



Doing and Displaying Gendered Boundary Work among Blended Families in Israel

Sociology

1–16

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0038038516677220

soc.sagepub.com



Kinneret Lahad

Tel Aviv University, Israel

Galia Sabar

Tel Aviv University, Israel

Naama Sabar Ben Yehoshua

Tel Aviv University, Israel

Abstract

This article seeks to introduce a more complex understanding of family change in Israel, through the case study of Israeli blended families. Going beyond the research on blended families in Israel and elsewhere, we wish to focus our analysis on how blended families are *displayed* in contemporary Israeli society. The analytical stress on displaying enables us to discern the fluidity and creativity in contemporary family life in Israel, as well as the *boundary work* through which family members present their family, to themselves and to other audiences. By analyzing data from over 40 in-depth interviews with parents who formed a blended family unit, we argue that family members embody a *fuzzy mindset*, which does not confine to a state of either/or, and at the same time negotiates traditional nuclear models of the “natural” family inherent in Israeli society.

Keywords

blended families, boundary work, displaying families, Israel, reflexivity

Corresponding author:

Kinneret Lahad, Assistant Professor, NCJW Women and Gender Studies Program, Tel-Aviv University, 6997801, Israel.

Email: lahadk@post.tau.ac.il

Introduction

Over the last decade, the study of the everyday life of the family has become an established topic for research. The increasing diversity of family forms—that is, individuals living outside the conventional heterosexual bio-centric model—has led to a changing reality, in which more and more “people find themselves in chains of relations with several individuals across different households” (Smart and Neale, 1999: 72). As family forms undergo significant changes, they also give rise to the development of new analytical tools which seek to locate and re-conceptualize family life. Many of these studies examine the family as a social construct, according to which individuals understand and ascribe new and old meanings to their personal relationships and forms of belonging and togetherness (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; May, 2011). One of the most influential lines of analysis has been taken by critics who argue that “family” is something that people do and practice (Morgan, 1996, 1999, 2011; Smart and Neal, 1999), as well as display (Finch, 2007).

These important contributions to the sociology of family life have informed our research, which investigates the ways of *doing and displaying* blended families—that is, families in which at least one of the parents is rearing non-biological children—in Israel. Indeed, the case study of Israeli blended families reflects some of the significant changes and continuities that family structures and familial relationships are undergoing today. The research project on which this article is based incorporates data from 49 in-depth interviews, with parents who formed a blended family unit including members who are biologically and socially connected. Going beyond the research on blended families in Israel and elsewhere, we wish to focus our analysis on how blended families are *displayed* in contemporary Israeli society. This constitutes the first original contribution of this article. Exploring the family from this standpoint allows us to discern how family is created through ongoing and dynamic interaction, while taking into consideration the relational and changing nature of family life in Israel.

A striking feature of many of the stories we heard is the *heightened reflexivity* concerning the everyday practices of the research participants' families. All of them related to the fact that their parenthood includes active boundary work which was done and displayed in what Signe Howell (2001) terms *self-conscious parenting*. Elsewhere, Allan et al. (2011) found that patterns of belonging and commitment in step-families can be more complex than in first-time families. For Allan et al., the idea of family boundaries reflects experiences of inclusion and exclusion, which allows differing degrees of “flexibility” and “permeability”. By drawing on this study, we hope to demonstrate that the display of blended families in Israel consists of active *boundary work* (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and a *complex interplay* between biogenetic and social family ties. Hence, the second contribution of this study is the development of this line of analysis. We argue that the displaying of families embodies a *fuzzy mindset*, which is not confined to a state of “either/or” (Zerubavel, 1991, 1995). Moreover, similar to the work done by Allan et al. (2011) and Finch and Mason (1993), we found that the formation of the blended family in Israel reflects a continuing process of negotiation, in which its members reconfigure, challenge and adapt to the changing and continuing forms of family life.

So far, previous research has examined practices of displaying blended families mostly in Anglo-Saxon and European contexts. Here, we wish to extend and employ these theoretical perspectives to the Israeli context. Israel is a strongly pro-natal society, one that places high value on bearing children; the formation of a large family is still considered, in many ways, to be a patriotic act and part of the national mission (Berkovitch, 1999; Hashiloni-Dolev, 2007; Lahad, 2012, 2013, 2014; Lahad and Shoshana, 2015). Moreover, Israel is the only country in the world in which the national health insurance system subsidizes all types of NRT (new reproductive technologies), and extensive use of assisted reproductive technologies is justified as an appropriate response to Israeli consumers' need for biological parenthood (Gooldin, 2011). To a large extent, these pro-natal policies reflect Zionist, nationalist ideologies, and the primacy of the familial unit and childrearing in Israeli society.

Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli (2009) terms this cultural climate as the “natural family” paradigm, one which underlies the notion of Israel's Jewish collectivity as a network of biologically related kin (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2009). Our analysis demonstrates that the significance of passing as a biologically related family in Israeli society is related to the heightened importance of biogenetic kinship in Israeli society. Thus, our article offers a unique case study which allows us to explore the active boundary work and everyday negotiations between biogenetic and social kinship in blended Israeli families.

In common with many European and American societies, Israel has been affected by societal trends such as the multiplicity of living arrangements, postponement of the age of marriage, rising rates of divorce, LGTB partnerships, single-parent families, and single-person households. Given this shifting normative framework, the various accounts that follow also tell us how the family is re-imagined and negotiated by members of blended families, while merging new and continuing models of membership and relatedness.

Between Families We Live with and Families We Live by—Theoretical Notes

In his important analysis of the family, Pierre Bourdieu (1996) framed the family unit as a social construction grasped as a reality transcending its members. As such, the family appears as the most natural of social categories, destined to provide a model for other social bodies. The domestic unit is conceived as though it has a will of its own, founded on normative prescriptions about the proper way to conduct social relations. This ideal also constructs family life, as Bourdieu (1996: 20) elaborates, as “a separate social universe, engaged in an effort to perpetuate its frontiers and oriented towards the idealization of its interior as sacred”.

There is no doubt regarding the extent to which these prescriptions organize and discipline our everyday lives. The everyday life of families can be understood through the distinction between the families *we live with* and the families *we live by* (Gillis, 2002). Indeed, most of the interviews with members of blended families brought up the wish to live up to the ideal of the biogenetic family, and at the same time unfold their creative efforts in order to create their own versions of successful familial living.¹

According to John Gillis (2002: xv, emphases in original), “[t]he families we live *with* today may be smaller, more fragmented and temporary, but the families we live *by* are larger, more cohesive and permanent now than at any time in the recent past”. This observation communicates with Hanna Naveh’s (2004) argument that despite its constant failures, in life and in fiction, the family continues to dominate our collective consciousness. Naveh predicts that we are doomed to yearning to fill this gap, and to live relentlessly in the shadow of its non-realization. In this respect, the family ideal produces such high expectations that disappointments and frustrations are inevitable (Craib, 1994). Although we regularly come upon images of family life which do not necessarily live up to this harmonious ideal, we nonetheless, as Naveh (2004) conveys, still cling to it.

In this vein, our project follows Jessica Collett and Ellen Childs’ (2009) important proposal concerning the need to incorporate dramaturgical tools within family research. This outlook, they suggest, highlights the performative and intersectional dynamic of family in everyday life. This becomes particularly relevant when studying the varied ways through which people seek new ways of creating meaningful relationships (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Weeks et al., 2001) and what Weeks et al. (2001) describe as *the everyday life experiments* in forming intimate relationships.

Indeed, the kind of experimentation involved when forming blended families entails much improvisation and ongoing sustainment. The analytical stress on doing and displaying enables us to discern the fluidity and creativity in contemporary family life in Israel, as well as the variations with which people manage and present their family to themselves and to others. As Finch (2007) elaborates, family display is contingent on others and dependent on convincing others. In her excellent and much-referenced article, Finch (2007: 67) claims that: “[d]isplay is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships”. She further elaborates that the need for display becomes more intensive when recognition and validation are sought, particularly in cases where families do not conform to the traditional biogenetic models (Gabb, 2011; Heaphy, 2011). This display hinges and negotiates categorical symbolic boundaries, and it shows the ways in which classification processes can be flexible and unstable (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Zerubavel, 1991, 1995).

These themes are reiterated in many of the interviewees’ accounts. Their acts of display are diverse, and often set to affirm their new family formation to themselves, family members, and others. Our line of inquiry is therefore attuned to the manner in which blended families are concerned with transmitting the “right” impression and abiding with the societal standards of what the “good” and “natural” family stands for.

Methodology

This article is a part of a larger research project (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua and Sabar, 2012), which incorporates data from 41 in-depth interviews with parents raising non-biological children, and with 11 sons and daughters with experience (either present or past) of being raised in blended families (Naama and Galia). Over 150 people approached us once we started our online search. We contacted 60 potential research participants, and eventually

interviewed 41. We initially planned to recruit the study participants via snowball sampling. This technique enables the participants themselves to utilize their social networks to refer the researcher to others who could take part in the study (Mack et al., 2005). However, we soon realized that this technique led to relative homogeneity among the participants in relation to age, profession, socio-economic status, class, sexual orientation, religion, and geographical location.

To enhance diversity, we then posted a request on an Israeli online forum of blended families which enabled us to recruit additional and varied participants. Thus two-thirds of our sample was recruited via snowballing and one-third via online recruitment. While the strength of online recruitment through online forums is the ability to target the relevant population via selective forums, while at the same time reaching a wide audience (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008), its downside is the exclusion of those who do not have regular computer access or do not participate in the targeted forum. The first concern is minor in the Israeli context as this is one of the countries with the highest home-computer penetration rate in the world (Mesch, 2003), and the second was addressed by the snowball part of the study.

Unlike much research on blended families (Allan et al., 2011; Bray and Hetherington, 1993; Burrell, 1995; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003; Visser and Visser, 1988; Zucker-Anderson and White, 1986), we were curious to look into the positive experiences of blended families' members. Hence, we decided to focus on informants who view their blended family as a success. As we have predicted, and as will be detailed below, our informants were able to share with us the entanglement, the challenging as well as the rewarding aspects of being a part of a blended family. This decision was also based on our personal experiences, which we consider as supportive and empowering even though the process of "becoming one family" remains difficult, complex and often painful. We stopped interviewing and started analysis once we felt that we were no longer developing new insights from additional interviewees, an accepted sign within qualitative research (Gutterman, 2015). In this article, we focus on the interviews with parents who were raising biological and non-biological children. The parents were interviewed separately, most of them providing rich and complex descriptions of their ways of coping with the practical, daily challenges inherent in raising a blended family.

We sought to choose interviewees who had been raising non-biological children for at least a number of years. The interviewees differed from each other in many aspects: the age of the rearing parents (from under 40 to over 70); their degree of active involvement in raising their non-biological children; their lifestyle (religious or secular); their ethnic extraction; their gender; their family status prior to establishing the blended family (widowed, divorced or single); and the number of children they had prior to beginning their new family (between one and five).

Despite the variety, they shared a common denominator: most of the interviewees identified themselves as heterosexual and belonged to the middle class, although not all enjoyed stable financial circumstances. Despite the differences between the subjects—in their personal stories, their inclinations and their personal and family status—many of the responses to our questions were similar in content and emphasis, revealing the general and common among the particulars. The interviews were conducted in the format of an informal conversation with a series of questions, in an attempt—not always

successful—to reduce our own involvement as interviewers. In fact, we were often emotionally moved and reacted on a personal level, and at times we commented—both as researchers and partners—on similar human experience.

The questions were intended mainly to encourage the subjects to unpack their own stories, to retrieve details in order to complete the picture or to elucidate points that did not seem entirely clear. (Josselson, 2013) The opening question to parents was almost always: “Tell us how you met your partner.” After the opening question, we asked the respondents to tell us the story of their blended family. For example: prior to formalizing the relationship, did they consider the challenges or complexities embedded in raising the other parent’s children? How did the extended family accept their non-biological children? What difficulties did they encounter and how did they cope with them? What message did they wish to convey to people considering whether to begin a family constituted thus?

Like Amia Lieblich (2007), we also placed great emphasis on the opportunity afforded to the interviewed subjects to make their voice heard and describe their reality as they see it, at a certain point in time at which they are both looking retrospectively at the past and soberly observing the present. We were not concerned with the degree of “objective truth” in the subjects’ narratives: “[t]his is how they chose to present themselves to us and to the readers, and this is their narrative truth” (Lieblich, 2007: 12).

Qualitative research takes into account the place of the researcher in the study, his or her place and state in respect to the studied subject (positioning), and the degree of involvement with respect to overt characteristics—such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and personal status (Josselson, 2013). As researchers of a familiar environment we, Galia and Naama, were aware of the advantages and the disadvantages of our positioning, which grew out of our personal experiences with our own blended families, during the course of the research. Kinneret, who is single and grew up in a nuclear family, approached the research field from a different, more detached perspective, and hence acted at times as the one highlighting nuances and illuminating new insights.

Alfred Schuetz (1944), in his essay on the stranger in society, noted the complexity of researching an environment that is well known to the researcher, one in which he is in fact a “native”. In a study of this type, the researchers enjoy clear advantages, thanks, among other things, to their command of the language and their ability to read overt and covert behavioral codes and cues. Yet, for the very same reasons, such intimate familiarity—the researchers’ sense of knowledge and awareness—may itself silence other voices, nuances and insights. Some of us found ourselves repeatedly asking each other and ourselves to what degree we could separate ourselves—that is, separate between what we ourselves had experienced and were experiencing, and what we were being told by our interviewees.

Nevertheless, since each family is a world unto itself, we had to operate between two poles that sometimes created a conflictual situation: between the strange and the familiar, the close and the distant, the inner and the outer world, appropriation and estrangement (Feige, 2003). This obliged us to conduct ongoing processes of examination, to raise questions, cast doubt and endlessly monitor our own insights, the things we had heard and those we had not listened to.

Displaying as an Everyday Experience

The following excerpts from the interviews conducted reveal a complicated and diverse picture of the ways in which people manage and present their family to themselves and to others. For example, Reuven, 27, a bachelor when he married Dorit, 27, the divorced mother of two-year-old twins says:

In the first year I had to change negative attitudes, people would say things like “that’s a heavy load you’ve got on your hands now...” That really bothered me, because my connection with the twins was strong and immediate and full of love, and these were reactions of people who didn’t know what I was really feeling, they just guessed. There was a sense of sorrowful compassion from the people around me. After a while it stopped because they saw the result.

Elsewhere in the interview he tells us another story:

There’s something else, pretty technical, that bothers me: we live in a small city, and too often I find myself explaining to people who once knew me how come I suddenly have so many kids. “They’re yours?” “When did you manage that?” Yes, they’re mine. That’s the message I’m trying to convey to others and to the kids themselves. To people who are more nosy, which is common in Israel, I have to explain the situation and go on from there.

Reuven’s accounts highlight the significance he attributes to passing as a “normative”, “natural” family. Questions and intrusive remarks such as “Are they yours?” “When did you manage that?” and “Oh, that’s a tough load you’re carrying” were experienced by Reuven as negative and disturbing. It might be suggested that in certain contexts these comments also reveal a normative assumption, that becoming a rearing parent to children who are not your biological ones could not be a matter of choice, but rather the result of maneuvering and manipulation that one has been subjected to by one’s new partner. Statements such as “Oh, that’s a tough load you’re carrying” reflect a hierarchy of parenting in which there is a powerful bias in favor of *biological* parenting, which is assumed to be people’s preferred choice in Israeli society. This is another interesting manifestation of what Naveh (2004: 107) terms as the *fetishization of blood ties* in Israeli society, and what Janette Logan (2013) views as a hierarchy of parenting options, in which having biological children is considered as a default option.

By not passing as a “normative” family, Reuven is required to affirm and “successfully” display his new familial identity. Thus, as evidenced from the examples above, the need to account, explain, perform, and justify are among the reoccurring experiences of “new families”, leading many of them to practices which involve heightened reflexivity. In a different study, Petra Nordqvist (2010) observes that many of the lesbian parents whom she interviewed had deliberately chosen a sperm donor with a potential physical similarity to the non-birth mother. This choice was motivated by the desire to create a physical resemblance, hence to “look like a biological family” and “pass as one”. Another example can be found in Barbara Katz Rothman’s (2005) ethnographic study on interracial adoptions. Rothman observes that in order to make her mother–child connection visible to strangers, she purposely uses phrases in which she emphasizes the words “my daughter”, or chooses embodied gestures which convey mother–child relations to an external audience.

Returning to Reuven's account, one can see how a parent-child stroll becomes a familial practice that needs to be recognized as such. Reuven also points out the particularity of the Israeli directness, in what Tamar Katriel (1986) refers to as "dugri talk". According to Katriel, "dugri talk" is a direct form of speech talk and bold interpersonal style, that could also explain the need to be prepared for intrusive questions in relation to one's non-biological family unit.

The idea of practicing and displaying boundary work emerged in the interview with Karmit. Karmit, who is 33 years old and previously divorced, married Shlomi, 36, the divorced father of Nathanel, 10 years old:

Even when I tell people I'm his mother, they often say: "Oh, but he's not yours." You know, strangers. So I say: "No, he's not mine. So what, don't I make sandwiches for him in the morning?" I didn't give birth to him, so does that mean he'll go to school without a sandwich or that I won't take him to a doctor when he's sick? What does it mean, that I didn't give birth to him? In day-to-day life, it doesn't mean anything.

Her account differentiates between the fact that she is not Nathanel's biological mother and familial everyday practices which demonstrate her parental responsibilities and commitment toward her non-biological child. In this case it is worth noting that *displaying the blended family* is also *displaying gendered* appropriate behaviors, in which women are perceived as primarily responsible for routine childcare and household chores. Karmit's account corresponds with Allan et al.'s (2011: 88–89) observation in relation to British stepfamilies, in which they argue that "orderliness" in itself is a family accomplishment, enacted through the generally routine and gendered management in which wives and mothers have prime responsibility for domestic organization.

The narratives we heard exemplify Morgan's (1996: 189) observations that family practices convey a sense of the *daily* and *unremarkable* nature of people's familial experiences. Everyday practices, such as strolling together in public or preparing a sandwich, may go unnoticed in what are perceived to be the "normal" or "conventional" biogenetic kind of families. One can claim perhaps that when one is part of such a family, there is no need to account for and explain that these are "my children" or bestow particular meanings to the preparation of sandwiches.

"Passing as a family", as Reuven and Karmit's accounts exemplify, is a multidimensional and contextual process. Both stories reflect the self-conscious parenting involved in crossing the boundaries between the biological and non-biological. As Karmit clarifies, the fact that she is not biologically connected to her son does not have implications on her everyday obligations and responsibilities as a rearing mother. Through this small and unnoticed daily act of making sandwiches, she makes and manifests her connection to the child as visible and valid, just as any biological parent. Karmit is aware of the boundaries and crosses them, allowing a blend of boundedness and boundlessness (Zerubavel, 1991: 120). It could also be argued that she recognizes conventional boundaries yet does not necessarily accept them.

Similar themes emerge from Eran's account. Eran, 36 and a bachelor, married Aya, 34, a divorcee with a boy aged 10 and a girl aged eight. After a short while, their daughter Natalie Bar was born. In the following vignette, Eran offers a unique variation of doing and displaying blended families:

One of the things Aya was moved by, and I think she told the kids and they were excited about it too, is that pretty quickly after we made the relationship official there was some issue with life insurance that I had to deal with. The insurance agent asked me to name my beneficiaries, and I just naturally said Aya. Then he asked what would happen should the beneficiary pass away, so I said, "It should be split equally between the kids." The agent asked: "Which kids?" and I said: "Noah, Adam, and Natalie." He looked at me—he had known me from before my marriage to Aya—and he said: "That's great, Eran." I asked: "What's great?" I never even thought otherwise, he's the one who told me other people do it differently. I told that to Aya, that I hadn't felt anything particular and just naturally said the names of my three kids. Aya told Noah and Adam when I wasn't there, and I guess it had a certain impact. I mean, I always feel I have three kids, in whatever has to do with wills and formal things in general. Whatever it is, they're always three equal kids. My mom thinks otherwise, but that's another story...

Eran's story is significant in a variety of respects. His encounter with the insurance agent juxtaposes different viewpoints toward blended families. The agent's query as to which children would and/or should be included in his life insurance policy can be interpreted as another indication of the dominance of the ideology of the biogenetic family model. In addition, one could assume that if all of Eran's children had been his biologically, a question of this nature would not have been raised at all. Eran's response—that the money should be divided equally between his biological and non-biological children—surprised the insurance agent, and touched his wife. Eran describes this as a spontaneous decision that reflected his parental commitments. Yet this act was acknowledged and endowed with substantive meanings by both the insurance agent and Eran's wife and children.

Eran's story brings up the importance of displaying families. As Finch (2007) stresses, families are not merely done but also need to be displayed; in this case to both his family and the insurance agent, acting both as observers and evaluators of the act, emphasizing the significance of both external and internal forms of recognition critical to doing and displaying families. Following Finch's analysis of displaying families, Morgan (2011: 62) stresses that points of ambiguity or unscheduled transitions might provide such a context where the need to display family might be felt more acutely than on other occasions.

In this context, it could be argued that Eran's decision is grasped as a supererogatory act. In this case, he applies what are considered to be the agreed-upon ideal conventions and moral principles ascribed to the biological family: the equal distribution of money with no calculations and discrimination. It might also be suggested, drawing on Cherlin's (1978) view of blended families as incomplete institutions, that the idea that they lack institutional guidelines renders some acts as extremely generous and supererogatory.

Indeed, all of the above could be seen as "moral tales" (May, 2008; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003). In presenting their understanding of their family relationships, the interviewees are also positioning themselves as moral beings and judging other people's motives and behavior from this perspective. Thus, as we can see, humans actively negotiate permeable and fixed boundaries and this process is significant to the constitution of their moral self.

Hence, Eran's decision challenges the binary hierarchical relations between social parenting and biological parenting, and he is aware of its impact. As he said, "I assume it did the job", in terms of doing and displaying his egalitarian stance toward all his three

children, regardless of whether they were his biological or non-biological children. Eran explains that when the agent asked him which children would be entitled to the insurance pay-out, he reflected upon something that he perceives as natural, and which did not require any additional or particular consideration on his part. Yet in a society, such as Israel, that takes biogenetic familial relations as the basic point of reference, Eran's parenting practice expresses, as well as establishes, his long-term commitment to all three of his children.

The presentation of this act as ordinary and natural is a significant act of display, and is rewarded and praised. Eran's narrative draws on terms such as "natural" or "nothing in particular", and at the same time his acts could be seen as rewarded not only in regard to the act itself but to his own attitude to the act, as natural and ordinary. Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003) found that fairness is a major issue in blended families. They argue that the sense of unity that "family" is meant to represent is frequently less evident in stepfamilies than "natural families". In Eran's response the issue of fairness is figured out through transgressing the boundaries of the biological and non-biological, and by displaying an act which signifies inclusion.² However, Eran is very much aware that his attitude is remarkably different than that of his mother: "but that's another story", he explains. In that sense, his interpretation of his mother's attitude is one which accentuates these very boundaries. From that point he adds:

I feel the same toward them, I love them the same, though as I said, I'd prefer not to think about what I do or say to Noah and Adam, the way it is with Natalie, but I love them the same. I think Natalie even had a bit of a hard time when she was born, because I was worried that I had to compensate them, like prove to them I wasn't discriminating against them. You see what I mean? She might have gotten worse treatment than she deserved. Compared to them, I felt safe with her.

In the above extract, Eran emphasizes that his feelings toward his non-biological children are identical to his feelings to his biological daughter; but at the same time, he wishes that he was less aware of what he says and how he acts toward his non-biological children. Thus, we can see that the boundary works in relation to one's emotions, attempting to create sameness while recognizing separateness. His account could be interpreted as an interesting example of how the marking of boundaries is not a clear-cut experience, and generates ambiguity and inconsistencies, or what Zerubavel sees as a fluid mindset transgressing conventional either/or logic.

Another account unfolding the subtleties of these relations is told by Joyce, who at the age of 28 married Ygal, 30 at the time and the divorced father of Daniel, five-and-a-half:

I really invest a lot of effort and ... you know, sometimes I get something in return, but I don't expect more than that. I'm the one who says to him that his mom is important, that his relationship with his mom is important, that no one can replace her.

Joyce's account is another example of boundary work in everyday life. In the passage above, it is Joyce who marks the boundaries by emphasizing that no one can replace Daniel's biological mother. It could be said that in this case, the boundary

between the biological and non-biological was re-constituted by her. Later in the interview, Joyce adds:

I have a friend whose father was previously married, before he married her mother. When they married, he had a son, who her mom had raised since the age of three. When the son got married, under the Chuppah [Jewish wedding canopy], he asked his biological mother, who had left him when he was two years old, to lead him into the ceremony. My friend's mother was really upset by that. I wouldn't get upset, but I can't stop thinking about that story. I mean, when the moment of truth arrives she's his mom and not me. And though I don't feel like a victim, I think that's very real. I think it's a thankless job. The fun reward is the relationship that develops.

Although Joyce states that she would not be offended if the child she was rearing would ask his biological mother to accompany him to the altar, the issue is constantly present in her mind. The wedding marks an impermeable boundary separating the biological and the non-biological, revealing how symbolic boundary work is an act of generating difference and mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. The wedding is a moment of public display toward members within and without the blended family, and distinctions between the biological and raising mother are clearly drawn.

Lamont and Molnár (2002: 168) term symbolic boundaries as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality”. Thus, by employing this kind of boundary work Joyce constitutes her status vis-a-vis the biological mother. As she explains, by her everyday practices she is the raising mother but in her conversation with her son she draws the boundary to define who she is not.

In a different interview, Bina—34, the divorced mother of a six-year-old son and married to Alon, the divorced father of four children aged between two to 13—reflects upon her role as a rearing mother:

At home I'm not an extra, there I'm an actress, but the minute it's about school or family events I take my part as an extra, not as the star. But I'm there. At the weddings for example, the girls' biological parents led them under the Chuppah ... not both fathers and both mothers.

Bina differentiates between different interactions which accordingly lead to different family displays. Such identity-defining boundaries are buttressed by using terms derived from the realm of theater. The metaphor of an *extra*—as opposed to the main *actress*—enables her to make sense and orient herself in these different interactional encounters and accordingly different senses of the self and familial membership. Anthropologist Gaylene Becker (1999: 65) emphasizes that metaphors are the means through which people can locate new meanings in their lives:

Metaphors themselves do not reorganize thinking, but they provide one way of locating new meanings, which, in turn, may facilitate efforts to reorganize life. The use of metaphor is one way in which people impart elasticity to their personal frameworks of meaning. In altering these frameworks, people use components of cultural discourses in creative ways to create the most culturally relevant fit for their life experiences.

Assuming such divisions, Bina's account demonstrates elasticity, what Zerubavel terms as a flexible mindset. This is another example of why familial boundaries are rarely clear-cut, and change within different spatial and temporal contexts. Bina's account, in common with many of the other interviewees in this study, is highly reflexive and very much aware of the different kinds of audiences for which the display takes place (Morgan, 2011). As Morgan (2011: 63) points out, "[s]ome forms of display, therefore, might be like a game of charades where, at different times, those displaying are also in the audience". In a way which is similar to Joyce's account, through the act of displaying and acknowledging different kinds of audience, Bina can evaluate her own position and her view of herself.

Conclusion

Our article offers a unique lens through which the analytical perspective of displaying the boundary work of blended families can be further extended and developed. Another major finding of this article is the high degree of attentiveness to what Howell views as the self-conscious parenting family, in which the family is de-biologized and biologized at the same time (Howell, 2001: 207). The need to negotiate conventional familial norms is reflected, for instance, in the questions, speculations, and default assumptions which members of blended families face in their everyday life. The difficulties in passing as a "first time family"—that is, a biologically related family—require a "convincing" display of their blended families to demonstrate in public that "this is my family and it works" (Finch, 2007: 67).

Yet, drawing on Gabb (2011) and Heaphy (2011), it is important to note the normative framework which defines what is considered to be a good family and good parenting. Indeed, in the different accounts we heard the family members work with the boundaries of the natural family in Israel, employing voluntary and creative measures which both conform with and challenge its boundaries. Thus, we view the respondents as self-reflexive individuals who are highly aware of their own acts and the responses of others to these acts. It is important to stress that during this process, their own normative concepts of what a family is and "who my family is" are contested and re-worked. This can be seen, employing another of Howell's terms, as a *process of "kinning"*, in which family ties are de-biologized and biologized at the same time (Howell, 2001: 207). Our findings support Howell's research findings on adoptive parents, which assert that within the kinning process, the biological model lurks in the background. From all the above and by building on Zerubavel's insights, we also argue that all the blended family members we interviewed employed a flexible mindset and readiness to at least listen even if not always to take action on needed changes.

However, our contention is that this flexibility demonstrates the continuing and changing power of bio-genetic models in the Israeli cultural imagery. Indeed, the blended family is constantly evaluated against these models through active symbolic boundary work, and we found that most of the interviewees were aware of and attempted to evaluate and rework the boundaries between biological and non-biological families. Hence, on the one hand, the interviewees challenged the exclusivity and sanctity of biological relations as the sole basis for forming and maintaining strong familial bonds. But at the same

time, they were extremely aware that blood ties are taken for granted, and of the privileged system of belonging in their social surroundings. In that sense, and continuing Zerubavel's (1991, 1999) line of analysis in relation to being situated within several mental fields at the same time, blended family members defy the either/or logic underlying the mutual exclusivity of conventional categories.

Consequently, our analysis could not be completed without paying attention to the socio-normative context which constitutes the *politics of display*, namely which family norms privilege certain families and exclude others. Jacqui Gabb (2011) and Brian Heaphy (2011) rightly note the ways in which displays operate as socio-cultural constructs, in which some actors are more readily recognized and legitimated as family actors than others. Family displays cannot be separable from conceptions of "proper" families which, in turn, are closely connected to conceptions of morally and socially "good" families—namely, adopting and displaying conformity to white middle-class heterosexual norms (Heaphy, 2011: 30–31).

In our case, adherence to the pro-natal heterosexist values of the Israeli family appears to be the standard. Differently put, doing and displaying cannot be disentangled from the normative ideals of the white, Jewish, heteronormative middle-class nuclear family dominant in Israeli society. In closing, it is significant to acknowledge the limitations of this article as we only interviewed Jewish middle-class blended family members. As class and nationality are important correlates, we believe they should be included in future studies about blended and "new" families in Israel.

Thus, what counts as a good and convincing display is also dependent upon conforming to these norms; as Morgan (2011) insightfully notes, one has to take the audiences to whom displays are directed toward into consideration. These observations offer a research agenda for future studies which takes into consideration the politics of display and social belonging in Israeli society and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

We wish to extend our thanks to the editor, the three anonymous reviewers and Vanessa May for their close reading and important suggestions.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. There are numerous studies dealing with blended families, sometimes referred to as step, merged, recoupled or even patchwork families. Whereas compared with the wealth of research on the previous stage of blending, the divorce or widowing blending is still a field that needs much more understanding. The existing studies deal with various issues that the new structure brings about such as defining the borders of the family and communication among family members (see, for example, Allan et al., 2011; Bray and Hetherington, 1993). Conflicts that occur regarding the devotion between children and their rearing parent (the non-biological) (see, for example, Burrell, 1995; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003), accommodating the changes that the new family brings about (e.g. Visser and Visser, 1988), and

defining the roles within the family and outside (see, for example, Zucker-Anderson and White, 1986).

2. Eran's decision should be understood within the wider legal context. According to Israeli law, only biological ties and official adoption are recognized as legally binding parents and children. In spite of many cases relating to non-biological parents' rights and obligations, all in all the Israeli legal system tends to ignore the relationship between children and their raising parents. According to Blecher-Prigat and Daphna Hacker (2010), the Israeli legal system refuses to grant the latter any legal rights or duties regarding the children, regardless of the nature of the relationship established between them. The only two aspects of the legal system that specifically acknowledge that the raising parent is not a complete stranger are the criminal and the economic arenas; that is, he/she has economic responsibilities for his/her non-biological children and their criminal liabilities. Having said this, no parent—biological or social—is legally obliged to include any one in his or her will; however, if no will is made, then according to the Israeli system only biological children will be considered as beneficiaries of the deceased.

References

- Allan G, Crow G and Hawker S (2011) *Stepfamilies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Atkinson E and DePalma R (2008) Imagining the homonormative: Performative subversion in education for social justice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29(1): 25–35.
- Becker G (1999) *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Berkovitch N (1999) Women of valor: Women and citizenship in Israel. *Israeli Sociology* 2(1): 277–317 [Hebrew].
- Birenbaum-Carmeli D (2009) The politics of “the natural family” in Israel: State policy and kinship ideologies. *Social Science & Medicine* 69(7): 1018–1024.
- Blecher-Prigat A and Hacker D (2010) Strangers or parents: The current and the desirable legal status of parents' spouses. *Hebrew University Law Review* 40: 5–65 [Hebrew].
- Bourdieu P (1996) On the family as a realized category. *Theory, Culture & Society* 13(3): 19–26.
- Bray JH and Hetherington EM (1993) Developmental issues in StepFamilies Research Project: Family relationships and parent–child interactions. *Journal of Family Psychology* 7(1): 76–90.
- Burrell NA (1995) Communication patterns in stepfamilies: Redefining roles, themes, and conflict styles. In: Fitzpatrick M and Vangelisiti AL (eds) *Explaining Family Interactions*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 290–309.
- Cherlin A (1978) Remarriage as an incomplete institution. *American Journal of Sociology* 84(3): 634–650.
- Collett JL and Childs E (2009) Meaningful performances: Considering the contributions of the dramaturgical approach to studying family. *Sociology Compass* 3(4): 689–706.
- Craib I (1994) *The Importance of Disappointment*. London: Routledge.
- Feige M (2003) *Two Maps for the West Bank: Gush Emunim, Shalom Achshav and the Formatting of the Israeli Space*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Eshkolot Library.
- Finch J (2007) Displaying families. *Sociology* 41(1): 65–81.
- Finch J and Mason J (1993) *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*. London: Routledge.
- Gabb J (2011) Troubling displays: The affect of gender, sexuality and class. In: Dermott E and Seymour J (eds) *Displaying Families: A New Concept for the Sociology of Family Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 38–60.

- Giddens A (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gillis JR (2002) Our imagined families: The myths and rituals we live by. *Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life Working Paper 7*.
- Gooldin S (2011) Cultural competence and ethical incompetence: Notes from a study of the new reproductive technologies in Israel. *Diversity in Health & Care* 8(1): 45–54.
- Gutterman TC (2015) Descriptions of sampling practices within five approaches to qualitative research in education and the Health Sciences Forum. *Qualitative Social Research* 16(2): art. 25.
- Hashiloni-Dolev Y (2007) *A Life (Un)Worthy of Living: Reproductive Genetics in Israel and Germany*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Heaphy B (2011) Critical relational displays. In: Seymour J and Doucet A (eds) *Displaying Families: A New Concept for the Sociology of Family Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 19–37.
- Howell S (2001) Self-conscious kinship: Some contested values in Norwegian transnational adoption. In: Franklin S and McKinnon S (eds) *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 203–223.
- Jamieson L (1998) *Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Josselson R (2013) *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry: A Relational Approach*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Katriel T (1986) *Talking Straight: Dugri Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lahad K (2012) Singlehood, waiting, and the sociology of time. *Sociological Forum* 27(1): 163–186.
- Lahad K (2013) “Am I asking for too much?”: The selective single woman as a new social problem. *Women’s Studies International Forum* 40: 23–32.
- Lahad K (2014) The single woman’s choice as a zero-sum game. *Cultural Studies* 28(2): 240–266.
- Lahad K and Shoshana A (2015) Singlehood in *treatment*: Interrogating the discursive alliance between postfeminism and therapeutic culture. *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 22(3): 334–349.
- Lamont M and Molnár V (2002) The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 167–195.
- Lieblich A (2007) *Arak for Breakfast*. Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House [Hebrew].
- Logan J (2013) Contemporary adoptive kinship: A contribution to new kinship studies. *Child & Family Social Work* 18(1): 35–45.
- Mack N, Woodsong C, MacQueen KM, et al. (2005) *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collectors Field Guide*. North Carolina: Family Health International.
- May V (2008) On being a “good” mother: The moral presentation of self in written life stories. *Sociology* 42(3): 470–486.
- May V (ed.) (2011) *Sociology of Personal Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mesch GS (2003) The family and the Internet: The Israeli case. *Social Science Quarterly* 84(4): 1038–1050.
- Morgan DH (1996) *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Morgan DH (1999) Risk and family practices: Accounting for change and fluidity in family life. In: Silva E and Smart C (eds) *The New Family?* London: SAGE, 13–30.
- Morgan DH (2011) *Rethinking Family*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Naveh H (2004) The heart of home, the heart of the light: The portrait of the family in the new Hebrew literature. In: Kleinberg A (ed.) *The Love of Mothers and the Fear of Fathers: Rethinking the Israeli Family*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Keter Publishing House and Tel Aviv University Press, 105–176 [Hebrew].

- Nordqvist P (2010) Out of sight, out of mind: Family resemblances in lesbian donor conception. *Sociology* 44(6): 1128–1144.
- Ribbens McCarthy J, Edwards R and Gillies V (2003) *Making Families: Moral Tales of Parenting and Step-Parenting*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Rothman BK (2005) *Weaving a Family: Untangling Race and Adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Sabar Ben-Yehoshua N and Sabar G (2012) *Two Houses and a Child: The Story of Blended Families in Israel*. Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House [Hebrew].
- Schuetz A (1944) The stranger: An essay in social psychology. *American Journal of Sociology* 49(6): 499–507.
- Smart C and Neale B (1999) *Family Fragments?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Visher EB and Visher JS (1988) *Old Loyalties, New Ties: Therapeutic Strategies with Stepfamilies*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Weeks J, Heaphy B and Donovan C (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*. London: Routledge.
- Zerubavel E (1991) *The Fine Line*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zerubavel E (1995) The rigid, the fuzzy, and the flexible: Notes on the mental sculpting of academic identity. *Social Research* 62(4): 1093–1106.
- Zucker-Anderson J and White GD (1986) An empirical investigation of interaction and relationships patterns in functional and dysfunctional nuclear and stepfamilies. *Family Process* 25: 407–422.

Kinneret Lahad is an assistant professor at the *NCJW Women and Gender Studies Program* at Tel Aviv University, Israel. She has written extensively on female singlehood and has just completed her book which offers sociological and feminist readings of Singlehood and Social Time to be published by Manchester University Press and has co-edited a book on mechanisms of denial and repression in Israeli society. Her current projects include independent and collaborative studies on women's friendship practices, Aunthood, social emotions, feminism and academia as well as ageing and anti-ageing. She has been a visiting professor and an honorary research fellow at the Venice International University and Manchester University. During winter 2016–2017 she will be a visiting scholar at Columbia University, NY and Ca'Foscari University.

Galia Sabar, President, Ruppin Academic Center and Professor of African Studies at Tel Aviv University, Israel. Her research focuses on three main themes: African migrants and asylum seekers with special emphasis on social and religious identities; socio-political aspects of HIV/AIDS in East Africa; and blended families in Israel. All her research has been interdisciplinary by nature combining history, anthropology and cultural studies. Professor Sabar has published seven books and over 40 articles in professional journals. Her recent book: *Two Homes and a Child* was co-authored with Prof. Naama Sabar (her mother) focusing on blended families in Israel.

Naama Sabar Ben Yehoshua, Constantiner Professor in Jewish education (emerita), school of Education, Tel Aviv University. She along with a colleague founded the field of Qualitative Research in Education in Israel and led the field for many years. She published the first books in Hebrew on Qualitative Methodology in Education both for beginners and for advanced researchers. Her latest book *Qualitative Research in Education* is being published in Chinese. Naama and her husband Shimshon are proud of the blended family that they have raised. They are parents to five children and have 14 grandchildren.

Date submitted January 2016

Date accepted September 2016