmeshment and parentification. Additionally, boundary ambiguity may manifest in different ways within families (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). When a divorce or separation occurs the children may become confused about what their relationships with each parent should look like and may begin to feel caught in the middle (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). For example, a child may be concerned about fairly sharing their time with both parents, may feel like a go-between for their parents, or may experience anxiety thinking about their parents both being at a function together. This can have negative effects on a child's security within these relationships leading to a decrease in family satisfaction (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Children may also become involved in parental conflicts, which has been associated with deterioration in the quality of relationships between the parents and child (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Fosco & Grych, 2010). Children in this role may also feel a lack of support from their family as they are now unsure of their role in their family and with each parent. In this study, boundary ambiguity is explored from the perspective of the young adult child in regards to their concerns about their relationship with each parent, their concern for the relationship between their parents, confusion about the family structure, and feeling caught between their parents.

Parentification

Parents and children may be unsure of what the family system should look like after a divorce, which can lead to the child taking on more parental and spousal responsibilities, possibly increasing the stress experienced by the child (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Boss & Greenberg, 1984). In some cases, alliances and coalitions (e.g., father and son join together against mother) may be formed (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Perrin et al., 2013) with the child becoming one or both parents' confidant (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007). When parentification occurs, a child may notice an increase in power within the family system such as being involved with decision making and being privy to adult issues such as financial and relational struggles. The child's opinion can become an important part of decision making for the parent. This parentification may occur in both divorced and married families. It has been found that approximately 10% of children, both with married and divorced parents, see themselves as parentified (Rosenburg & Gullman, 2001). Although parentification occurs in many family structures, feeling caught in between parents has been found to occur more with children of divorced parents than those with married parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Children with divorced parents are twice as likely to report instances of instrumental (e.g., taking care of siblings, taking care of the household, providing income) and emotional caregiving (e.g., becoming parents confident, regulating conflict between parents), which are both seen as more destructive forms of parentification, than children with married parents (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001).

Parentification can cause a child to become more adult-like in their behavior (i.e., controlling and directing others) and express a more limited range of emotions (Johnston, 1990). These behaviors may affect the support parentified children receive from their family. Parents

may believe that children who are displaying adult behaviors and limiting their expression of distress to reduce burden on the family system do not need additional support. Additionally, as the parentified child is now filling a parental versus sibling role, siblings may see the parentified child as less approachable, limiting their ability to support their sibling. Accordingly, parentified children are more apt to see their family setting as unfair (Jurkovic, et al., 2001) and to experience psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and stress due to the child feeling unable to handle the needs and expectations of their parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Koerner, et al., 2000; Shaffer & Egeland, 2011). Parentified children also display poorer social skills and greater feelings of isolation due to their responsibilities in the home than non-parentified children, preventing them from spending time and receiving social support from peers (Noble-Carr, 2002; Stainton, & Marshall, 2009).

Age at Divorce or Separation and Birth Order

How families and children experience and adapt to the structural upheaval of divorce may differ by the age of the children at the time of the divorce. According to structural family theory (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), as children become older, typically during adolescence, they increase their individuality and autonomy. As this process occurs, the child's power will grow and they may move higher in the hierarchical system (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Accordingly, older children in the family may be more apt to experience parentification due to their higher hierarchical status in the family at the time of the divorce.

Very few researchers have examined how a child's age or birth order within the sibling subsystem may impact their experience of boundary ambiguity and parentification. In some families, especially larger ones, it is not uncommon for one of the children, typically an older child, to become a "helper" to one or both of the parents (Minuchin, Nichols, & Lee, 2007). The

"helper" may take on greater parental responsibility and assist in tasks such as taking care of their siblings, helping the parent make decisions, and supporting the parent through personal struggles. When a stress or crises, such as divorce or separation, occurs, the weight of taking care of the family may fall more fully onto the shoulders of the "helper" (Minuchin, et al., 2007).

First children are more apt to take charge, strive for perfection, and to look for recognition compared to younger siblings and only children (Gfroerer, Gfroerer, Curlette, White, & Kern, 2003). The first children are also more likely to report having good relationships with their younger siblings which may lead them to feeling that they need to care for them (Pollet & Nettle, 2009). When divorce occurs parents may see the first child as more able to handle situations and provide for the needs of the parent and other family members. This may lead to boundary ambiguity and parentification. On the other hand, only children are found to be more cautious, have a higher sense of entitlement, and are less likely to go along with other people especially a group of peers, which is more similar to middle and youngest child experiences (Gfroerer et al., 2003). Although these traits are quite different from the first child, only children may be more apt to experience boundary ambiguity or parentification because of a parent reaching for the only support available in the new family system.

Family Satisfaction, Family Support, and Stress

Family satisfaction encompasses a person's satisfaction with family life in general and in their relationships with parents and siblings. Even with children of married parents, children who feel they are caught in between parents and in charge of "improving" their parents' disputes report having higher avoidance and dissatisfaction in their relationships with their parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Children of divorced families, though, report even less satisfaction with their relationships with their parents than children with married parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). They

also report higher levels of avoidance in discussing relationship or family issues with their parents and lower levels of closeness with their parents than children of married parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Some children of divorce viewed their parents as selfish or view them in a more critical light than they did before the divorce (Cartwright, 2006). Other children report that conflict between their divorced parents has had a negative effect on their own relationship with their parents (Cartwright, 2006). Children who have experienced a parental divorce may also feel that they have lost their family and wish to have a "normal" family (Cartwright, 2006).

Both boundary ambiguity and parentification may result in a child feeling unsure that they can count on their family for support. A parentified child's movement out of the sibling subsystem may result in the "helper" losing a support system from the siblings (Fishman, 1993). Not only are sibling subsystems a place of support, but they provide a safe place for children to develop autonomy and make mistakes as they explore (Minuchin, 1974). The siblings who are not "helpers" may also struggle not only because they lose support from their sibling, but because they also may experience more difficulty connecting with and feeling support from their parents due to less access to them (Fishman, 1993). Based on Minuchin's structural family theory, it would be anticipated that if a child is taking on a parentified role the parent may not believe that the child is in need of the support or they may not be in a state to give the child support. Also, siblings may not be able to give the parentified child support because they do not have the resources or understand that their sibling may need additional support because of their developmental status.

All of these changes are likely to cause stress in family members as they attempt to adapt to a morphing family structure that is reduced only when the individual is able to clearly identify the boundaries within the family. Without these clear boundaries, the integrity of the family is

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threatened causing the family and individual stress to increase or be sustained over time (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Minuchin, 1974). Additionally, parentification may cause prolonged stress due to the child taking on a role that is not developmentally or structurally appropriate (i.e., helping the parent to make adult decisions, being a parent's confidant; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

The Present Study

This study aims to explore the experience of boundary ambiguity and parentification of young adults who are attending college and have divorced or separated parents. I hypothesize that children who were older at the time of their parents' divorce/separation will experience higher rates of boundary ambiguity, parentification and stress and lower rates of family satisfaction and support. In addition, I hypothesize that first and only children will experience higher rates of boundary ambiguity, parentification, and stress and lower rates of family satisfaction and support compared to younger siblings. In this study, I would also like to explore two additional questions. Does parentification mediate the association of boundary ambiguity with perceived stress, family support, and family satisfaction (controlling for sibling order, age at divorce/separation, race, sex, # of siblings, & social support) for young adult children of divorce or separation? See Figure 1.1 for a visual representation of the hypothesized model and direction of specific effects. Also, does sibling order moderate the relationship between the variables in the model? By exploring this we will begin to understand more about the effects of boundary ambiguity and parentification on young adult children of divorce.
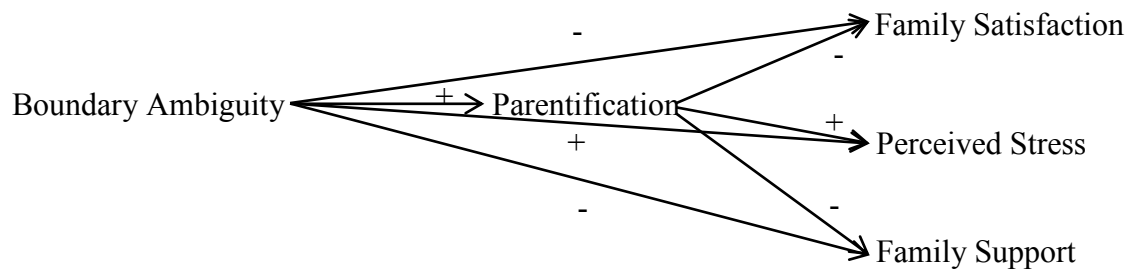
Figure 2.1 Hypothesized Model

Chapter 3 - Methods

Procedure and Participants

The data for this study were drawn from a larger study on young adult relationships at a large Midwestern university. Students in an introductory Human Development class and upper level Sociology classes were given multiple options for class credit, including participation in the larger study. Students who chose to participate were provided a link to an online survey at three different points during the semester: Week 2 (Wave 1), Week 8 (Wave 2), and Week 14 (Wave 3). Students had one week to complete and submit the online survey. For the current study, data was collected during Week 8 (Wave 2) of the Spring, 2015 semester.

While completing the survey all students were asked "Please select the option that best describes your biological parent's situation:" and were able to choose from my parents are married, my parents are divorced, one of my parents are deceased, my parents never married, my parents are going through a trial separation, or other and given a space to specify. Out of 541 students who completed the survey, 20% ($N = 109$) indicated their parents were divorced and 3 indicated that their parents were separated. These participants were combined to have a total of 112 participants. Three participants were removed due to incomplete data, leaving a final sample of 109 young adults with separated or divorced parents. Of these 109 young adults, approximately 77.1 % were female and 22.9% were male, with the mean age of 19.68 years old. Ethnicity of the participants was 89.0% Caucasian, 6.4% African American, 4.6% Latino, 4.6% Asian, 1.8% Native American/American Indian, and 0.9% Other. (Students were able to select multiple options for ethnicity categories so the total does not equal 100%.) Of the 109 participants, 38 reported being first or only children.

Measures

Boundary Ambiguity

To measure boundary ambiguity, 20-items from the Boundary Ambiguity Scale for adolescent and adult children of divorce were used (Boss, Greenberg, & Pearce-McCall, 1990; see appendix A) covering how children view their relationship with their parents and between their parents. Each statement was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* (1) to *almost always* (5). Example items included: "I worry about whether I am spending enough time with each of my parents," "I feel comfortable talking to my mother in front of my father," and "My parents and I can solve family problems together." The mean for these items was computed such that a higher score corresponded with a higher degree of boundary ambiguity ($\alpha = .83$).

Parentification.

Parentification was measured using two subscales from the Parentification Scale (Mika, Bergner, & Baum, 1987; see appendix A) that asked about the child acting as a spouse to the parent (7 items) and the child parenting the parent (6 items). Participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *never or does not apply* (1) to *very often* (5). Examples of statements from the spousal role items included: "My father shared personal problems or concerns with me as if I were another adult" and "My parents would argue, and I would wind up on the side of one of them." Examples of statements from the parental role items include: "I restored peace if conflicts developed between my parents" and "My parent(s) sought my advice on adult matters." A mean scale score was computed such that a higher value indicates greater parental role ($\alpha = .84$), spousal role ($\alpha = .88$), and total parentification ($\alpha = .93$).

Perceived Stress.

Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1988; see appendix A). It is made up of 10 questions that are rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* (0) to *very often* (4). Some of the questions included on the Perceived Stress Scale were "In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?" and "In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?" A mean scale score was computed such that a higher value indicates greater perceived stress ($\alpha = .87$).

Family Satisfaction.

Family Satisfaction was measured using the Kansas Family Life Satisfaction Scale-Adolescent Version (KFLS; Schumm, Jurich, & Bollman, 1986; see appendix A). The KFLS is made up of four questions including "How satisfied are you with your family life?", "How satisfied are you with your parents' relationship with each other?", "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your parents?", and "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your brothers and/or sisters? (Answer only if you have a sibling)." Each question is answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *extremely dissatisfied* (1) to *extremely satisfied* (7). A mean scale score was computed such that a higher value indicates greater family satisfaction ($\alpha = .79$).

Social Support.

Social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988; see appendix A). The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support is made up of 12 statements that compose three subscales: family, friend, and significant other support. Each statement is rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale

ranging from *very strongly disagree* (1) to *very strongly agree* (7). Examples items from each subscale included: "I can talk about my problems with my family," "I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows," and "There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings." The mean of the items was computed with higher scores indicating greater support. The family support subscale ($\alpha = .94$) was used as an outcome in this study while the friend subscale ($\alpha = .95$) and significant other support subscale ($\alpha = .95$) were used as controls.

Sibling Order and Age at Divorce/Separation

Participants were given a definition of a sibling ("anyone that you see as an important part of your family. This can include full, half, step, adopted, fostered, etc. siblings.") and asked to indicate how many siblings they had. Participants were able to choose 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 or more siblings. Participants were also asked "Where are you in sibling order?" They were able to choose from only, youngest, second youngest, middle, second oldest, oldest, or other and given a space to specify. For analyses, sibling order was recoded as a dichotomous variable indicating the child as first or only child versus not. The first and only children group was made up of 38 participants and the younger sibling group was made up of 66 participants. Five participants did not report where they were in sibling order.

To assess for age at divorce or separation, participants were asked "At what age were you when your parents established separate households during the process of separation/divorce?" Participants were given a space to enter their age in years.

Analysis Plan

I used SPSS to examine normality and missingness in the data and run basic correlations on all the variables; specifically noting whether age at divorce/separation was related to my variables of interest. I then used ANOVAs to test whether sibling order associated with levels of

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boundary ambiguity, parentification, perceived stress, family support, and family satisfaction. Because group sizes were unequal, Welch's *F*-statistic was requested; it adjusts *F* and residual degrees of freedom to be robust when homogeneity of variances is violated (Field, 2005).

The path model (see Figure 1.2) was tested in M*plus* 7.0 using the raw data (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Since the data approximated a normal distribution, missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML). Bootstrapping techniques (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) were used to test the mediating effects of parentification in this model. To determine if the direct effects in the model varied between only/first children and younger siblings, I used cross-group equality constraints which forced the unstandardized parameter estimates to be the same across groups. Because the constrained models are nested within the unconstrained model, a χ^2 difference test was performed to compare the constrained and unconstrained models (Kline, 2011), with a non-significant chi-square value indicating that the parameter may be equal in the populations, or in other words, there would be no significant moderation.
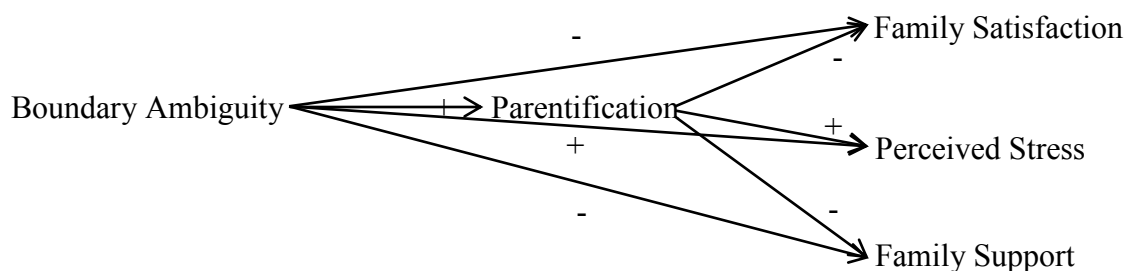

Figure 3.1 Hypothesized Model

Chapter 4 - Results

Correlations

To explore my first hypothesis, I examined how participants' age at which their parents established separate households correlated with their reports of boundary ambiguity, parentification, stress, family satisfaction, and family support (see Table 4.1). As hypothesized, the child's age at which their parents established separate households was positively correlated with boundary ambiguity and negatively correlated with family satisfaction, and family support. Contrary to my hypothesis, participants' age at which their parents established separate households was not correlated with parentification (or either of its subscales). Participants' age at which their parents established separate households was also not correlated with current stress.

I next examined the correlations between the variables in my hypothesized path model. As expected, boundary ambiguity was positively correlated with parentification and negatively correlated with family satisfaction and family support. Parentification and its subscales (spousal role and parental role) were correlated in the expected direction family satisfaction, and family support. Contrary to expectations, parentification was not related to stress. Surprisingly, parentification and spousal role were found to be rated higher for first and only children but parental role was not found to correlate with sibling order.

I next explored how the control variables related to my variables of interest. Significant other support and friend support correlated in the expected direction with each other, boundary ambiguity, family satisfaction, family support, and stress. Females were found to have lower family satisfaction then males. Age at divorce or separation was positively correlated with parentification and the spousal role subscale. The child's age at which their parents separated

Table 4.1 Correlations and Descriptive Statistics (N = 109)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Boundary Ambiguity	–														
2. Family Satisfaction	-.54***	–													
3. Perceived Stress	.29**	-.31**	–												
4. Significant Other Support	-.27**	.36***	.25**	–											
5. Family Support	-.46***	.59***	-.33***	.61***	–										
6. Friend Support	.-31**	.42***	-.38***	.70***	.74***	–									
7. Total Social Support	-.39***	.52***	-.36***	.87***	.89***	.91***	–								
8. Spousal Role-Parentification	.43***	-.34***	.04	-.03	-.22*	-.01	-.10	–							
9. Parental Role-Parentification	.44***	-.28**	.03	-.06	-.25*	-.01	-.12	.85***	–						
10. Parentification	.45***	-.33*	.03	-.04	-.24*	-.01	-.12	.97***	.95***	–					
11. Gender	.09	-.23*	.10	.04	-.07	-.00	-.01	.13	.14	.14	–				
12. Age	-.06	.03	-.08	.01	-.06	-.03	-.03	-.12	-.07	-.10	-.19*	–			
13. Age at Divorce/Separation	.26**	-.22*	-.04	-.10	-.29**	-.14	-.20*	.08	.10	.09	.04	.05	–		
14. Ethnicity	.10	-.13	-.00	-.04	-.00	.03	-.00	.01	.06	.04	.21*	-.08	.11	–	
15. Sibling Order	-.04	-.13	.02	-.01	-.14	-.03	-.07	.25*	.17	.22*	.12	.12	.12	-.02	–
M	2.65	5.09	2.91	5.78	5.67	5.75	5.73	2.42	2.37	2.39	1.77	19.7	8.69	.38	.48
SD	.63	1.31	.64	1.25	1.29	1.15	1.09	.97	.91	.91	.42	1.63	5.39	.38	.48

Note: Gender: 1 = *male*, 2 = *female*. Ethnicity: 0 = *other*, 1 = *white*. Sibling order: 0 = *younger siblings*, 1 = *first/only child*.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .00

or divorced was found to negatively correlate with family satisfaction and family support and was positively correlated with boundary ambiguity. Due to a lack of correlation between age and ethnicity with the variables of interest, age and ethnicity were removed from further analyses.

Characteristics of First/Only Children and Younger Siblings

I next used ANOVAs to explore how being a first or only child (e.g., sibling order) was linked with perceived experiences of boundary ambiguity, parentification, stress, family satisfaction, and family support for young adults with divorced or separated parents. As hypothesized, first and only children reported significantly higher rates of parentification than those who were not the first or only child, $F(1,102) = 5.22$, $p < .05$ (See Table 4.2). First/only children also reported significantly higher rates of taking on a spousal role with their parents compared to who were not the first or only child, $F(1,102) = 6.52$, $p < .05$. However, there were no significant differences between first/only children and younger siblings on experiences of boundary ambiguity, family satisfaction, stress, family support, or parental role.

Table 4.2 Analysis of Variance Results for First/Only Children and Younger Siblings (N = 104)

	First/Only Children (*n* = 38)		Younger Siblings (*n* = 66)			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Boundary Ambiguity	2.63	.55	2.68	.67	.17	.69
Parentification	2.68	.95	2.27	.82	5.22	.02
Parental Role	2.60	.96	2.28	.85	3.05	.08
Spousal Role	2.74	1.02	2.26	.87	6.52	.01
Family Satisfaction	4.83	1.32	5.18	1.29	1.70	.20
Family Support	5.47	1.29	5.83	1.23	2.03	.16
Stress	2.93	.74	2.91	.60	.02	.88

Testing the Proposed Model

I first tested the fit of the path model in Figure 1.2. To conduct a more robust analysis, I modeled the influence of the covariates (gender, age at divorce/separation, sibling order, significant other support, and friend support) on all variables in the model to control for both the direct and indirect effects of the covariates on boundary ambiguity, parentification, family support, family satisfaction, and stress. Participants' gender was not significantly associated with any of the variables of interest in the model and was removed from further analyses. Additional non-significant paths from control variables to the variables of interest were removed for parsimony. This modified model was an excellent fit to the data (Kline, 2010): χ^2 (8) = 6.25, p = .62, CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.03; RMSEA = .00 (90% CI = .00, .10), and SRMR = .03. As expected, boundary ambiguity was positively associated with parentification (controlling for sibling order) and perceived stress (controlling for age at divorce/separation and friend support). See Table 4.2 for path coefficients and Figure 4.1 for a visual representation of the direction of paths between the variables of interest in the final model. Contrary to expectations, parentification was not associated with perceived stress (controlling for age at divorce/separation and friend support). As expected, both boundary ambiguity and parentification were negatively associated with family satisfaction (controlling for age at divorce/separation, sibling order, significant other support, and friend support) and family support (controlling for age at divorce/separation, significant other support, and friend support).
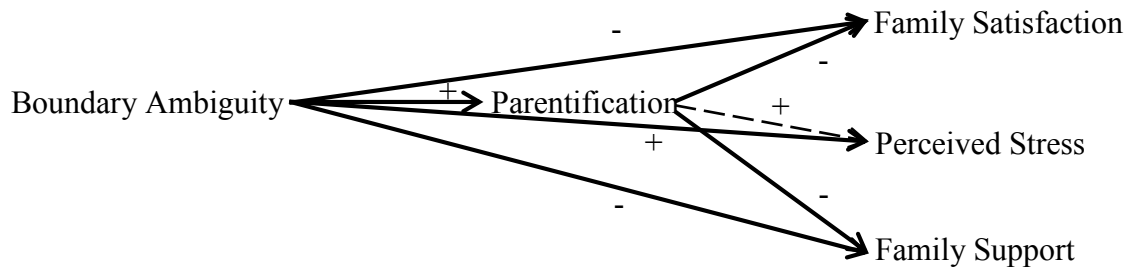
Figure 4.1 Final Model.

Controls variables are not represented in the model for simplicity (See Table 4.2 for path coefficients related to the control variables). Bold lines refer to significant results while dashed lines refer to insignificant results.

Bootstrapped indirect effects were used to test the mediating role of parentification in this model. The indirect effect from boundary ambiguity → parentification → family satisfaction was significant ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .01$, CI = -.13, -.03) as was the indirect effect from boundary ambiguity → parentification → family support ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .001$, CI = -.11, -.04). The indirect effect from boundary ambiguity → parentification → stress was marginally significant ($\beta = -.04$, $p < .05$, CI = -.08, -.00). In general, the associations between boundary ambiguity and family satisfaction, family support, and stress was partially mediated by parentification.

The results from the final analysis indicated that this model explained 64.5% of the variance in family support, 45.6% of the variance in family satisfaction, 24.3% of the variance in parentification, 22.9% of the variance in stress, and 16.6% of the variance in boundary ambiguity.

Table 4.3 Unstandardized and Standardized Coefficients for the Final Model (N =109)

Parameter Estimates	Unstandardized (SE)	Standardized	95% CI
Direct Effects			
Boundary ambiguity → Parentification	.61 (.12)	.42***	
Boundary ambiguity → Family satisfaction	-.65 (.21)	-.28**	
Boundary ambiguity →Stress	.25 (.11)	.24*	
Boundary ambiguity →Family support	-.31 (.15)	-.15*	
Parentification → Family satisfaction	-.31 (.14)	-.19*	
Parentification → Stress	-.07 (.07)	-.09	
Parentification → Family support	-.25 (.09)	-.17**	
Indirect Effects			
Boundary ambiguity → Parentification → Family satisfaction	-.19 (.06)	-.08	-.13, -.03
Boundary ambiguity → Parentification → Stress	-.04 (.02)	-.04	-.08, -.00
Boundary ambiguity → Parentification → Family support	-.15 (.04)	-.07	-.11, -.04
Controls			
Age at divorce/separation → Boundary ambiguity	.03 (.01)	.22*	
Friend support → Boundary ambiguity	-.18 (.05)	-.32***	
Sibling order → Parentification	.44 (.16)	.24**	
Age at divorce/separation → Family satisfaction	-.04 (.02)	-.14	
Sibling order → Family satisfaction	-.31 (.21)	-.10	
Significant other support → Family satisfaction	.21 (.12)	.18	
Friend support → Family satisfaction	.29 (.14)	.22*	
Age at divorce/separation → Stress	-.02 (.01)	-.16	
Friend support → Stress	-.22 (.05)	-.37***	
Family satisfaction → Stress	-.10 (.06)	-.17	
Age at divorce/separation → Family support	-.04 (.01)	-.51*	
Significant support → Family support	.17 (.08)	.17*	
Friend support → Family support	.59 (.10)	.51**	

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

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Moderation of Sibling Order on the Relationship between Path Model Variables

Finally, I conducted a multiple group analysis to test if sibling order moderated the relationships between the variables in the path model. After running the fully unconstrained model, I ran a model constraining all the path coefficients to be equivalent between first/only children and younger children (a fully constrained model). A chi-square difference test revealed that the fully constrained model did not fit the data significantly worse than the fully unconstrained model ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}}[17] = 22.81$, *ns*), thus no further analysis was conducted. Sibling order did not moderate the relationships between variables in the model and should only be included as a covariate.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

During a parental separation or divorce, the family hierarchy goes through structural changes, potentially leading to ambiguity in the boundaries between parental and sibling subsystems (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Given the prevalence of divorce, the potential negative impact boundary ambiguity and parentification are theorized to have on children, and the dearth of research on the topic, this study had four main goals. First, I explored how the child's age at which the parents established separate households during separation or divorce impacted their current experiences of boundary ambiguity, parentification, family satisfaction, stress, and family support. Next, I explored whether first or only children of separated or divorced parents experienced different levels of boundary ambiguity, parentification, family satisfaction, stress, and family support than younger siblings with separated or divorced parents. Third, I tested whether parentification mediated the relationships between boundary ambiguity and the outcome variables (family satisfaction, stress, and family support). Finally, I explored whether sibling order moderated the relationships between the different variables in the model.

The Impact of Sibling Order and Child's Age at Separation/ Divorce

According to structural family theory (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), as children develop they begin to seek more individuality and autonomy, which increases their power within the family hierarchy. This increase in power may be seen by the parents as a sign that a child can take on more responsibilities, leading to the child experiencing greater parentification and boundary ambiguity. As hypothesized, young adults who were older at the time of parental separation or divorce reported lower family satisfaction and support and greater boundary ambiguity than peers who were younger when their parents established separate households. Contrary to structural family theory and my hypothesis, young adult's age at separation was not

related to parentification. Conversely, sibling order was not related to experiences of boundary ambiguity, family satisfaction, stress, and family support, but was positively related to parentification. This could indicate that age of divorce, rather than sibling order, may be a more important factor when considering boundary ambiguity, family support, and stress because even if a child is the youngest sibling they may be old enough to recognize the changes in the family structure and feel uncertain. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children from ages 2 to 7 are not yet capable of organized, logical processes (Feldman, 2012), so a 4 year old may not be able to logically comprehend the effects divorce will have on their family structure and therefore not experience boundary ambiguity. As children grow, they are able to integrate more logical thinking and are able to abstractly (Feldman, 2012). Because of this, a 17 year old may be better able to understand how the family system will change and have concerns about those changes.

First and only children reported a higher degree of parentification, especially by taking on a spousal role, compared to those who were lower in sibling order, whereas young adults' age when their parents established separate households was not related to parentification. Regardless of age, first and only children may be expected to take on the role of "helper" in order to assist the parents with day to day tasks during a separation or divorce. Especially within larger families, first children may already be seen as a "helper" thus, when divorce occurs, first children may take on a heavier load of helping, potentially becoming a confidant to their parent(s) or working alongside the parent(s) within the family (Minuchin, et al., 2007). In addition, the first child will hold more power due to their age relative to their other siblings within the family system, so when a divorce or separation occurs, these children can easily slip into the spousal role when parents feel overwhelmed and look to a family member to confide in. Only children

may also have similar experiences of being seen as a "helper" or may become a "helper" to a parent when a spouse leaves the family system and begin to take on bigger responsibilities (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The parent may put these additional responsibilities on the only child because they feel like there are no other options to go to for support.

Neither sibling order, nor age at divorce or separation was significantly correlated with perceived stress. This may also be due to the measurement of stress over the past month, which may be emphasizing the impact of more proximal variables (such as school work and exams) that impact stress for college students rather than evaluating the impact of familial stress, specifically.

The Mediating Role of Parentification

Congruent with structural family theory (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), parentification mediated the link between boundary ambiguity and family satisfaction and boundary ambiguity and family support. As a family system changes due to divorce or separation, a child may experience more boundary ambiguity which is linked with increased stress, and lower family satisfaction and support. Boundary ambiguity may also lead to parentification of a child or children as a way to stabilize the system. Being parentified may further reduce feelings of family support, since the child has been moved into a caregiving rather than care-receiving role. Further, the child may now be more privy to distress that is occurring within the dissolving parental subsystem, feeling caught in between, and thus, less satisfied with their family life. This is congruent with previous findings in which parentification was found to lead to less family satisfaction and higher stress (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Fosco & Grych, 2010; Jurkovic, et al., 2001; Koerner, et al., 2000; Shaffer & Egeland, 2011)

Moderation by Sibling Order

Contrary to expectations, sibling order was not found to affect the relationships between variables in the model. In structural family theory siblings higher in the sibling order may be more apt to take on additional responsibilities in their family as their power within the system increases reducing the distance between the parental unit and child (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The parents may see the child as more of an equal leading to looser boundaries and expectations of the child taking on responsibilities that may not be developmentally appropriate. These experiences may change the way the child experiences stress, family satisfaction and support (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Our findings did not support this hypothesis. These findings suggest that although first and only children were found to experience more parentification that overall, boundary ambiguity is linked to parentification, family support, family satisfaction, and stress similarly regardless of sibling order.

Limitations

There are several limitations worth noting. This study was performed with a small sample at a Midwestern university that was predominantly female, white, and young (between the ages of 18 and 20 years old). This limits generalizability of results. A larger more diverse population of young adults may also help to strengthen the model and findings. Furthermore, this study used a parentification scale that explores past experiences of parentification rather than current experiences while boundary ambiguity explores current experiences. In future research, matching the measures to look at either current or past experiences may be beneficial. Also, the stress scale used covers general stress over the past month. It may be more useful to use a stress scale that assess familial stress, specifically. In addition, reflective reports of family process from the past is subject to biased recollection reports. Finally, this study attempted to control for step-family

structure by asking participants to consider their sibling order based on who they consider to be a family member, but we did not ask about sibling order within each step-family, thus their views of boundary ambiguity and parentification may be based on their role in multiple families.

Further Research

These results suggests several areas for further research. To begin, the findings of this study should be explored with a larger, more diverse population that would include more males, a higher rate of other ethnicities, a broader range of ages within young adulthood, and with non-college populations. In addition, it may be beneficial to explore differences between younger young adults and older young adults. This may give insight into how older young adults who may be in the process of starting their own families are affected by family of origin boundary ambiguity and parentification. Also, due to remarriage after divorce, exploring the effects that other types of siblings (step-siblings, half-siblings, etc.) have on the child's perceptions of boundary ambiguity, parentification, family satisfaction, stress, and family support is needed. A focus specifically on current feelings of boundary ambiguity, parentification, family satisfaction, stress, and family support within young adults will help to further our understanding of how divorce affects young adults on a daily basis.

Implications for Application

Adding to the literature on children's perceptions of boundary ambiguity and parentification, this study found that boundary ambiguity and parentification may lead to higher stress levels, and lower family satisfaction and family support for the child. When working with families who are experiencing divorce, clinicians can use this information to educate parents on the effects that boundary ambiguity and parentification can have on children even later in life. Clinicians can help parents to readjust the boundaries between parent and children during

transitions in the spousal and parental subsystems. They can also help both parents to continue to work together as a parental unit in order keep the parental subsystem intact and prevent boundary ambiguity. In addition, clinicians can help parents find a healthy outlet for their personal experiences such as individual therapy or increasing support from friends or family. Helping the parent to find social support outside of the children may have a huge impact on preventing boundary ambiguity and parentification. If parents are able to do this their children may experience less stress, higher family satisfaction, and higher family support which will help them develop well into the future.

Conclusion

Given the potential negative impact of boundary ambiguity and parentification on children's development, it is important to continue exploration into the effects of divorce on family structure. The results of this study extend structural family theory and previous findings on the impact of divorce on children by identifying the prominent role boundary ambiguity and parentification have on children's experiences of family satisfaction, support, and stress, even years after the divorce. Expansion and replication of these findings is warranted with a more representative sample.

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Appendix A - Measures

Boundary Ambiguity Scale-4

Instructions: The following statements are about the changes in your family since the divorce of your parents. Using the scaled provided as your guideline, choose the number that best shows how you feel and place it in the blank to the left of each item. There are no right or wrong answers.

For statements 1-20, use the following scale as a guide in answering:
> 1=Never
> 2=Rarely
> 3=Sometimes
> 4=Often
> 5=Almost always

1. I hope that my parents' relationship with each other will improve
2. I worry about whether I am spending enough time with each of my parents
3. My parents and I can solve family problems together
4. I find myself being a go-between for my parents (e.g., carrying messages, making arrangements).
5. I feel as though each of my parents wants me to be on his/her side
6. Since the divorce, I find it more difficult to talk with my father about things I may need from him (money, time, advice).
7. Since the divorce, I find it more difficult to talk with my mother about things I may need from her (money, time, advice).
8. My feeling about who I consider a member of my family and who is not a member of my family continues to change
9. I still feel disturbed about my parents' divorce
10. I think about my mother and my father as a unit, as "my parents."
11. I feel comfortable talking to my mother in front of my father
12. I feel comfortable talking about my father in front of my mother.
13. My family has clear rules about how money and financial arrangements should be handled.
14. When I think about important future occasions (e.g., graduations, weddings, newborn children) where my parents will be together, I worry about how they will behave.
15. People on my father's side of my family secretly ask me about my mother or ask me to say hello for them.
16. People on my mother's side of my family secretly ask me about my father or ask me to say hello for them.
17. I worry about which family members I should or will be with on important holidays and special occasions.
18. My parents say things about each other to me that make me feel uncomfortable.
19. In both of my parents' homes, I feel comfortable, like I belong.
20. It is unclear how the relationships between my extended family (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins) have been affected by the divorce. (edited)

Parentification Scale

Instructions: For statements 1-17, use the following scale as a guide in answering:

       1=Never or does not apply
       2=Rarely
       3=Occasionally
       4=Often
       5=Very often

Spousal role vis-à-vis parents items
1. My parent(s) shared intimate secrets (e.g., concerning relationships and/or sexual issues) with me.
2. My parents discussed their financial issues and problems with me.
3. My mother shared personal problems or concerns with me as if I were another adult.
4. My father shared personal problems or concerns with me as if I were another adult.
5. One parent would come to me to discuss the other parent.
6. My parents would argue, and I would wind up on the side of one of them.
7. One (or both) of my parents asked for my input (rather than my other parent's input) when making an important decision.

Parental role vis-à-vis parents items
1. My parent(s) let me have a lot of influence when making important adult decisions.
2. I was the mediator or "go-between" when a conflict arose between my parents.
3. I consoled one or both of my parents when they were distressed.
4. My parent(s) at times became physically ill, and I was responsible for taking care of them.
5. My parent(s) sought my advice on adult matters.
6. I restored peace if conflicts developed between my parents.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

Instructions: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by circling how often you felt or thought a certain way.

For questions 1-10, use the following scale as a guide in answering:
       0=Never
       1=Almost Never
       2=Sometimes
       3=Fairly Often
       4=Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?

4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Kansas Family Life Satisfaction Scale (KFLS) Adolescent Version

Instructions: For each of the following four questions please indicate your satisfaction by recording your answer in the space to the left of the item. Use the following scale to indicate your response:
1=Extremely dissatisfied
2=Dissatisfied
3=Somewhat dissatisfied
4=Mixed
5=Somewhat satisfied
6=Satisfied
7=Extremely satisfied

1. How satisfied are you with your family life?
2. How satisfied are you with your parents' relationship with each other?
3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your parents?
4. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your brothers and/or sisters? (Answer only if you have a sibling).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

Instructions: We are interested in how you feel about the following statements. Read each statement carefully. Indicate how you feel about each statement

For statements 1-12, use the following scale as a guide in answering:
1=Very Strongly Disagree
2=Strongly Disagree
3=Mildly Disagree
4=Neutral
5=Mildly Agree
6=Strongly Agree
7=Very Strongly Agree

1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.
2. There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
3. My family really tries to help me.
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.

5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.
6. My friends really try to help me.
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.