

## Parental Attitudes Determining Children's Roles and Reflections of Children's Roles on Adult Life: A Qualitative Study

DOI: 10.26466/opus.948457

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### Abstract

*This study aims to examine the role of the children in the family of origin and the definition of these roles, the parent attitudes that affect the formation and perpetuation of these roles, and the manner in which childhood roles are carried into adult life. The phenomenological model, a qualitative research method, was used in this study to obtain in-depth information about the subject. "Personal Information Form" and "Open-ended Questions List" were used as data collection tools. The study group consisted of 110 people, of whom 91 (82.7%) were women and 19 (17.3%) were men. The obtained data were analyzed using the MaxQDA – Version 2018 software. The observations resulting from the study included that the hero child role comes with assuming responsibility, parent-like attitudes, and a mediator role in the family system and that the attitudes of such children's parents attribute more power and responsibility to the child in question. It was observed that the scapegoat children describe themselves as problematic, rebellious, and a burden, and their parents treat them with neglect, abuse, emotional absence, and incrimination. On the other hand, lost children are those who are ignored, easy going, and inhibited. Mascot children regard themselves as the ones who give joy and lighten the mood in the family, who are enthroned, and who are the little ones. Parental attitudes determining children's roles and reflections of children's roles on adult life are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Children's roles, parental attitudes, qualitative method.

## Çocukluk Rollerini Biçimlendiren Ebeveyn Tutumları ve Rollerin Yetişkinlik Yaşamına Yansımaları: Nitel Bir Araştırma

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### Öz

Araştırmada, bireylerin öz kök ailede oluşan çocukluk rollerini, bu rollere ilişkin tanımlamaları, bu rollerin oluşumunu ve devamını etkileyen anne baba tutumları ile çocukluk rollerinin yetişkin yaşamına nasıl yansıdığını incelemek amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmada, konu hakkında derinlemesine bilgi sahibi olmak amacıyla nitel araştırma yönteminin fenomenolojik modeli kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu; Google formlar üzerinden araştırmaya katılmayı kabul eden ve yanıtlayan bireyler oluşturmuştur. Buna göre çalışma grubu, 91' i (%82,7) kadın, 19' u (%17,3) erkek olmak üzere toplam 110 kişiden oluşmaktadır. Elde edilen veriler MaxQDA – Versiyon 2018 bilgisayar programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonucunda, Kahraman çocukluk rolünün sorumluluk, ebeveynleşmek ve sistemde arabulucu roller üstlenmekle tanımlandığı, ebeveyn tutumlarının ise çocuğa olduğundan fazla güç atfetmek ve sorumluluk yüklemek olduğu görülmektedir. Günah keçilerinin problemlili, isyankar ve yük olarak kendilerini tarifledikleri, ebeveyn tutumlarının ise ihmal, istismar, duygusal olarak yok olmak ve suçlayıcılık olduğu görülmektedir. Öte yandan kayıp çocuklar, yok sayılan, uyumlu ve ezik çocuklardır. Maskotlar ise kendilerini neşe, enerji veren, tahtın sahibi, evin küçüğü olarak tanımlamaktadır. Çocukluk rollerini belirleyen ebeveyn tutumları ve çocukların rollerinin yetişkin yaşamına yansımaları tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** çocukluk rolleri, ebeveyn tutumları, nitel metod.

## Introduction

Children are born into an already established system and are affected by how this system functions (Bowen, 1966; Fischer and Wampler, 1994). The goal of the family system is to maintain the balance through the interaction of family members (Kerr and Bowen, 1988; Titelman, 2008). According to Bowen (1966), the family has a flexible and dynamic structure so as to meet the needs of this system. Conflicts may occur; however, family members develop various defense mechanisms and assume roles to remain in the system and maintain continuity (Wampler et al, 2009). Bowen (1978) suggested that the reason behind the adoption of these of roles is the anxiety engendered by the needs of the system. The common goal that all these roles serve is to eliminate uncertainty and imbalance within the family and to restore the balance one way or the other. The children adopt different roles to survive within the family. However, these roles should be considered in the context of family dynamics rather than as to whether they are compatible with social norms (Suneel et al., 2017).

While parents are the ones who determine the rules and values of the family system, the roles adopted by family members may impact one another (Bowen, 1978). Roles are adopted during childhood to individually and emotionally survive within the family (Black, 1979; 1982; Woititz, 1983; Woodside, 1983; Russell, Henderson and Blume, 1985). There may be a tendency to perpetuate these roles during adult life as well (Scharff et al., 2004). Roles adopted during childhood are thought to have an influence on personality traits (Black, 1979; 1982; Bosma, 1972; Hecht, 1973; Woititz, 1983) and job (Woititz, 1987; Mathews and Halbrook, 1990) and partner (Black, 1982) choices in adult life and to persist as maladaptive behaviors (Black, 1982; Scharff et al., 2004).

In the literature review, it was seen that the nature of dysfunctional families was mostly investigated in the context of parents' addictions to substances such as alcohol (Black, 1979; 1982; Fischer et al., 1991; Wampler et al., 2009; Wampler et al., 1993). Black (1982) and Wegscheider (1981) classified the roles of children with alcoholic parents into four categories, namely, the hero, the scapegoat, the mascot, and the lost child. These roles enable children to express their feelings and cope with conflicts within the family system (Bell and Bell, 1982); however, on the other hand, these roles

are adopted to help maintain the peace within the family, which prevents them from expressing their true feelings (Black 1979). Psychological disorders were found to be more common among children of parents with alcohol addiction (Fischer and Wampler; 1994; Scharff et al., 2004; Wampler et al., 1993). Contrary to studies explaining family dysfunctionality with alcoholism and addictions, some studies did not find a significant difference between the roles adopted by the children of non-alcoholic parents and the children of parents with alcohol addiction (Alford, 1998). The adoption of different roles seems to be happening also in families where there is no parental alcoholism (Alford, 1998; Deason and Randolph, 1998; Fischer and Wampler, 1994). Some strict role behaviors have been observed in siblings of children with disabilities (Atkins, 1991). Some studies in the literature have tried to describe the roles in the family and expand Wegscheider's (1991) definition of hero, scapegoat, lost child, and mascot by adding new roles and definitions (Margasiński, 2017; Samuel et al., 2014; Zagefka et al., 2020).

Children in the hero role are defined as success-oriented and parentized, caring for the whole family. Children in the scapegoat role are known to cause problems both within the family and in their social lives and not obey the law. Those in the lost child role are known for their silent, attuned, and withdrawn character. Children who adopt the mascot role, on the other hand, focus on alleviating conflict and reducing the level of stress among family members by making jokes (Black, 1982; Scharff et al., 2004; Zastrow, and Kirst-Ashman, 2012; Werner and Broida, 1991). While the lost children are more inclined to experience psychological problems in the future, the role least inclined to psychological problems later in life is that of the hero (Scharff et al., 2004), and mental health problems are seen less in children who adopt the hero and mascot roles (Suneel et al., 2017). The following characteristics of children in different roles were stated. Children in the role of hero draw positive attention to their achievements; those in the mascot role try to prevent the emergence of problems within the family with their cheerful attitude; those in the role of lost children stay on the sidelines and remain quiet; and children in the role of scapegoats attract negative attention with behaviors (Wegscheider, 1991). Studies reported that the scapegoat and lost child roles are more common in dysfunctional families (Alford, 1998; Potter and Williams,

1991; Zagefka et al., 2020). Yahav and Sharlin (2000; 2002) showed that the children of couples who cannot openly talk about their problems in their relationships tend to adopt the role of scapegoat. Similarly, Zagefka et al. (2020) found that the scapegoat and lost child roles were associated with individuals' depression symptoms in adult life.

Black (1982) and Wegscheider (1981) stated that children who adopt the hero role, who are usually the eldest child, are caregivers and responsible, that the children in the scapegoat role attract negative attention to themselves because of their problematic and action-oriented behaviors, that those in the lost child role are known for being forgotten and isolated, and that the children who adopt the mascot role are amusing and helpful in preventing the emergence of problems within the family (Potter and Williams, 1991).

The aim of this study was to examine the childhood roles in the family, the characteristics of these roles, and the family attitudes that shape the childhood roles, as well as to understand, interpret, and describe the length of time for which these roles were maintained by individuals into their adult lives, through a qualitative methodology. This study is carried out on the basis of the theoretical framework developed by Black (1982) and Wegscheider (1981) wherein they classified the roles into categories of "hero," "scapegoat," "lost child," and "mascot." Accordingly, how childhood roles are defined, the memories about these roles, and the attitudes of the parents that reinforced these roles were analyzed qualitatively. In addition, the reflections of childhood roles on adult life, family relationships, and relationships outside the family were examined.

## Method

The phenomenological model, a qualitative research method, was used to examine the childhood roles of individuals in the family of origin, the definition of these roles, the parental attitudes that contribute to the formation and perpetuation of these roles, and the manner in which childhood roles affect adult life, as well as to gain in-depth information on the subject. Approval was obtained with 2021-04/03 decision number from the Ethics Committee of Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University for the research study. For data collection, the "Personal Information Form"

prepared by the researchers to obtain the demographic characteristics of the participants and the “Open-Ended Question List” prepared by the researcher in line with the knowledge obtained from the literature review to examine the childhood roles, the attitudes of the parents, and the reflections of these roles on adult life were used. The data of the research were collected via Google Forms. At the beginning of the study, the participants were informed about the research, and the participants who approved it participated in the study. The researchers analyzed the data obtained by using the MaxQDA – Version 2018 software.

### Study group

The study group consisted of individuals who agreed to participate in the study via Google Forms and answered the questions in the data collection tools. The study group comprised 110 individuals, 91 (82.7%) of whom were women and 19 (17.3%) were men. The average age of the participants was 35.8 (ss = 9.13). Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Group**

Demographic Characteristics		f	%
Gender	Female	91	82,7
	Male	19	17,3
Marital Status	Married	56	50,9
	Single	54	49,1
Education Status	High school and below	4	3,6
	Associate degree	6	5,5
	Bachelor's degree	77	70,0
	Postgraduate	23	20,9
Birth Order	Oldest	41	37,3
	Middle	31	28,2
	Youngest	34	30,9
	Only child	4	3,6
Mother	Alive	96	87,3
	Not alive	14	12,7
Father	Alive	88	80,0
	Not alive	22	20,0
Parents' Marriage Status	Married to each other	83	75,5
	Divorced but not married to anyone else	3	2,7
	Mother or father remarried	4	3,6
	Separated due to the death of one of the parents	20	18,2
Total		110	100

## Data collection tools

**Personal information form:** This form was prepared by the researcher in light of the findings from the literature review. The form includes questions regarding gender, age, marital status, educational status, birth order, and parents.

**Open-ended questions list:** In line with the findings of the literature review and different qualitative studies on the topic, a 6-question open-ended questions list was prepared by the researcher to be able to examine the childhood roles the participants adopted in their families of origin, the definitions of these roles, and the reflections of these roles on adult life. The questions in the list were as follows. How would you define your role in your family of origin during your childhood? What would be an expression to describe you? Can you write an anecdote from your childhood that shows your role in the family? What were your mother's attitudes that reinforced your role? What were your father's attitudes that reinforced your role? Do you still play this role in the family you created as well? If you do, how? Have you ever played this role in non-family relationships? If you have, how? Can you write down a sample of event from your life?

## Data analysis

An applied thematic analysis via which the identification and analysis of implicit and explicit ideas from the data were made was utilized in this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). A key feature of thematic analysis is the breadth of scope, which means that the analytical process can be carried out with large data sets. The data set consisting of the answers given to the open-ended questions list was analyzed by the researchers using the MaxQDA – Version 2018 software package. First, the researchers divided the answers given to the questions into four different data sets in line with the childhood roles theoretical framework developed by Black (1982) and Wegscheider (1981), namely, "hero," "scapegoat," "lost child," and "mascot," they thought the answers corresponded with. Before the data set was divided into four, it was thoroughly examined by

a research support team consisting of three psychological science specialists, including the researcher, and the answers given to the questions about role definitions, role-related memories, parental attitudes, and reflections of the roles on adult life were evaluated as a whole. None of the answers given to the open-ended questions were examined under a broad category but under four categories: definitions of each childhood role, attitudes of the mother, attitudes of the father, and reflections of the roles on adult life. Codes were created under these four categories in line with the responses given by the participants. To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, the assignment to the codes under the categories was made separately by the research team. In the later stages of the analysis, the coding and recall functions in the program, as well as the codes and categories, were checked again by the research team. Categories, subcodes, and frequency of mention are determined and presented through MaxMaps as well.

## **Findings**

Several findings resulted from this qualitative study carried out to examine a host of issues. The childhood roles of individuals in the family of origin and the roles themselves were defined, the parent attitudes that affect the formation and perpetuation of these roles were examined, and the manner in which childhood roles affect adult life was investigated. All of this was based on the participants' answers to the questions in the "open-ended questions list," and they are given below.

## **Distribution of the study group members by childhood roles**

First, the researchers divided the answers given to the questions into four different data sets in line with the childhood roles theoretical framework developed by Black (1982) and Wegscheider (1981), namely, "hero," "scapegoat," "lost child," and "mascot," they thought the answers corresponded with. The data set was thoroughly examined by a three-person research team before dividing it into four. Subsequently, the answers given to the questions about role definitions, role-related memories, parent attitudes, and the effects of these roles on adult life were



evaluated in light of the findings of the literature review, and a childhood role was assigned to each participant. The frequency and percentages related to the distribution of the participants by role and the distribution of roles by gender and birth order are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

As seen in Table 2 and based on the answers given by the participants, 47.2% of the participants were assigned the role of hero, 10.9% scapegoat, 14.5% lost child, and 27.4% mascot. Accordingly, as can be seen in Table 2, 82.7% of the participants in the hero role were female and 17.3% were male, 100% of the participants in the scapegoat role were female, 81.3% of the participants in the lost child role were female and 18.8% were male, and 76.7% of participants in the mascot role were female and 23.3% were male.

**Table 2. Distribution of childhood roles by gender**

Childhood Role	F	%	Gender	F	%
Hero	52	47.2	Female	43	82.7
			Male	9	17.3
Scapegoat	12	10.9	Female	12	100
			Male	-	-
Lost Child	16	14.5	Female	13	81.3
			Male	3	18.8
Mascot	30	27.4	Female	23	76.7
			Male	7	23.3

However, when the distribution of childhood roles by birth order was examined, as seen in Table 3, 44.2% of the participants in the hero role were the oldest child, 26.9% were the middle and youngest children, and 1.9% were the only child. While 50% of the participants in the scapegoat role were the oldest child, 41.7% were the middle child, and 8.3% were the youngest child. It was observed that 31.3% of the participants in the lost child role were the oldest child, 25% were the middle child, 6.3% were the youngest child, and 37.5% were the only child. While 50% of the participants in the mascot role were the youngest child, 20% were the oldest child, and 23.3% were the middle child.

**Table 3. Distribution of childhood roles by birth order**

Childhood Role	f	%	Birth Order	F	%
Hero	52	47.2	Oldest	23	44.2
			Middle	14	26.9
			Youngest	14	26.9
			Only child	1	1.9
Scapegoat	12	10.9	Oldest	6	50.0
			Middle	5	41.7
			Youngest	1	8.3
			Only child	6	37.5
Lost Child	16	14.5	Oldest	5	31.3
			Middle	4	25.0
			Youngest	1	6.3
			Only child	6	37.5
Mascot	30	27.4	Oldest	6	20.0
			Middle	7	23.3
			Youngest	15	50.0
			Only child	2	6.7

### Themes and subcategories

The data set, which was classified into four in accordance with the four childhood roles, was examined under four categories, namely, *the definitions of the childhood roles, the attitudes of the mother that reinforced this role, the attitudes of the father that reinforced this role, and the reflections of these roles on adult life (intra and out-of-family relationships)*. Below are the subcodes of the categories, explanations of the codes, and examples from the participants' statements. In line with the ethical principles of scientific research, the real identities of the participants were not revealed; instead, numbers were assigned to each participant, and their statements were presented along with their participant numbers and genders.

**3.2.1. Hero** The subcodes of the categories of definitions of childhood roles, attitudes of the mother, attitudes of the father, and reflections of these roles on adult life for participants who had been in the hero child role are presented in Figure 1.

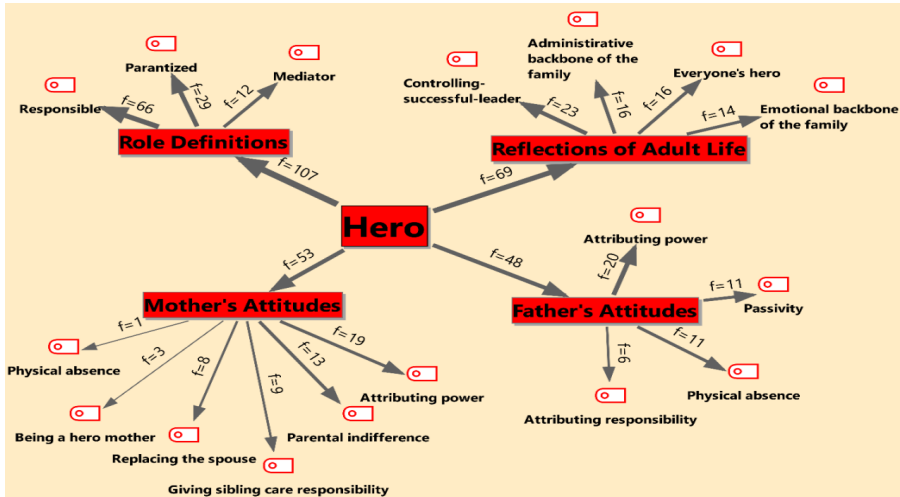


Figure 1. MAXMaps of Hero Role Subcodes (f = frequency of mention)

### Roles of the hero child

**Responsible:** Extremely attentive, savior, the backbone of the household, the good child, hardworking, bright, successful, well-advised, diligent, helpful, meticulous, person of duty, mature, loves to conquer difficulty

“One who keeps tabs on everything, the savior who makes the family life easier.” (F2)

“I was looking after my family.” (F3)

**Parentized:** The child assuming the role of the mother or the father, the leader role the parents should assume over their children, in the family system—the heroism of the child to the extent of parentization

“I was the older sister... the responsibility to take care of my younger siblings was given to me at such a young age.” (F23)

“I was like a father... I would be the one to answer the door at night.” (F46)

**Mediator:** Balancer, completer, problem-solver, compromiser, bridge

*"Balance... One day my older brother and sister-in-law had an argument over an issue and my brother was very angry. My sister-in-law shared the situation with my older sister. My sister called me and explained the situation. I went to my brother, talked to him, and calmed him down. He even realized his mistake and brought home a gift for his wife." (F25)*

*"Trying to be a mediator and peacemaker during my parents' arguments was generally tiring." (F39)*

### **Attitudes of the hero children's mothers**

**Attributing power:** Taking pride in the child's achievements, always unconditionally supporting the child, showing the child as an example, taking the child's advice, believing in the child's potential, and encouraging the child

*"They would be more sure than me that I would finish what I had started and never pressure me to do that thing. They would say 'You know what to do.'" (F75)*

*"My mother has always supported me unconditionally." (F31)*

**Parental indifference:** Lack of parental control and support

*"Nobody talked to me about the kind of stuff I felt anxious about (going to the doctor, dentist, etc.), and I was left with that anxiety; I had to deal with that feeling by myself." (F17)*

*"My mother was absent." (F10)*

**Giving sibling care responsibility:** Taking on the siblings' physical and emotional responsibility

*"The responsibility of my sibling was put on my shoulders. This responsibility came with tasks..." (F2)*

**Replacing the spouse:** Mother putting the child in place of her husband, placing her expectations from her spouse on the child

*"She would act like I am her husband." (F46)*

**Being a hero mother:** The mother being in the hero role as well and the hero child idolizing her

*"My mother mentored and led all of us by adopting a patient, determined, and strong approach. She had such a power that she would not even raise her voice; you would understand what she expects from the way she looks at you." (F47)*

**Physical absence of mother:** Mother having died or not physically being with the child for a reason

*"I developed a sense of responsibility after my mother passed away." (F79)*

### **Attitudes of the hero children's fathers**

**Attributing power:** Emphasizing the success of, as well as supporting, trusting, and appreciating, the child

*"He would say that I was like a lion and even better than him. He would pray to God in order for me not to feel his absence." (M87)*

*"He would always make me believe that I would be successful." (F41)*

**Passivity:** The father being weak, having no power over the family system, and usually placing his own parental responsibility on the mother

*"He always passed the buck to my mother, thinking that she would know the best about everything." (F17)*

*"My father remained passive within the family and could not intervene in anything. He also would not take any responsibility." (F25)*

**Physical absence:** Father having died or not physically being with the child for a reason

*"I would not see my father much when I was growing up because of his profession." (F44)*

*"I took on responsibility because my father had died." (F79)*

**Attributing responsibility:** Placing too much responsibility on the child

*"My father would send me everywhere." (M98)*

*"I grew up with a father figure who thought I was capable of doing more. He would have criticisms of his own." (M97)*

## **Hero children in their adult lives**

**Controlling-successful-leader:** Feeling the need to be successful at school and at work, to retain control, and to take a leading role in different systems

*“The fact that I finished school and grew up to a sensible person is a result of this role.” (M6)*

*“I want to be in control both in my family and in my professional life; I do not ask someone else for help even when I am busy. Nobody can do my job as well as I do.” (F59)*

**Administrative backbone of the family:** Having the power to make important decisions in the family, to take responsibility, to be the advisor, to manage the family system

*“I still have an important role in running the family.” (M81)*

*“I try to take care of my family’s errands inside and outside the house that are difficult for them to do, such as bank transactions, things to be done on the Internet, etc.” (F88)*

**Everyone’s hero:** Being the problem-solver, helping hand, supporter, decision-maker, and guide in other relationships (Friendships, romantic relationships, professional relationships, etc.)

*“In my spare time, I help my boyfriend and other friends who currently receive their education online with their homework.” (F29)*

*“In my professional life, I was the mediator in conflicts within the department. I was also asked to take a role in the resolution of a problem between neighbors.” (F47)*

**Emotional backbone of the family:** Being the person who takes the responsibility of solving problems and maintaining the emotional balance of the family.

*“Although I got married and left home, I still try to offer my family all the emotional support I can give.” (F69)*

*“Certainly my role in the family continues... The burden of solving family disagreements is still mine.” (F86)*

## Scapegoat

The subcodes of the categories of definitions of childhood roles, attitudes of the mother, attitudes of the father, and reflections of these roles on adult life for participants who had been in the scapegoat child role are presented in Figure 2.

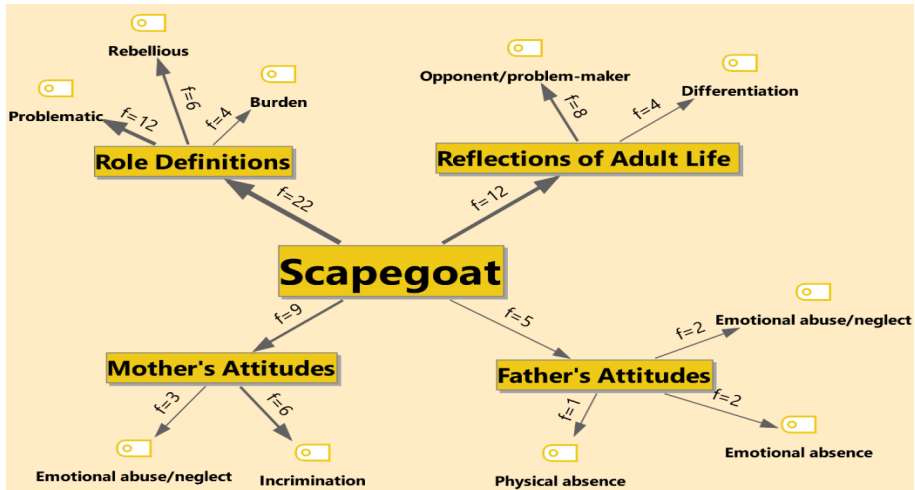


Figure 2. MAXMaps of Scapegoat Role Subcodes

## Roles of the scapegoat child

**Problematic:** Lazy, selfish, insidious, problematic, naughty, misfit, and messy

*"Selfish, insidious, problematic..." (F42)*

*"I was the scapegoat... I would take a beating because of my sibling's faults." (F74)*

**Rebellious:** Rebel, stubborn, heterodox

*"Rebellious and wayward... That's how people described me, as well as angry and lonely." (F108)*

*"Stubborn... When my mother asked me to help her with the housework, I would resist doing it." (F19)*

**Burden:** Feeling like a burden, an unwanted person in the family

*"Burden... They would say that they did everything for me." (F7)*

### **Attitudes of the scapegoat children's mothers**

**Incrimination:** Getting angry, blaming, always supporting the other party

*"She would never support me. She always thought that the other party was right." (F61)*

*"She would get angry at me." (F67)*

**Emotional abuse/neglect:** Frightening, threatening, humiliating, and rejecting the child, not showing affection to the child, making the child work at an early age, showing inconsistency in the love and attention given to the child, and not giving the child the needed emotional intimacy and closeness

*"Whether I was wrong or right, she would tell me that my sibling was too young and I should let the problem go." (F42)*

*"... otherwise, she did not hesitate to say things that would offend me in front of the family or in a social gathering." (F71)*

*"During the renovation of the house, my mother told the worker to adjust the height of the kitchen counter based on my height..." (F71)*

### **Attitudes of the scapegoat children's fathers**

**Emotional abuse/neglect:** Frightening, threatening, humiliating, and rejecting the child, not showing affection to the child, making the child work at an early age, showing inconsistency in the love and attention given to the child, and not giving the child the needed emotional intimacy and closeness

*"... He would have even more expectations than my mother such as in helping him put on his socks, shining his shoes, etc. He would resort to physical violence even if I was a little late, let alone not doing what he wanted." (F71)*

*"My father would engage in physical and emotional violence against me at my mother's instructions." (F108)*

**Emotional absence:** The father being emotionally unavailable



*"He would take my mother's side." (F30)*

*"My father would usually stay silent about the happenings in the house." (F37)*

**Physical absence:** Father having died or not physically being with the child for a reason.

*"No, we haven't met." (F7)*

### **Scapegoat Children in Their Adult Lives**

**Opponent/problem-maker:** Opposing, antagonistic, problem-maker

*"I have a critical attitude, I criticize many things, I am sharp-tongued, and I tend to spoil the mood of others." (F61)*

*"I still resist doing things I don't want to do." (F19)*

**Differentiation:** Being able to build a personality, distinguish thoughts from emotions, and balance individual and social life despite outside pressures.

*"Despite my past, I take responsibility, offer support, and manage things only when I want to. I try to prevent people from taking advantage of me whenever they want to..." (F71)*

*"Today, I still have an opponent part in me, and my selfish, insidious and problematic personality traits have considerably disappeared; however, the feeling of responsibility with which I replaced these traits seems to have created a rather boring person, so, I need to work a lot on my joyful traits." (F42)*

### **Lost child**

The subcodes of the categories of definitions of childhood roles, attitudes of the mother, attitudes of the father, and reflections of these roles on adult life for participants who had been in the lost child role are presented in Figure 3.

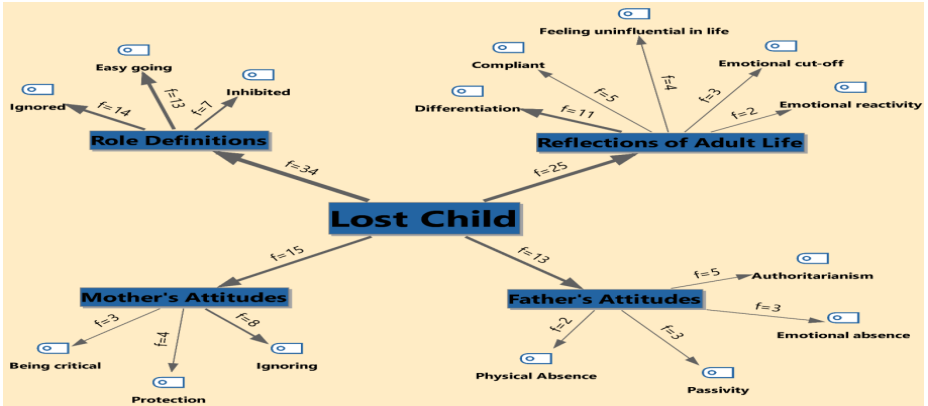


Figure 3. MAXMaps of Lost Child Role Subcodes

## Roles of the lost child

**Ignored:** Overlooked, pretended to be unseen

*"Self-sustaining individual..." (F12)*

*"Invisible... I have no memory of someone paying attention to me." (F16)*

*"Ignored..." (F27)*

**Easy Going:** Keeping up with the family system, adapting

*"I was an adaptable child... I would frequently go to another city to stay with my grandmother because my parents would be busy with work, but I always reacted positively to it." (F5)*

*"I was quiet, calm." (F96)*

*"I was a mature child." (F22)*

**Inhibited:** Suppressed, silenced, meek

*"I was suppressed." (F33)*

*"I was an inhibited child... I was always oppressed; I never felt like anyone was ever around me." (F73)*

*"It was sad..." (F72)*

## Attitudes of the lost Children's Mothers

**Ignoring:** Ignoring the child, as well as their presence and needs

*"My family supported my older brothers in any way they can for years with the thought that they were the problematic children so their needs should be met."* (F27)

*"My mother was emotionally unavailable. For example, around the age of 5, when I would act stubborn and cry, my mother would leave me to myself and show no affection whatsoever."* (F99)

**Protection:** Protecting the child from negativity

*"My mother would never leave me alone..."* (F5)

*"She would do everything to protect her children."* (F72)

**Being critical:** Criticizing and judging the child

*"She was constantly critical of and unsatisfied with everything."* (F16)

*"She was extremely serious, critical, and prescriptive."* (F33)

### **Attitudes of the lost children's fathers**

**Authoritarianism:** Firm, oppressive, discriminatory

*"My father always thought that he was right; it was impossible to have a proper discussion with him, to have an opportunity to speak up my mind, even if he was in the wrong."* (F99)

*"My father would tell me that a girl would not speak."* (F73)

**Passivity:** The father being weak, having no power over the family system, and usually placing his own parental responsibility on the mother

*"Uninfluential, clueless."* (F16)

*"My father generally would not interfere much."* (F63)

**Emotional absence:** The father being emotionally unavailable

*"My father was very busy with his work."* (F22)

*"It was my father's fault, but we were in no place to get mad at him as he was sick."* (F72)

**Physical Absence:** Father having died or not physically being with the child for a reason

*"My father was very busy with his work."* (F22)

*"My father died when I was 2 years old." (F27)*

### **Lost children in their adult lives**

**Differentiation:** Being able to build a personality, distinguish thoughts from emotions, and balance individual and social despite outside pressures

*"... now I live in a different city and I maintain my place within the family." (F5)*

*"I have been prioritizing my own wishes for a long time. I can make sacrifices, but as long as I don't steal too much from myself... I do the same thing in my other relationships and stand my ground" (F18)*

*"Yes. I see the benefits of resilience now; I decide on what to do about everything and I am independent." (F22).*

**Compliant:** Remaining silent in order not to disturb the order rather than based on a mutual agreement; acting according to the wants of others

*"I always act harmoniously in my friendships." (F5)*

*"I generally display behaviors my friends expect of me; I am calm." (F63)*

**Feeling Uninfluential in Life:** Feeling invisible and impotent in various areas of life

*"Now, I live a quiet and dull life, as expected from me..." (F63)*

*"In crowded settings, I do not talk too much, and I tend to stay away from discussions..." (F99)*

**Emotional cutoff:** Individuals trying to separate themselves from the family of origin by putting physical distance between them, keeping interactions short and superficial, and thus, keeping away from family problems

*"I am married now, I try to do everything without asking for help; it is difficult for me to ask for help." (F12)*

*"I am not playing their games now because I am far away." (F78)*

**Emotional Reactivity:** Giving emotional reactions

*"... I have become a more aggressive and stubborn person... In my romantic relationship, I usually feel sad when I don't have things my way." (F63)*

## Mascot

The subcodes of the categories of definitions of childhood roles, attitudes of the mother, attitudes of the father, and reflections of these roles on adult life for participants who had been in the mascot child role are presented in Figure 4.

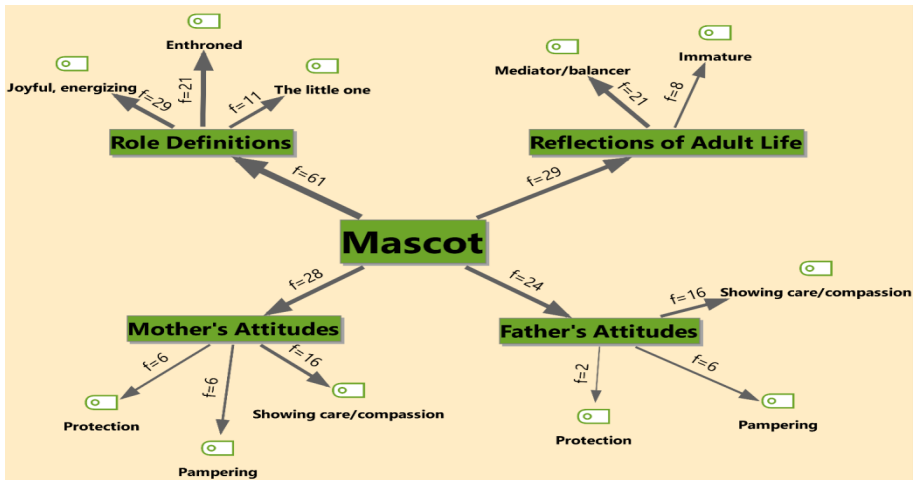


Figure 4. MAXMaps of Mascot Role Subcodes (f = frequency of mention)

## Roles of the mascot child

**Joyful, energizing:** Cute, knowledgeable, hyperactive, loving, dynamic, happy, source of joy of the household, love-spreader, irreplaceable, the center of focus

"I was a motivating child... I used to convince my family to go on a trip together." (F13)

"I used to clear the atmosphere even in the tensest of situations with only a joke." (F60)

**Enthroned:** The Sultan, spoiled, the only child, treated like royalty, coddled, favorite, in the center stage, lucky, pampered, loved

*"I am the first grandchild on both my parents' sides... I was coddled, the center of attention, and pampered." (F43)*

*"The whole family would buy me toys and want to spend time with me." (F4)*

**The little one (of the household):** The youngest member of the family

*"Since I was the youngest child, I would be advantageous in most matters compared to my siblings." (F95)*

### **Attitudes of the Mascot Children's Mothers**

**Showing care/compassion:** Caring, paying attention, supporting, nursing, expressing love

*"When she felt angry, I would make her laugh and she would be happy again." (F26)*

*"The attention she gave me and the way she would her love were priceless." (F52)*

**Protection:** Being protective of and caring for the child

*"She would make my decisions for me and not give me an opportunity to speak." (F48)*

*"She would tell me not to worry about things." (F9)*

**Pampering:** Valuing the child above everything, spoiling and indulging the child

*"I was my mother's 9th child; my first four siblings had passed away. She was going to abort me but then gave up on doing it her way to the hospital... She always tells me how happy she is to have had me." (F103)*

### **Attitudes of the Mascot Children's Fathers**

**Showing care/compassion:** Caring, paying attention, supporting, nursing, expressing love

*"While coming home, he would bring me food that would make me happy." (F40)*

*"My father would let me be, and he loved me very much." (M8)*

**Pampering:** Valuing the child above everything, spoiling and indulging the child

*"He would meet my needs without my having to ask for it; I had it all." (F48)*

*"I was always his priority; he would do whatever I wanted and shape his day according to me." (F62)*

**Protection:** Being protective of and caring for the child

*"My father would go easier on me than my mother." (F43)*

### **Mascot Children in Their Adult Lives**

**Mediator/balancer:** Problem-solver, advisor, conciliator

*"I organize the holidays, trips, and social gatherings. I am the one who assembles the team. That's why I have always been a team leader and manager since my formative years." (F13)*

*"I have taken my whole family under my wings... I am an organizer. I love to unite people." (F14)*

**Immature:** Seeking material and moral support, juvenile

*"I still receive material support from my family... I am always the weak side in my relationships, who demands attention." (F48)*

*"I am also well-liked among my friends, they see me as though their younger siblings." (M104)*

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to examine the childhood roles in the family, the characteristics of these roles, and the family attitudes that shape the childhood roles, as well as to understand, interpret, and describe for how long these roles were maintained by individuals in their adult lives. Our personality, our character traits, and the roles we play in life are shaped by our childhood experiences (Black, 1979; 1982; Woititz, 1983; Woodside, 1983; Russell, Henderson, and Blume, 1985). Although many theorists in the literature have focused on the reflections of childhood life in adult life, there are very few studies on identifying the kind of roles we have in the family in childhood and the reflections of these roles in adult life (Black,

1979; 1982; Bosma, 1972; Hecht, 1973; Mathews and Halbrook 1990. Scharff et al., 2004; Woititz, 1983; 1987). Accordingly, this study aimed to provide an in-depth examination of the childhood roles.

Some studies in the literature have tried to describe the roles in the family and expand Black (1982) and Wegsneider's (1981) definitions of hero, scapegoat, lost child, and mascot by adding new roles and definitions (Margasiński, 2017; Samuel et al., 2014; Zagefka et al., 2020). In his study, Margasiński (2017) defined the role of "*iron child*," who are individuals raised in a dysfunctional family, but who did not seem to have any mental problems. Samuel et al. (2014) identified the roles of "*hero, aggressor, mascot, and withdrawn*" as subdimensions in the scales they developed in the Pakistan sample. Zagefka et al. (2020), on the other hand, expanded this classification by adding the roles of "*caretaker*" and "*mastermind*." This study was carried out on the basis of Wegsneider's (1981) descriptions of hero, scapegoat, lost child, and mascot childhood roles.

Upon evaluation of the findings of the study regarding gender and birth order, it is seen that the roles of hero, lost child, and mascot can be played in both genders and that scapegoats were all women. When evaluated in terms of birth order, it can be seen that most of the hero children are the oldest child, that the vast majority of scapegoats and lost children are the oldest and the middle children, and that a majority of mascot children are the youngest child. Although this study is not generalizable as it is a qualitative study, it suggests that the oldest and the middle children shoulder the burden of the family system more by acquiring negative childhood roles. It was stated in previous studies that the youngest children are pampered and dependent on others and might sometimes have false claims (Feist and Feist, 2006), that they are the most sociable and well liked, and that they have strong empathy skills (Eckstein et al., 2010). Kalkan and Koç (2007) found that the oldest children tend to have a proactive and solution-oriented approach, that the middle children are submissive, powerless, and desperate, and that the youngest children, because they are protected within the family, are more passive and accepting, and they may give up more easily in the face of problems. The fact that those in the mascot role are mostly composed of the youngest children can be explained by the fact that they tend to solve problems in



the family system in a more passive way, not by addressing the problem but by distracting attention from it by means of joy, fun, and jokes. On the other hand, although there is insufficient evidence regarding the relevance of gender in this regard, it can be suggested that daughters carry the emotional burden of a family more than sons do and that they are more likely to be a part of triangulations within the family to alleviate tension. In their study, Vogel and Bell (1976) stated that the scapegoat of the family is usually a child as they have little power and are flexible enough to adapt to the role their families assign to them. Because girls are perceived as less powerful than boys are in families, this role may be more easily assigned to them.

**Heroes:** The findings of this study show that the hero children define their roles as "responsible," "parentized," and "mediator." It is seen in relevant studies in the literature that individuals who adopt the role of hero in childhood tend to take responsibility and attach importance to success, thus keeping positive attention on them (Black, 1982; Scharff et al., 2004; Zastrow, and Kirst-Ashman, 2012; Wegsneider, 1981; Werner and Broida, 1991). The attitudes of the hero children's mothers are attributing power, parental indifference, giving sibling care responsibility, replacing the spouse, being a hero, and physical absence, and the attitudes of the hero children's fathers are attributing power, passivity, physical absence, and attributing responsibility. Those who take on the hero role do everything right, show success, and take on the responsibilities of the house and other family members, as well as try to maintain the balance of the family system (Margasiński, 2017; Samuel et al., 2014; Zagefka et al., 2020). It is seen that those who took on the hero role as a child continue to be heroes in their adult lives, being the hero of everyone at their home, at work, and in their friendships, as well as taking the leadership role and emotional responsibility of the family because of their controlling-successful-leader personalities. Samuel et al. (2014) stated that the more the individuals internalize their role the more responsibilities they take on. It can be said that the physical or emotional absence of one of the parents pushes the child to take responsibility of the family, sometimes to the extent of parenting, and sometimes to playing the role of mediator to maintain the balance within the family system. It is seen that parents can heroize the

child by giving sibling care responsibility or attributing more power than they have. In the light of findings similar to those of this study, Samuel, et al. (2014) defined the role of the hero child as that of the one who adopts the role of organizer within the family so that the family functions well, takes responsibility to ensure the well-being of family members at the expense of their own, and always provides social and emotional support to family members. The statements of one of the participants, F14, which go thus, *“I went to a university in another city. My mother always calls me when she has a problem with my father because my older brother is disabled and my younger brother is in middle school. I used to do 8 to 9 hour-long commutes home every weekend just so that my mother could go to the hospital and I could take care of my brothers or that I could help my mother with housework. My mother would call me when she felt like she could not handle something. She would rarely call me to ask how I was. For example, if she could not find a document at home, she called me and scolded me when I could not remember where it was. My duty has always been to make sacrifices. When my friends saw me with a suitcase, they would ask if I was going home again. Should an appointment be made? It was up to me. Did I forget to make the appointment? I would be scolded again. Did she argue with my father? I had to support my mother. As if I had to choose a side. I had to make sure that my family members did not have any plans for me before making plans with my friends,”* show that in parallel with the findings of relevant studies, the hero role is adopted in the childhood years and maintained into the university years, exemplifying how children in the hero role take the leadership responsibility in the family, provide social and emotional support, and prioritize the well-being of the family members at their expense. Atkins (1991) stated that individuals with disabled siblings could be assigned more rigid roles by their parents. In the above statement, F14 rationalizes adopting the hero role and her mother’s behaviors with having a disabled sibling. Margasiński (2017) stated that it is usually the oldest child who plays this role.

**Scapegoats:** The findings of this study show that the scapegoat children define their roles as “problematic,” “rebellious,” and “burden.” Individuals who assume the role of scapegoats are defined as problem makers and are held responsible for the chaos within the family (Margasiński, 2017; Samuel et al., 2014; Zagefka et al., 2020). The following

statement of *F108* shows how scapegoats are triangulated within the family system, that is, targeted by the parents as the third party when they cannot cope with the conflicts among themselves: *"Apparently, my rebellious attitude helped my parents agree on something and talk to each other. I see that better now."* The attitudes of the scapegoat children's mothers are Incrimination and emotional abuse/neglect, and the attitudes of the scapegoat children's fathers are emotional abuse/neglect and emotional and physical absence. It is seen that scapegoat children go in one of the two opposite directions in their adult lives. On the one hand, some continue to be scapegoats in their other relationships as the opponent/problem-maker; on the other hand, some depart from their role as well as the family system. Actions such as coming home late, objecting to assigned duties, disobedience, and not taking part in the housework play a role in individuals being perceived as aggressor (Samuel, et al., 2014). *F61's* description of her childhood attitude as *"Naughty, incompatible, and problem-maker"* and her statement *"When my cousins did not take me among them, I tried to beat up one of them"* support the findings of the literature review. However, the scapegoat children who separated themselves from their families are less likely to experience triangulation; they can stand their ground both in their new relationships, regardless of how intense they are, as well as in their family system, and establish a balance between unity and individuality. Scapegoats who differentiate themselves from the family state that they feel less emotional responsibility for their families of origin.

**Lost children:** The findings of this study show that the lost children define their roles as "ignored," "easy going," and "inhibited." The lost child tends to be emotionally sensitive (Zagefka et al., 2020). According to the definition of Samuel, et al. (2014), the withdrawn child spends time alone, does not attend functions, and is shy and quiet. *F99's* description of her childhood attitude as *"Not very problematic, adaptable, quiet, and a lonely kid who is not much of a sharer"* supports the findings of the literature review. The attitudes of the lost children's mothers are ignoring, protection, and being critical, and the attitudes of the lost children's fathers are authoritarianism, passivity and emotional and physical absence. It is seen that in their adult lives, some lost children are "compliant" in that they

keep up with the system rather than actually fitting in it, that they are quiet and submissive, and that they feel uninfluential in many settings outside the family as well. On the other hand, some of the lost children drift apart from their families of origin in their adult lives to distance themselves from the problems within the family system, keeping their interactions short and superficial. In other words, they experience emotional cutoff and try to keep themselves out of the unresolved problems within the family system. Some lost children, however, become overly emotional in their adult lives, that is, they give intense emotional reactions to developments and situations. Last, some lost children seem to get themselves rid of this role, just as some scapegoats do, and evolve as a person, being able to stand their ground both within the family system and in other relationships, regardless of how intense they are and despite outside pressure, and to establish a balance between unity and individuality.

**Mascots:** The findings of this study show that the mascot children define their roles as “Joyful, energizing,” “enthroned,” and “the little one.” Samuel et al. (2014) defines mascots as individuals who make family members happy: constantly joking, smiling, cheerful, entertaining, and even acting as the clown of the family to reduce the tension within the family system. The dominant emotions felt by the mascot are fear and insecurity (Margasiński, 2017). F26’s description of her childhood attitude as “*The source of joy of the household*” and her statement “*When my mother got upset, I would make a joke and lighten the mood*” support the description of the mascot role identified by Samuel et al. (2014). The attitudes of the mascot children’s mothers are showing care/compassion, pampering, and protection, and the attitudes of the mascot children’s fathers are, similar to those of the mothers’, showing care/compassion, protection, and pampering. It was seen that the attitudes of both parents toward the mascot children are positive and that they glorify them. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the youngest children constitute a majority of mascots. Similar to the scapegoats, mascots seem to take one of two opposite directions in their adult lives: they can either be a mediator/balancer or be an immature person. It can be seen that the mascot children who grow up to be a mediator/balancer transform their

joyful, fun, and the little-one-of-the-household attitude into the role of problem-solver, advisor, and conciliator. However, it is noteworthy that some of the mascots still need financial and moral support from their family, often openly stating that they need this support, and tend to triangulate within the family system by behaving like they are still the little ones of the household.

### **Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Studies**

It is observed in this study that the hero child role comes with assuming responsibility, parent-like attitudes, and a mediator role in the family system and that the attitudes of such children's parents attribute more power and responsibility to the child in question. It is seen that hero children grow up to be controlling, successful, or leading, perpetuating their hero roles both in the families they create and their other relationships, by taking responsibility. It is observed that the scapegoat children describe themselves as problematic, rebellious, and burden-like and that their parents treat them with neglect, abuse, emotional estrangement, and accusation. In adult life, scapegoats either let go of this role upon being separated from the family or maintain this oppositional and problematic role. On the other hand, lost children are those who are ignored, easy going, and inhibited. The attitudes of the parents toward lost children are emotional absence, ignoring, authoritarianism, or being critical. Lost children either abandon this role in adult life upon separating from the family or perpetuate their passive, compliant roles. Mascot children regard themselves as the one who gives joy and lightens the mood in the family, enthroned, and is the little one. Parental attitudes toward these children are showing care/compassion, protection, and pampering. In their adult relationships, the mascots adopt either a mediating/balancing role or an immature role.

This qualitative study aimed to describe childhood roles in detail, as well as the parental attitudes that reinforce these roles, rather than aiming to prove the generalizability of these roles. In future studies, these roles could be examined using quantitative methods and the variables that affect these roles can be determined. The most important limitation of the study is that due to the non-symmetrical gender distribution among

participants, no meaningful findings were obtained on the role of gender in the acquisition of these roles. Empirical studies may be carried out on how demographic characteristics such as gender, the vital status of the parents, birth order, and the existence of a disabled sibling or parent predict the role adopted in childhood. In a recent study on childhood roles, the role of "iron child" was set forth. The definitions of this role, the parental attitudes that shape it, and its reflections on adult life can be examined in depth with qualitative studies. It is hoped that the findings of this study on childhood roles are useful to psychotherapists working with individuals and families in therapeutic interventions addressing the effects of the family system on the individual and aiming to transform the dysfunctional roles adopted in childhood.

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### Citation Information

Yavuz Güler, Ç. (2021). Parental attitudes determining children's roles and reflections of children's roles on adult life: A qualitative study. *OPUS– International Journal of Society Research*, 18(Eğitim Bilimleri Özel Sayısı), 4013-4045. DOI: 10.26466/opus.948457.