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# "Mothers like Us Think Differently": Mothers' Negotiations of Virginity in Contemporary Turkey

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“Mothers like Us Think Differently”:  
Mothers’ Negotiations of Virginity in Contemporary Turkey

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **Dedication**

*Annem 'e.* To my mother.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	6
Turkey: Historical Change and Clash of Cultures .....	6
Creation and Perpetuation of the Discourse of Virginity.....	11
Theoretical Framework.....	18
Third Space Feminism .....	18
Tactical Subjectivity .....	21
Method .....	22
Recruitment and Data Collection.....	22
Participants.....	24
Translation and Analysis.....	25
Analysis.....	27
Negotiating Virginity from a “Borderland” Country.....	29
Tactical Subjectivities: Modern Women, Modern Mothers, Caring Mothers .....	31
Modern Women .....	32
Modern Mothers & Caring Mothers .....	35
Changing the Discourse of Virginity .....	39
“Virginal Facades” .....	39
Young Circles .....	41
Pedagogical Practices.....	42
Other Agents of Change: Sons.....	43
Conclusion .....	45
References.....	51
Appendix A: IRB Study Approval Letter .....	57

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Descriptions of Participants .....	24
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## **Abstract**

Even though virginity in Turkey is commonly defined, thus gendered, as losing the hymen, in Turkish society, discourses of virginity connect to broader discussions, such as modernity, morality, social honor/shame, religion, family values, and even medicine (vaginismus and artificial hymen surgery). Previous scholarship on women's rights in Turkey outlines how historical approaches by Kemalist secularism were not enough to diminish oppressive social norms such as virginity and how the current conservative government and elements of traditional Turkish society perpetuate virginity as an important virtue for unmarried women. This study adds seven Turkish mothers' interpretations of what I am calling the contemporary Turkish discourse of virginity, as well as the mothers' descriptions of their pedagogical practices on the topic of premarital sex with regard to their adult children. Here I report the semi-structured interviews I conducted with heterosexual urban Turkish mothers, 45-60 years old, college-educated, and socioeconomically privileged, living in Western Turkey, a region more closely aligned with European ideals. Participant mothers self-identify as Kemalist women, meaning secular, and use this perspective in describing virginity and its role in the contemporary Turkish society. I argue, first, that the "modern" participant mothers speak from an interstitial location, which is the result of contradictions between secular and conservative ideals in Turkey. Second, the participant mothers discuss virginity tactically from three different subjectivities: modern women who believe in women's rights, modern mothers who respect their daughters' choices regarding premarital sex, and caring mothers who worry about the social consequences of their daughters' choices in a society that still stigmatizes the loss of virginity. Third, as a result of

these shifting subjectivities, participant mothers observe as well as participate in a subtle social change in urban Western Turkey, which I argue is moving the politics of virginity from a social imperative toward covert practices of choice. The transcripts also show the underlying presumption of heterosexuality not only among participant mothers' negotiations of virginity but also in the broader modern Turkish discourse of virginity. By bringing forward the voices of these participant mothers, this study aims to portray the complex structure of Turkish society and document interpretations of a discourse that oppresses Turkish women

## **Introduction**

*I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, p.44).*

This study analyzes seven Turkish mothers’ negotiations of the discourse of virginity in contemporary Turkey. Here, I define the Turkish discourse of virginity as the complex historical, cultural, political, and religious ideologies surrounding Turkish women’s chastity that informs gendered social relations in today’s Turkey. Through interviewing heterosexual urban Turkish mothers who are 45-60 years old, college-educated, and socioeconomically privileged, this study aimed to understand how these mothers “think differently” about virginity, and in what ways they talk about its role in the society, in their lives, and in the lives’ of their children. This work not only brings forward the participant mothers’ voices, but also it situates Turkey as a “borderland” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012) country, something in between and not wholly of either the Middle East or Europe. Participant mothers in this study also occupy a between space in Turkish society due to their “modern” ideas regarding gender and women while being members of a conservative culture, and they discussed virginity from three different positionalities: modern women, modern mothers, and caring mothers. Shifting among these positionalities enables participant mothers to both communicate strategies for survival and cultivate a safe space for their children from which to subvert the normative gender-specific discourse around virginity in Turkey.



In a 2014 speech about Turkish TV shows and the immorality of society, the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, Bulent Arinc, said: “[The woman] will know what is *haram*<sup>1</sup> and not *haram*. She will not laugh in public. She will not be inviting in her attitudes and will protect her chasteness” (Dearden, 2014). He added, “Where are our girls, who slightly blush, lower their heads and turn their eyes away when we look at their face, becoming the symbol of chastity?” (Dearden, 2014). More recently, in 2015, the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, supported Arinc’s claims in a sexist and essentialist declaration in his speech about domestic violence and women’s rights:

You cannot make women and men equal; this is against nature... You cannot subject a pregnant woman to the same working conditions as a man...

You cannot make a mother who has to breastfeed her child equal to a man.

You cannot make women do everything men do like the communist regimes did...this is against her delicate nature. (Cetingulec, 2015)

Still, it is women’s bodies that are the general concern of the government in Turkey; it is women’s bodies that need to be protected and preserved for men.

The discourse of virginity as it is related to women’s bodies and specifically defined by the presence or absence of the hymen surrounds the lives of women in Turkey. But it is not solely about having sex or losing virginity; it is also attached to many other broader aspects of the culture, such as modernity, marriage, morality, and respectability. Although issues about women’s lives are deemed private and kept hidden from the public gaze, the discourse of virginity in Turkey is often in the news, movies, political speeches, legislation, and everyday conversations. Being a virgin is the presumptive norm in hetero-patriarchal Turkish society, and women who are not virgins become regarded as deviant, less pure, and undesirable. Valuing

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<sup>1</sup> *Haram* is a word coming from Quran. It refers to the acts and sayings that are considered sins in Islam.

women only for their virginity reinforces a sexual double standard and posits women at the center of the discourse. Women's value is reduced to what they choose to do or not to do sexually in a social context that offers few choices. That is why in an effort to protect their dignity and respect in the society, women "choose" to suppress their sexuality and protect their virginity (Alemdaroglu, 2015; Ergun, 2007; Muftuler-Bac, 1999).

The existing literature on virginity in Turkey mostly revolves around the historical failure to emancipate women in Turkey (Arat, 1994; Ozdemir, 2010; Parla, 2001), the notion of honor/shame in society (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003), the religious grounds of virginity (Gelbal, Duyan & Ozturk, 2008), the East-West cultural clash in Turkey (Kandiyoti, 1987; Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012), the central importance of marriage and family (Alemdaroglu, 2015; Cindoglu, 1997; Ozyegin, 2009; Tekeli, 1995), and the rise of a sexual disorder called vaginismus resulting from psychological pressure imposed on women by the society to preserve virginity (Tugrul & Kabakci, 1997). Some authors argue that today the understanding of virginity, especially within circles of young adults, is changing and shifting toward Westernized notions of "choice," that a woman is a rational agent who is capable of making decisions about her sexual life (Ellialti, 2008; Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012). Drawing from the previous literature, this study examines how 45- to 60-year-old, college-educated, modern, and economically stable women in Turkey define the concept of virginity and where they locate it within their own and their adult children's lives. I believe that collecting the narratives of these women and analyzing them sheds light on a group that has not been studied before.

Anzaldúa (1987/2012) states that women abstain from feeling strong and powerful by internalizing the role of a victim within patriarchal societies. She argues that women should not

hesitate to fight for their rights and lives. Women should not look for others to blame, but rather they should find ways to challenge oppressive belief systems. In this study, I followed Anzaldúa's challenge and took women's voices seriously. I strived to open up new lines of research through analyzing a socially problematic discourse—virginity—and by listening to Turkish mothers whose voices are generally not heard in either the academic literature or Turkish culture more broadly.

I write as a cisgender heterosexual Turkish feminist researcher who is receiving graduate education in a Western institution. As a Turkish woman interviewing Turkish mothers, I could understand, on a personal level, the cultural norms and social values imposed on the women as described by the participant mothers in this study. At the same time, talking to a *feminist* researcher encouraged the participant mothers to converse freely with me about their “modern” ideas about women's sexuality and virginity, according to my transcripts. I want to note that I knew the participant mothers and their children prior to this research. This might have caused them discomfort in talking to me about their children's virginity, but the participant mothers still shared their personal experiences and how they addressed the subject of virginity with their children. Therefore, I believe that the rapport I had with the participant mothers and my positionality as a Turkish woman the same age as their children allowed me to communicate with participants better and to interpret their responses with a more self-conscious eye for issues of validity and dependability as described by Chilisa (2012).

I first start by outlining how the literature frames the discourse of virginity in Turkey. The literature review is divided into two sections. The first, “Turkey: Historical change and the clash of cultures,” deals with the history of women's emancipation in Turkey and covers current criticisms of previous feminist movements. The second section of the literature review presents

current arguments surrounding the creation and the perpetuation of the discourse of virginity in Turkey by the government and by social norms. Then, I explain my theoretical framework, based on tactical subjectivity (Sandoval, 1991, 2000), by way of third space feminism (Bañuelos 2006; Pérez 1994; Villenas, 2006), which informs this study. In the methods section, I describe the semi-structured interviews I collected and analyzed using feminist critical-interpretive textual analysis. In the analysis section, I present my interpretations of the interviews to present three main arguments: (1) Participant mothers spoke from an interstitial location between Kemalist secular ideals and traditional conservative religious norms in Turkey. (2) Mothers shifted among three subjective positionalities when talking about virginity in Turkey: modern women, modern mothers, and caring mothers. (3) Participants' mothering practices in conjunction with the growing Turkish phenomenon of "virginal facades" (women pretending to be virgins) is moving the politics of virginity from a social imperative toward covert practices of choice.

## **Literature Review**

The discourse of virginity is shaped by historical, social, and cultural factors. Here I first examine how historical changes perpetuated the gender inequality in Turkey and how they contributed to understandings of women's sexuality as threatening. Then I examine cultural norms attached to virginity and women's sexuality, and outline socio-cultural expectations about women's sexuality, which support my claim that cultural taboos about women's sexuality remain present in Turkish society.

### **Turkey: Historical Change and the Clash of Cultures**

Turkey is located in between Europe and Asia, and this unique geography results in contradicting Eastern versus Western views of sexuality, gender equality, and modernity in the society (Kandiyoti, 1987; Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012). Women living in Turkey are torn between two cultures: a traditional culture, prescribing the virtue of being a virgin, and the Western culture, promoting ideals of agency and individuality (Bekker, Rademakers, Mouthaan, De Neef, Huisman, Van Zandvoort & Emans, 1996). The clash of Middle-Eastern conservative values and Western secular ideas creates a mosaic social structure (Kandiyoti, 1987).

Historically, Turkey is unique among other Muslim countries in terms of being a supposedly secular republic in the Middle East. That is why it is important to examine historical changes that happened in Turkey and explore how these changes create, perpetuate, and validate the discourse of virginity.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, the Republic of Turkey was declared by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and a rapid change towards Westernized ideals began (Ozdemir,

2010). In this environment, the bodies of women and the clothes they wore became the ground upon which becoming a modern secular state depended (Parla, 2001). The agenda imposed by the supporters of Ataturk, known as Kemalist reformers, included women's rights to vote, to receive inheritance, to choose a spouse, to get a divorce, and to hold the custody of their children. In order to modernize and Westernize the society, Kemalists tried to change the way women and men were dressed to correspond to Western styles. According to the Kemalist viewpoint, women covering their hair and faces were not secular enough. Other than appearance and rights, Kemalist reformers also focused on women's rights to receive formal education. Institutionalized education was seen as the key factor that would lead to the emancipation of women and hence a more Westernized society.

Although these reforms made women more visible in the sociopolitical world and increased awareness and recognition of their rights, the changes failed to address the gender inequality that had already been dominant in the society. Before the reforms, women were responsible for the children and the household, as well as the agents carrying on religious and traditional norms of the society. Much of the literature argues that reforms not only failed to address the gender inequality in the society but also perpetuated traditional gender roles of women (Alemdaroglu, 2015; Arat, 1994; Cindoglu, 1997; Tekeli, 1995). Several authors agree that Kemalists perceived women as the agents of change but still perceived motherhood as the utmost duty of a woman (Arat, 1994; Gole, 1996; Tekeli, 1995). Kemalist reforms created the "new Turkish women" who were "virtuous, asexual, [and] nationalistic mothers" (Ozyegin, 2009, p.106). This approach failed to acknowledge women as individuals but rather recognized them as social beings who were responsible for carrying social values and contributing to the broader society by rearing secular and modern children in the Kemalists' own vision of a more

perfect Turkey (Muftuler-Bac, 1999). In this regard, women were deprived of their individual desires and needs (Arat, 1994). That is why Kemalist reforms have been criticized for not being feminist enough, thus resulting in less progressive outcomes than planned.

In light of increasing discussions about modernity, secularism, conservatism, and politics, throughout the 1980s, feminists in Turkey started to readdress the gender inequality in the society, and they strived to raise awareness about how women are oppressed every day by their families, by traditions, by the State, and by the society (Tekeli, 1995). Issues such as abortion rights, honor killings, sexual harassment, rape (marital and non-marital), and relatively low numbers of women in politics dominated the agenda of Turkish feminist arguments (Ozyegin, 2009). Turkish women started to organize “awareness-raising groups” to discuss their status in the heteronormative patriarchal structure of society and the State. They organized public protests and published women’s magazines (Binder & Richman, n.d.). Although women had already been politically present, their voices became “louder” through the new feminist movement (Arat, 1994). Feminist movement after the 1980s took up an intersectional approach to women’s issues by asserting that the consequences of changes in the society differ by class, ethnicity, and race (Ozyegin, 2009). Since then, feminist movement has been, therefore, more inclusive and more individual rights when compared to Kemalist movement (Tekeli, 1995). Today, feminist movements in Turkey continue, despite growing opposition in an increasingly conservative political environment.

Rapid urbanization, migration to Western Turkish cities, and Westernization of the Turkish society resulted in to the formation of three different groups of women (Tekeli, 1995). The first group is living in the traditional rural culture, which is shaped by low economic status and patriarchal control over women. The second group consists of urban women who

internalized Western values and enjoy more autonomy in the society and in their families. The third group is the intersection of the first two groups and is called “the new urban.” In this group, women enjoy freedom up to a certain point, but they are still affected by conservative traditional norms. This variance in the society results in different types of experiences of patriarchal control and diverse responses to women’s issues. Small groups of women look emancipated and live relatively free lives; however, according to Muftuler-Bac (1999), this illusion results in misconceptions about women’s lives. It hides the fact that still all women continue to be oppressed by patriarchal control.

In 2002, as the Justice and Development Party (JDP) became the elected government of the country, the Kemalist secularists felt threatened by how JDP might promote an Islam-sympathetic political agenda (Cinar, 2010). Therefore, since JDP won the election, there have been two opposing ideological groups in Turkey. Although members of the JDP say they do not affiliate themselves with Islamic values, their conservative approach to political and social issues attracted an Islamic electorate (Duran, 2008). The JDP also has initiated legal and social regulations causing debate about conservative values in relation to politics (Cinar, 2010; Yildiz, 2008). Some examples of regressive social and political policies in Turkey today include:

- Increasing the number of government-funded Prayer Leader and Preacher schools over the last decade
- The JDP-led Turkish Parliament’s removal of the headscarf ban from the Turkish constitution in 2008
- The JDP-led Turkish Parliament’s prohibition on alcohol purchase after 10 p.m. in 2013
- The Erdogan administration’s crackdown on dissent, including arrests of approximately 259 journalists representing freedom of speech and a government watchdog, along with



the dismissal of almost 4000 academics perceived to be too progressive or anti-government from government-funded universities in 2016 in the wake of a failed military coup on July 15.

At each juncture of conservative-leaning change, the secular public has objected, voicing alarm that the Turkish government is becoming too conservative, rolling back individual civil rights, and privileging traditional, even religious, norms over “modern” and secular ones that have dominated Turkish politics and society since Ataturk’s regime beginning in the 1920s (Duran, 2008).

The interests of different political groups are reflected in the issues related to women’s bodies and rights. Modernization movements in Turkey, and the supporters of such movements, believed in the premise that modernization and secular education could erase even the most conservative Islamic forces in the society. Today, the headscarf is one of the most controversial political issues in Turkish society regarding women’s freedom, and it divides not just women and men but also women and women (Tekeli, 1995). The headscarf is seen as a threat to the secular structure of the Turkish society. Gole (1996) states, “No other symbol than the veil reconstructs with such force the ‘otherness’ of the Islam to the West” (p.1). Among Kemalists and less conservative Turkish virws, the headscarf is seen as challenging the core values of the society, secularism of the public space, the place of religion in education, and individual rights to multiculturalism (Gole, 1996). The historical change towards modernization and the feminist movement in Turkey not only fueled tensions about the headscarf between groups of women but also focused those debates solely on women’s bodies and the discourses related to these bodies. Institutions and power structures in the society remained outside of the debates.

Debates between secularist and conservative groups in Turkey rely on the fact that women's bodies are to be shaped and restructured to fit to the image of *either* a secular *or* a conservative woman (Gole, 1996; Tekeli, 1995), as if these are the only mutually exclusive natural choices. Reforms in the Kemalist era started with changing the clothes and the lifestyles of elite people but failed to realize that race and class affect the process of modernization. In 1980s, the women's movement became more inclusive in terms of arguing for more diverse topics regarding women's lives, and feminists focused on how to empower women and emancipate them. The debate continues today, but it is now predominantly about religion and the veil. Arguments about what the veil symbolizes and the politicization of this tradition dominate discussions about gender equality and women's rights, which are mostly shaped by Western ideals. Although Turkish feminist movements have strived to emphasize women's freedom to live, choose, and decide, debate still focuses on what women wear as the sole point of conflict (Tekeli, 1995). As an alternative argument, in her essay "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?", Abu-Lughod (2002) emphasizes the importance of understanding myriad ways of practicing autonomy without reducing women's agency to a choice of wearing or not a piece of clothing, such as a headscarf. Meanwhile, Turkish feminists have additional concerns, including the discourse of virginity.

### **Creation and Perpetuation of the Discourse of Virginity**

In Turkey, virginity is controversial and contentious. Virginity defines how Turkish women live their lives, and it affects other feminist debates such as abortion, premarital sex, laws concerning rape and violence against women, as well as medical procedures such as reconstructing the hymen. In the dictionary of the Turkish Language Association, virginity is defined as "purity, chasteness, innocence, freshness, naturalness" (TLA, 2015). The definition

itself hints how virginity is conceived as compulsory while enforcing the desired characteristics of a woman. The discourse of virginity and the significance of the hymen, as medically certified, determine women's sexuality in the society (Ozyegin, 2009).

In Islam, premarital sex is forbidden and that is why in a Muslim country like Turkey, virginity becomes crucial to defining who has had premarital sex or not. Women are under constant pressure to protect their virginity and even prove it through virginity examinations if necessary (Ayotte, 2000; Ergun, 2007; Parla, 2001; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Men are encouraged to freely have sex while women are restrained from it. Women are forced to hide their sexuality, whereas men enjoy the liberty to speak freely about it (Gelbal, Duyan & Ozturk, 2008; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). The literature supports the claim that women who engage in premarital sex face consequences such as alienation, exclusion, and victimization by the family as well as by the society (Bekker et. al, 1996; Ergun, 2007). Families who know that their daughters are virgins and hence "pure" tend to support their children emotionally. Yalcin, Aricioglu, and Malkoc (2012) concluded from their study that emotional support of the family decreases when a daughter has premarital sex. The stigmatization resulting from loss of virginity, as well as pressure in the family to maintain virginity, leave women with limited choices.

Forbidding premarital sex as shameful is also related to the importance of the institution of marriage in Turkish society. Women are expected to get married at some point in their lives. Ergun (2007) argues that being married socially and legally validates women's status in the Turkish society; whereas, a single man is socially acceptable. Women gain credibility and respectability through the institution of marriage as evidence they complied with the social expectations and conformed to the role assigned to them. Therefore, being marriageable remains important for women. Virginity is used as the prerequisite to find a husband and honor the

groom's family (Cindoglu, 1997). Millar (2008) explains this tradition as the commodity model of virginity. Millar (2008) writes: "The chastity movement is a practical set of principles, a set of investor's guidelines for maximizing the benefit of the commodity... 'extra virgin' is a worth lot more" (p.31). Being virgin determines the value of a woman, and "pureness" is regarded as the most valuable trait of a potential wife. That is why women are urged to secure the best possible marriage through protecting their virginity in order to present it to their husbands only after they are married. Parents also contribute to the commodity model through monitoring their daughters (Alemdaroglu, 2015). "Blood sheet," still practiced in some areas of Turkey today, is an example of how historically families' perpetuated the patriarchal norms surrounding virginity, and how women's virginity represented a commodity bartered between the bride's and groom's families (Cindoglu, 1997). In the practice, the day after the marriage, a sheet with the bride's blood is hung outside of the house or shown to family members in order to prove that the bride was a virgin. According to a 2011 study carried out at a university in Turkey, 25% of the male participants believed that blood stain on the sheet after the first intercourse should be displayed (Essizoglu, Yasan, Yildirim, Gurgen, & Ozkan, 2011). Although this tradition is thought to be practiced mostly in the rural parts of Turkey, the idea is still prevalent in the society.

The pressure to comply with traditional rules and therefore to be able to find a husband, forces women to pursue other ways of being a virgin. In Turkey, virginity is primarily defined by the presence of a hymen and thus, reconstruction surgeries have become a popular way to restore virginity. Artificial virginity, provided by reconstructive surgery, is a way Turkish women choose to hide their premarital sexual encounters, cope with mental unrest, and prevent alienation in the family and in the society (Bekker et. al, 1996; Cindoglu, 1997; Ellialti, 2008; Ozyegin, 2009; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Upholding patriarchal expectations by

pretending to be virgins enables women to enjoy their freedom and avoid the shaming process (Ellialti, 2008). Although the reconstructive surgery is medically unnecessary, physicians in Cindoglu's study (1997) posit it as socially crucial due to the importance given to virginity. Cindoglu (1997) states that even though this operation perpetuates cultural norms and expectations, medical doctors justify it as supporting women who otherwise would not be able to get married in a society which seeks virgin brides. That is why Ozyegin (2009) argues that even though hymen reconstruction procedures uphold the normative understanding of virginity, they also enable women to gain control over their bodies; it is a survival strategy implemented by women for themselves.

Another medical condition resulting from the utmost importance given to virginity is vaginismus. This "sexual dysfunction disorder" is defined as "the recurrent or persistent involuntary contraction of the perineal muscles surrounding the outer third of the vagina associated with penetration with any object" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In less medical parlance, women who have been socialized to prize their virginity but have never been taught the basics of sexual relations have difficulty with intercourse even with their husbands. Higher rates of vaginismus are seen in Middle-Eastern countries that participate in the commodity model of virginity (Tugrul & Kabakci, 1997; Yasan & Akdeniz, 2009). Yasan and Akdeniz (2009) add that the stigma attached to women having premarital sex, pre-arranged marriages, limitations on the premarital sexual life (especially for female patients), and patriarchal cultural characteristics perpetuate this condition. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the meaning of sexuality depends on culture. In Turkey, cultural stigma about women's sexuality and premarital sex results in high rates of lifelong vaginismus (Tugrul & Kabakci, 1997; Yasan & Akdeniz, 2009).

In Turkey, the concepts of sexual purity, virginity, chasteness, private/public, and honor are created and maintained in the family (Alemdaroglu, 2015; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003; Tekeli, 1995; Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012). Conservative social values are still held by families, and they become the determinants of how a woman can live her life (Alemdaroglu, 2015). In Turkish society, family is one of the most important institutions, and individuals are held responsible to their families (Tekeli, 1995). Patriarchal family values are established through the male head of household who controls the familial norms regarding women's sexuality in the name of the family's honor (Jayaweera, 1997). Yalcin, Aricioglu, and Malkoc (2012) write that family plays a crucial role in how individuals perceive premarital sexual intercourse. Presence or absence of family openness toward women's sexuality and their support for daughters' choices impacts women's lives with regard to virginity, sex, and sexuality (Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012). Without such support, women are left with no choice but to distance themselves from sex and sexuality and hence accept traditional norms surrounding virginity.

The family is the agent that enforces the importance of honor on women, and it negotiates what acts can bring shame to women and to their families. Women's bodies are preserved, monitored, and asexualized for the honor of their family; whereas, their brothers, fathers, uncles enjoy freedom of sexuality and even receive respect and appreciation for it (Cindoglu, 1997; Gelbal, Duyan, & Ozturk, 2008). Damaging the honor and the image of the family can have serious consequences, such as alienation from the family, virginity examinations, loss of self-esteem, suicide, domestic violence, and murder (Ergun, 2007; Sakalli-Ugurlu, & Glick, 2003). Under such pressure and danger, women are forced to comply with traditional norms in order to avoid bringing shame to their families and risking their lives. Sakalli-Ugurlu and Glick (2013) contend, "Paternalistic ideals become prescriptions that are enforced not only by dominants, but

by members of the subordinate group who attempt to live up to those ideals, which become an integral and positively valued aspect of subordinates' self-image" (p. 297). According to this approach, through embodying the role of "the pure virgin," women reflect ideals of virginity to other women, and it results in women monitoring other women's sexuality (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). This is how honor has become a widespread ideology dependent on virginity in Turkish society.

Another problematic aspect related to honor is how it is shaped and perpetuated by dominant masculine ideas. Connell (1987) claims that hegemonic masculinity is created in relation to subordinated masculinities and men's domination over women. Hegemonic masculinity is also defined as heterosexual and highly attached to the institution of family. Men believe that masculinity is something to be achieved. That is why men constantly feel the threat of not being perceived as masculine (Kandiyoti, 1987). Traditionally, in Turkey, men in the family are expected to perform "protective masculinity" (Ozyegin, 2009, p.108). The rhetoric of protection of women is a part of the Turkish masculine identity, and it mostly results in oppressive limitations on women's lives and women's bodies (Goksel, 2006). Men are defined by how well they protect what is theirs: women and family (Cindoglu, 1997). In order to protect what is theirs, paternalistic families monitor the virginity of all the unmarried women in the family because their honor is closely tied to the legitimacy of paternity. A virgin woman/daughter who will only have sex with her husband guarantees that children will not be illegitimate. Monitoring women's sexuality for the family's legacy is a way of reifying the importance of the paternal bloodline.

Some authors argue that today young women's perspectives on virginity are changing (Ellialti, 2008; Ozyegin, 2009; Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012). Although conservative

values are still commonly held by most Turkish families, young women in Turkey adopt more contemporary Western lifestyles. The adoption of these values results in changing attitudes, particularly among affluent educated urban families in Western Turkey (Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012). Today, the concept of virginity is challenged by the practices of young educated “Western” Turkish women, even as it is also perpetuated by the traditional beliefs of conservative families (Ozyegin, 2009). Young, single, professional Turkish women question oppressive norms and traditions. They are more aware of the ultimate control of women’s sexual experience in the Turkish society (Ellialti, 2008). According to Ozyegin (2009), this leads to “virginal facades”: women pretending to be virgins in order to retain the society’s respect. She also argues that today in Turkish society it is almost acceptable for women to lose their virginity if it is in the context of love, long-term relationship, or some kind of an emotional investment. This is a finding that the participant mothers in the present study echoed, supporting Ozyegin’s research (2009). Although this shift in young women’s sexual attitudes in Ozyegin’s study and the mothers of adult women in the present study hints at a future of freedom for Turkish women’s sexuality, there are still preconditions for a woman to have premarital sex, and in the end it is tied to having a “relationship” or at least the possibility of getting married.



## **Theoretical Framework**

Recognizing Turkey's physical location between Europe and Asia affects how we conceptualize Turkish culture, including tensions between Kemalist secularism shaped by Western ideals and conservative culture attributed to the Muslim faith. My interpretation and analysis of the interviews suggests two explanatory frameworks for understanding the Turkish participant mothers' ideas about virginity: third space feminism (Bañuelos 2006; Pérez 1994; Villenas, 2006) and tactical subjectivity (Sandoval, 1991, 2000). Even though these two theories are related to each other, in this section they are discussed as separate to present two different arguments. The third space explains how Turkey is an interstitial society between the Middle East and Europe, yet not fully integrated into either, and Turkish society itself is a kind of hybrid where two distinct ideologies (secularism and conservatism) meet and create a unique culture full of tensions and contradictions. Sandoval's (1991, 2000) tactical subjectivity helps explain the strategies the participant mothers describe in navigating Turkey's sometimes contradictory social spaces.

### **Third Space Feminism**

Drawing from the works of post-colonial Chicana feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Bañuelos 2006; Pérez 1994; Sandoval, 1991, 2000; Villenas, 2006), I use third space feminism to understand the interstitial location of Turkey geopolitically, as well as the interstitial location of the participant mothers within Turkish society. If Anzaldúa's (1987/2012) "borderlands" is helpful in understanding both Turkey and the participant mothers, third space feminism is helpful

for recognizing that in-between spaces can be sites of negotiation of dominant discourses and social identities, as well as sites of oppositional agency for women.

Borders are defined in physical and political terms as dividing two different countries, states, or towns (Akyuz, 2013). However, the idea of borders also invokes the conceptual separation of “self” and “other.” Borders are not just used to define the territory of a nation but are also used as a device to separate cultures and societies, as well as to marginalize people as Other. Phenotype, language, race, ethnicity, and religion are used to create cultural borders between countries and within a society (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997). Baud and Van Schendel (1997) claim, “Borders create political, social, and cultural distinctions, but simultaneously imply the existence of (new) networks and systems of interaction across them” (p. 216). Therefore, borders represent more than a division of topographies and countries; they also are used to define difference between cultures and identities.

In Turkey, the clash of secular (Western) and conservative (Middle-Eastern) cultures continuously gives birth to a new form of interstitial culture. Social norms, traditional values, religious ideas, political conservatism, and relations in the family create cultural and political borders in the lives of women. All these borders affect how women create and convey meanings in their everyday lives, including ideas about virginity. The meanings attached to women’s virginity in Turkey force women to maintain their “honorable” appearance, while the concept of “modernity” expects them to accept and live according to secular Kemalist notions of freedom and equality. Today in Turkey, women, including mothers of adult daughters, live in a borderland, a society in flux among shifting religious, secular, political, economic, geographic, and generational tensions. To exist they shift their subjectivities moment-to-moment, day-to-day, depending on the social context.

Anzaldúa (1987/2012) describes “borderlands” as the interstitial location where marginalized women resist dominant oppressions, create their own positionalities, and enact their agencies even as they are invisible and marginalized. Similarly, Pérez (1994) defines the third space as a theoretical and practical location where women practice their agency through embracing an oppositional consciousness. Bhabha (1994), a postcolonial cultural critic, explains these in-between spaces as “the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interests, or cultural value are negotiated” (p. 2). The commonality in these three definitions is that women who live in such spaces are creative by necessity in interpreting their social contexts to survive in ways that over time subvert the dominant order, whether intentionally or merely as the matter of adapting to get by. The creation of these oppositional practices is, nonetheless, an act of resistance to social and political conditions that marginalize their everyday lives (Pérez, 1994).

Additionally, Villenas (2006) uses Pérez’s “decolonial imaginary” argument to understand the teaching and learning practices between Chicana mothers and daughters. She claims that these practices are examples of Pérez’s (1994) “doubling” because mothers teach their daughters both the ways to fit into systems of oppression as a means of survival and the ways to resist their subordination in order to have “self-worth and self-power” (p. 152). Combining Khan’s (1998) and Villenas’ (2006) approaches to third spaces, I record stories of Turkish mothers to understand the ways they define virginity, they argue its role in the Turkish society, and they communicate/teach their perspectives to their children.

## **Tactical Subjectivity**

Sandoval (1991, 2000) defines differential consciousness as a self-conscious and mobile form of identification deployed by U.S. women of color feminists, who have historically been marginalized not only by society but also by women's movement and Black Nationalism.

Sandoval (1991, 2000) explains tactical subjectivity used by U.S. women of color as a mode of strategically shifting political affiliations and allegiances in order to advance their own agendas for social change. Sandoval writes that one's alliances and identifications shift depending on one's ability to read social cues and willingness to adapt. Differential consciousness and tactical subjectivity, according to Sandoval, describe being mobile enough to shift gears across changing socio political "topoi." This requires flexibility and strength. Sandoval's description of tactical subjectivity is admittedly specific as a method for marginalized U.S. women of color to achieve political goals and as a critique of racist and exclusionary U.S. feminisms. Yet tactical subjectivity in the case of the present study becomes a useful frame for interpreting how Turkish participant mothers negotiate their progressive ideas about women, support and guide their daughters' independent choices regarding premarital sex, and try to protect their daughters from emotional pain and social ostracism, all within a religiously conservative society.

## **Method**

I conducted seven in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews with heterosexual urban Turkish mothers who were 45-60 years old, college-educated, heterosexual, financially stable, and self-identified as “modern women” in Turkey. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016. Using critical-interpretive feminist textual analysis, I analyzed how these women perceived the discourse of virginity in their lives, their families, and society.

### **Recruitment and Data Collection**

Participant mothers were recruited as a snowball sample from my Turkish social circle. I provided a short description of the study and asked my family members and my friends’ mothers if they would be interested in joining. Later, I set up phone calls with each participant to talk about the research and decide a date and place to meet for the interview.

Before each interview, potential participants read through the IRB-approved consent forms in the Turkish language. I also walked them through the form to make sure that they were fully informed about the study and the study's research process. I showed the participants the interview guide I was planning to use in the interviews. I explained to the participants the audio-recording process and showed them the device. I told the participants that they could stop the interview any time if they felt uncomfortable answering the questions or decided to withdraw from the study. Next, I presented the consent forms and walked them through the document. I explained that pseudonyms would be used in the study to protect their privacy and asked them to choose a pseudonym before we started the interview. The interview did not begin until I was sure

that I had answered any and all questions from the participants and consenting participants had signed consent forms.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked questions about demographics (age, education level, number of children, and gender of their children). Then I asked the following questions:

Question 1: How do you define virginity?

Question 2: Why do you think such a concept is present in the society?

Question 3: How do you think the concept of virginity affects women in the society?

Question 4: Whom do you remember talking to about virginity when you were a child and what did they say?

Question 5: Have you ever felt this concept determined certain things in your life or ever felt restricted (maybe in your childhood or teenage years)?

Question 6: How do you talk about virginity to your children?

Although these questions were used to direct the interview, follow-up questions were asked depending on the content of the conversation.

The interviews were conducted in Turkish in order to let participants express themselves as well as possible. The interviews were transcribed in Turkish. I am fluent both in Turkish and English. Since I am familiar with the Turkish culture and hence the idioms, I was the only translator of this research. All the transcripts, digital and transcribed, were kept in a password-protected computer which only I have access to.

In total, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews depended on the participants' answers and the number of follow-up questions, but on average, the interviews lasted about an hour. The participants chose the location and the time they wanted to be interviewed. I also let the participants know that I was willing to show them the transcripts

or conduct follow-up interviews with them, but none of the participants contacted me for follow-up interviews. I told them that I would provide copies of the final thesis manuscript and would be willing to meet with them again to go over it.

### Participants

Table 1 presents information about the participant mothers. This information was collected prior to the interviews. Having a daughter was not a criterion for participation, although six of the respondents had at least one daughter. Additionally, all the participant mothers have college degrees and are all Muslims living in Turkey.

Table 1. Descriptions of Participants			
Pseudonym chosen by the participant	Age	Current Occupation	Number of Children
Ipek	54	Teacher	1 adult son
Berrin	51	Retired journalist	1 teenage daughter
Melis	47	Teacher	1 adult daughter and 1 adult son
Ceyda	52	Teacher	1 adult daughter
Elif	55	Retired banker	2 adult daughters
Damla	50	Teacher	1 adult daughter
Pervin	59	Teacher	1 adult daughter

To further demonstrate the participants' privileged social locations in Turkish society, it is worthwhile to offer some background on their children's educational status. Elif, a retired former banker, has two daughters. One of her daughters, who is 24 years old, is in a master's program abroad, and the other one is 27 years old and a medical doctor. Pervin is 59 years old

and used to teach English in Turkey before retiring. She has a 25-year-old daughter who is currently getting a master's degree in Europe. Similar to Pervin, Damla also teaches English in a college, and she is 50 years old. Damla has one 20-year-old daughter currently in college. Ceyda is a mathematics teacher in a public school; she has a daughter who is in medical school and planning to go abroad to continue her studies. Melis is also a mathematics teacher in a high school. Melis has a 22-year-old daughter in college and an 18-year-old son in college. Berrin, a former journalist, is 51 years old. She is retired from her profession but currently volunteers for an NGO. She has a 15-year-old daughter who is in a private high school. Last, Ipek is 54 years old and has an adult son who is 25 years old. This information shows that participant mothers in this study speak from economically and educationally privileged locations, as evidenced by their careers and the fact of their children all receiving or planning to receive college-level education. Additionally, as some participants are teachers, it is important to note that they had the opportunity to observe Turkish youth and youth cultures, a discussion to which I return in the analysis.

### **Translation and Analysis**

In coding the transcripts, I used feminist grounded theory in order to let the codes emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially the common emergent codes were caring, mothering, modern ideas, Kemalism, virginity definitions, social change, youth, pretending to be a virgin, family life, interaction with children, sons, daughters, heterosexuality, and emotional attachment. Before I began analysis, I revisited and revised the codes several times by grouping and regrouping them. In the end, I grouped the codes into three themes: Turkey as a borderland country, participant mothers' tactical subjectivities, and social change in Turkey—which I use to present the core arguments of this study.



The method of analysis for the study was critical-interpretive feminist textual analysis, which enabled me to observe relationships between the participant mothers' talk in the transcripts and Turkish cultural practices. I incorporated a feminist lens to the textual analysis to specifically look for implications of gendered interpretations and practices in the society (Lazar, 2010). Through this lens, I analyzed power systems that privilege men, the exclusion and disempowerment of women, and Turkey's gendered social relations and spheres of influence. I looked for how the participant mothers talk about the importance of virginity in their lives and the lives of their families and friends relative to the discourse of virginity in Turkey.

## **Analysis**

Throughout the interviews, mothers talked about virginity in connection to modernity in Turkey. All participant mothers self-identified as “modern” women who follow Kemalist modernity principles. In the interviews, participant mothers voiced their concerns about how conservatism has begun to dominate politics and social life in the last decade. As they watched a conservative group gain power and the fact that they were living in a Muslim society, the participant mothers started to worry more about the material consequences of women losing their virginity as well as expressing their progressive ideas about women. I believe it would be incomplete to talk about virginity without situating Turkey as a “borderland” country both geographically and ideologically. These participant mothers speak from a between space created by the conflict between patriarchal conservative norms and Kemalist secular ideals of gender equality in Turkey. As they navigate this interstitial space and situate virginity in it, participant mothers shift among three different subjectivities, modern women, modern mothers, caring mothers, to express their modern ideas, contradict the dominant heteronormative understanding of virginity, support their children’s agency, and ensure the safety of their families. In doing so, these mothers portrayed the multilayered structure of Turkish society when it comes to a social discourse such as virginity.

Second, I focus on how participant mothers negotiated the discourse of virginity in Turkey from three different positionalities: modern woman, modern mothers, caring mothers. As modern women, all seven participants defined losing one’s virginity before marriage as a social taboo and a limiting discourse in women’s lives. One participant defined virginity as a

physiological trait. Five of the seven participants defined virginity as a socially valued practice, and three of those five participants argued that marriage should not be a prerequisite to having sex.

I also talked with participant mothers regarding how they taught virginity to their children and whether they still wish their children to be virgins. In the conversations about their children's virginity, participant mothers commonly used the phrase "making a decision" to refer to "losing one's virginity." Even though participant mothers perceived their children as well-informed adults who can make their own decisions about their lives, mothers also talked about being in a long-term relationship and having an emotional attachment as necessary to "make a good decision." All participant mothers were still concerned about their children's choices and the potential material consequences, such as alienation, marginalization, shaming, that their children could face as a result of such decisions. Therefore, I argue that, regardless of their progressive ideas in what I call modern women mode, when it comes to their adult children's virginity, mothers switched between modern mother mode and caring mother mode. In the modern mother mode, participants offer family support to their children so that their children feel free "to make good decisions." However, in the caring mother mode, participant mothers worry about the consequences of their children's freer attitudes towards premarital sex and so encourage their children to make "good" choices.

Third, in terms of social change, participant mothers' talked about their perceptions that Turkish youth are increasingly engaging in premarital experimentation. Participant mothers also discussed the existence of "virginal facades." Through choosing to lose their virginity and lying about it, the practice of "virginal facades" challenges the normative understanding of virginity and the expectation not to have sex until married. In sum, I argue that living in an interstitial

location in a borderland country results in the participant mothers' negotiating virginity from three different subjectivities.

### **Negotiating Virginity from a “Borderland” Country**

Elif, a 55-year-old former banker with two adult daughters, said: “This is how Turkey is. Being a virgin is the way to survive.” She was talking about why women choose to stay virgins and why virginity has importance in Turkey. With her statement in mind, I argue that there is an important connection between the country these participant mothers live in and their ways of defining virginity. Participant mothers in this study speak from a borderland country, Turkey, where Middle-Eastern and European borders meet, geographically and ideologically. Turkish society and politics are complex since they are neither fully European nor fully Middle-Eastern. Although these two cultures are distinct from each other, they create a multilayered social structure in Turkey. Turkish women find themselves navigating this complex social space in their daily lives. The interviews suggested that the ways participant mothers defined modernity and talked about the current social climate influenced the way they perceive virginity in the society and in their families. Therefore, I believe it is important to situate Turkish social structure through the seven participant mothers' perspectives before addressing virginity per se.

Three of the participants specifically talked about efforts to modernize Turkish society and how Kemalist principles are the measure of a modern person. Analyzing the interviews, I see that all the participant mothers refer to Kemalism when defining modernity in Turkey. Damla, a 50-year-old teacher with an adult daughter, defines modernity solely by Kemalist principles: “If you come from a social environment where Ataturk is respected as a leader and if your friends and family believe in his agenda, then you become a modern person.” Similarly, Berrin, a 51-year-old former journalist with a teenage daughter, said that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk tried to

make Turkey a modern country through emancipating women: “When Ataturk first founded the Republic of Turkey and brought democracy to this land, he empowered women a lot. He tried to make them more modern both in mind and in appearance.” Ceyda, a 52-year-old teacher with an adult daughter, claimed that Ataturk’s accomplishments are no longer valued and that is why Turkey is currently losing its modern, secular status. She said: “They [conservatives] don’t know the value of what Ataturk did for us. We didn’t fully understand it or didn’t even try to. There are people who just closed their minds to anything progressive.” Therefore, participant mothers identified modernity in relation to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s historical efforts to modernize/Westernize Turkey and his principles that prioritized secularism. I see the definition of modernity crucial to this study since it shapes participant mothers’ perceptions.

I see the conflict between participant mothers’ modern ideas shaped by Kemalism and dominant conservative values espoused and increasingly enforced by the government as the most prevalent social and political contradiction in these women’s lives. Participant mothers frequently brought up their disappointment with the current conservative sociopolitical climate when talking about modernity in Turkey. I believe that the disjuncture they are experiencing with the current social structure results in resistance to the dominant conservative values of the government regarding virginity and marriage. By mentioning President Erdogan’s statement about how many children a family should have, Ceyda situated the government as an institution creating a more conservative climate that normalizes oppressive limits on women’s lives and their bodies. She said: “Today the president says that a woman who doesn’t have at least three children is incomplete. This is the oppression we face today. They [the government] create this ideology.”

Similarly, Pervin, a 59-year-old retired teacher with an adult daughter, used the same example to show how the government is involved in women's lives. She said: "Women are exploited in this country, a lot. They try to create this injustice; the government is enforcing this. The president said that he wants women to give birth to at least three children. So ridiculous!"

Furthermore, Melis, a 47-year-old teacher with an adult daughter and an adult son, talked about her disappointment with the current ideological regime in Turkey and how it is accepted by majority of the population. Her disagreement and discomfort were apparent in her angry tone and posture. She said: "We are Muslims, and today we have a conservative government. They openly implement conservatism in politics or in social life. Is it accepted? Yes, 50% of the population accepts this regime."

These three responses show how living under a conservative political regime results in a tension between the mothers' politics and what the government and people who support the government stand for. As these mothers are unsatisfied with the current sociopolitical climate, they find themselves displaced from their vision of a progressive Kemalist Turkey and into a regressive conservative Turkey. In order to maintain their beliefs in a society increasingly hostile to their beliefs, participant mothers deploy tactical subjectivities that empower and protect their children.

### **Tactical Subjectivities: Modern Women, Modern Mothers, and Caring Mothers**

Sandoval (1991, 2000) argues that women shift among subjectivities as a way of achieving ends in a social context that does not provide them with political means. Sandoval uses this theory to talk specifically about oppressed and disenfranchised women of color living in the United States. In this study, participant mothers also seemed to describe using a strategy of shifting subjectivities to carry on in Turkey. Although participant mothers speak from privileged

positions and their forms of oppressions are not the same as the women Sandoval describes, I argue that in order to navigate the multilayered Turkish sociopolitical system, participant mothers employ strategies of persistence and resistance for themselves and on behalf of their children. Here, I explain the three positionalities—modern women, modern mother, caring mother—that the participant mothers engaged when responding to questions about virginity and its role in the Turkish society.

### **Modern Women**

When they spoke as “modern women,” participant mothers talked about losing virginity as a physiological trait and a taboo tied to morality and marriage in the society. Since the participant mothers were reared on Kemalist ideals, they understand Westernization and education as the pathway to become modern. Unlike their perceptions that Kemalist ideas are still valid, participant mothers believe virginity is an outdated and oppressive discourse. Their discussions of virginity privilege women’s agency and freedom to choose in matters of a woman’s sexual conduct.

Three participants emphasized the importance of gender equality when talking about virginity. They argued that even though men lose their virginity, too, the discourse continues to be built around women’s hymens. Damla, a 50-year-old teacher with an adult daughter, used a physiological definition of virginity to support the fact that virginity applies to both genders. Although she emphasized that men lose their virginity, she first talked about penetration of the hymen in reference to a girl losing her virginity. She said:

When I think of virginity, the first thing that comes to my mind is the hymen.

Losing virginity means that penetration occurred and the hymen stretched open. It means a girl had sex. When a hymen stretched open, it means there

was a relationship, a sexual relationship with a male. Of course, the same applies for males too, I mean, they lose their virginity too. If a male is a virgin, we can say that he has never had sex before.

Another participant, Berrin, also emphasized the importance of gender equality: If people manage to see women and men as equals, it will be easier to get rid of the idea of virginity. I mean we talk about a woman's virginity, but if we see them as equals then we need to talk about a man's virginity, too. This can change a lot of things and make the society a better one, a more modern one.

Participant mothers repeatedly contrasted their ideas about virginity to the dominant narrative of virginity, which suggests that they were communicating their modern perspectives through resisting conservative ideas about virginity in the society. In her answer, Damla talked about how losing one's virginity outside of marriage continues to be a prevailing taboo in the society, and as a modern woman, she rejects this notion. She said: "Virginity is one of the most important topics in Turkish society. Modern mothers like me understand virginity very differently now. But when you look at the bigger picture, it is still very important."

Berrin, also drew connections between the dictionary definition of virginity and how its loss remains a social taboo: "Defining virginity is difficult, especially for us. The root of the word means purity and innocence. In a way, being untouched. But of course, in Turkey it is a taboo. For me, it is not anymore." Her modern approach was apparent in how she situated her understanding in opposition to the dominant definition. Therefore, the transcripts suggest that these women initially took up the "modern woman" to contradict traditional Turkish definitions of virginity.



As modern women, participant mothers also denied the importance of marriage in a woman's life. They claimed that marriage should not be the utmost goal, and women should be free to have sexual experience, if they want to, before getting married. Melis talked about her own experience and how she married her husband as a virgin. The reason why she did not have premarital sex was primarily related to social norms that expected her to remain chaste before she got married. She said: "But this was very wrong in so many ways. A woman should get to know different men before getting married." She later claimed that this way of thinking is damaging because women are left inexperienced. From a modern woman's perspective, sex should not belong to marriage, according to Melis.

When talking about marriage, participant mothers emphasized the importance of "getting to know" partners prior to marriage. In these responses, "getting to know" had a sexual connotation. Ceyda mentioned that couples should be able to live together before getting married, and this should be acceptable in the society. She said: "Virginity is always related to marriage. It shouldn't be. You have to get to know who you are getting married to, you should live with them first."

Damla said that living with someone prior to marriage should be acceptable, and marriage should not be the condition for having sex. She said: "I didn't have sex before getting married. I thought it wouldn't be acceptable. But I don't think it should be that way. Before marriage it is important that partners should make sure they know each other. This is a great way to prevent marital problems." Here, Damla's reference to "knowing each other" is a euphemism for sex, as is Ceyda's in the paragraph before.

Speaking as "modern women," participant mothers do not believe that being married should be the sole condition for a woman to have sexual relations. Their ideas, based on their

experiences of marriage, revolve around the importance of having the freedom to live with a partner before getting married. The way they talked about sex as a part of getting to know a partner shows how these participant mothers use a modern perspective to challenge the connection between marriage and virginity in Turkey. Although participant mothers started to talk about virginity from their personal experiences and opinions as “modern women,” they switched to a mother’s perspective when talking about their own children’s virginity.

### **Modern Mothers & Caring Mothers**

Modern mother mode refers to participant mothers’ acknowledgement of their children’s agency and participant mothers’ way of distancing themselves from their children’s sexual choices. On the other hand, caring mother mode encapsulates participant mothers’ emphasis on responsibility, making well-informed decisions, the importance of privacy and safety, and survival in the society, which show how they care about their children’s decisions. This approach is an effort to protect their children from the material consequences of being a modern, non-virgin person in a conservative Muslim society. I analyze two positionalities here, modern mothers and caring mothers, in conjunction with one another because participant mothers shifted back and forth between these positionalities in our conversations about their children.

I do not argue that participant mothers in this society were aware of their positionalities but that it was an unconscious process primarily affected by where they are (Turkey) and who they are talking about (their children). I claim that the tactical shifts between subjectivities enabled participant mothers to assert their modern ideas within a conservative context while keeping in mind the material consequences those ideas might have on their children’s lives in the society.

I believe mothers in this study deploy the modern mother perspective to cultivate a context where their children can feel safe to resist the dominant understanding around virginity, and they employ the caring mother perspective to protect their daughters from the stigma and loss of social status that accrues when women lose their virginity before marriage. This type of mothering resembles U.S. Black mothers' relationships with their daughters and the dilemma they have in rearing their daughters, as described by Patricia Hill Collins (1991). In her article about Black mothering practices, Collins (1991) describes how Black mothers teach their daughters about "being self-reliant" and "resourceful" as ways to survive in a racist society while also teaching them ways to resist the interlocking oppressions of race and gender. Her argument specifically focuses on the relationship between marginalized U.S. Black mothers and their daughters. However, I contend that this type of tactical mothering pedagogy is also apparent in Turkish participant mothers' answers about their children's virginity. Although the U.S. context is different from the Turkish context, I claim that there are similarities in terms of how mothers teach survival and resistance to their daughters at the same time.

As modern mothers in a conservative culture, participant mothers provide their children the support systems they need to survive in Turkey. Yalcin, Aricioglu and Malkoc (2012) also state that familial support is crucial for women to avoid alienation, exclusion, and victimization. In the present study, this is especially the case when daughters lose their virginity. I see the participant mothers' modern approach as necessary to the survival of their children in a society where their choices about sexuality might not be supported. *All* participant mothers said that they respected their children's ideas about virginity and their children's future choices. For example, Ceyda, who has one adult daughter, claimed that her daughter should shape her life the way she wants to, which demonstrates her modern mothering: "It's up to her. It's her life. I want her to

live her life the way she wants to. I just don't want her to be upset. I certainly think that she should live with her boyfriend and get to know him.”

Melis, who has a son and a daughter, asserted that she would like her daughter to be *freer* than her son in terms of relationships and sexuality. Her perspective suggests that she cares about gender equality, even favors her daughter, and asserts that her daughter should be the only person making decisions about her life. She said: “I'd like my daughter to be freer than my son. She should live her life solely for herself. It's her life. I can't decide for her. Before you make important decisions about your life you need to have experience.” I see Melis' perspective on virginity as radical and progressive.

Although participant mothers deployed a modern mothering approach to virginity, they proposed certain conditions to having sexual freedom. These conditions were implied not as ways to limit their daughters' freedom but rather to protect them from marginalization in Turkish society. Participant mothers did not specifically mention virginity in their answers but chose to talk about “making decisions” regarding relationships. “Making decisions” is a euphemism for “losing one's virginity” in these replies.

*All* participant mothers mentioned the importance of making healthy, well-informed, and careful “decisions.” For example, Elif, who has two daughters, noted that even though she respects her daughters' choices it would be better for them to stay virgins until they get married. She believes that being a virgin is the only way to be respected as a woman in Turkish society. Her answer showed that she deployed the caring mother perspective and emphasized the importance of complying with social norms to survive in the society. She said: “They can make their own decisions as adults. But I'd want them to be traditional. There should be [gender]

equality... But if you are living in Turkey, there is no other choice. Women need to protect their virginity in order not to lose their respected status.”

Similarly, even though Pervin mentioned that her daughter is an adult woman who can make her own decisions, Pervin also emphasized the importance of being in a satisfying relationship with someone who respects her daughter’s choices: “I want her to make her decisions carefully. I know it’s her life. But I don’t want her to be sad later. She should be with someone who is right for her, who won’t make her upset or regret her decisions.”

Ceyda emphasized the importance of emotional involvement and the element of respect in the relationship. Ceyda demonstrates a caring mother perspective even though she stated that she would not be involved in her daughter’s life and that her daughter is free to make her own decisions. “It’s up to her,” said Ceyda. She said, “I just want her to live her life without burning herself out. Because when you look at Turkish men, it is very hard to find someone who respects you. I don’t want her to be emotionally hurt.”

In all these interviews the participant mothers communicate that respect, safety, care, and happiness are very important for these mothers, which is why they wanted their daughters to “make good decisions,” which again is a euphemism for losing one’s virginity. A respectful and caring relationship guarantees emotional attachment and not a random sexual encounter, which would be frowned upon in the Turkish society. Therefore, participant mothers repeatedly emphasized the importance of being in a committed relationship to avoid the impression of promiscuity.

Participant mothers become modern women when talking about their personal politics on the topic of virginity, modern mothers when initially speaking about how they perceive their children’s virginity, and caring mothers when noting the importance of survival in the society

and happiness in a relationship. Through strategically shifting among various positionalities, mothers in this study, unconsciously offer a cobbled together safe space for their children where participant mothers and their children can make sense of virginity and resist the dominant ideology around it. These “liminal” spaces become where these women, both mothers and daughters, learn to “survive sexism while laying their mark on the world” (Pérez, 1999; Villenas, 2006).

### **Changing the Discourse of Virginity**

Bhabha (1990) draws attention to how social change stemming from third spaces happens subtly. Although conservatism currently dominates the Turkish political system and social structure, participant mothers suggested that there has been some positive change regarding how virginity is perceived and talked about. *All* participant mothers agreed that losing virginity continues to be upheld as a taboo that limits women’s sexuality through positioning virginity as the norm and premarital sex as deviant. However, participant mothers’ answers also claimed that some women simply lie about virginity to be respected in the society and that young people do not think virginity matters for their happiness anymore. Therefore, attitudes towards virginity are slowly changing in some circles even though this social change is not overtly apparent in the society, according to participant mothers.

#### **“Virginal Facades”**

One of the ways some participant mothers observed change in the discourse around virginity is the existence of “virginal facades,” women who pretend to be virgins even though they have lost their virginity, dominantly defined as losing the hymen (Ozyegin, 2009). I am conflicted about this interpretation because, on one hand, one can argue “virginal facades” present an “act of doubling” (Pérez, 1999), where women obeyed the rules of the society by

pretending to be virgins but also subtly asserted their agency by choosing to lose their virginity and lie about it. On the other hand, one can argue that women do not “choose” to pretend to be virgins to subvert the normative idea but rather they are “forced” to do it by social expectations. It can be said that “virginal facades” are proofs of how virginity remains important in the society, and “virginal facades” are the ones who perpetuate the discourse of virginity in Turkey. Nevertheless, the participant mothers believe “virginal facades” are agents of change, which supports Ozyegin’s argument (2009).

In the interviews, participant mothers identified morality and respectability as the reasons why women lie about their virginity and become “virginal facades.” Participant mothers’ discontent in talking about these ideas suggested that they disagreed with women gaining respect only through being a virgin or a married woman. Melis, a school teacher, argued that women lie about virginity because losing virginity is not acceptable in the society: “They say virginity is morally right but actually it’s not what they think. Not many people are virgins. In Turkey, people have two masks. People don’t show who they really are or say what they actually think. They choose to pretend – pretend like they are virgins.” Although Melis is the only participant to generalize this attitude to the Turkish society, her response suggests that choosing to lie about virginity is common in Turkey.

Additionally, Ceyda said that morality is an important factor determining why women are forced either to protect their virginity or to pretend that they are virgins. She suggested that the gendered discourse of morality surrounding virginity needs to change:

Women choose to act like they’re virgins and do not say that they had sex before. While they do this, they also preserve the taboo in the society. They participate in the oppression of so many other women. People see this [being

a virgin] as the moral thing to do, but, no, it's not. Morality is in the head. Men have sex with all kinds of women, and they don't get labeled like women do.

Elif's articulation of respect in Turkish society shows how women sacrifice their sexual freedom to gain respect in the society. She argued that some women lose their virginity but lie about it to protect their respected status in the society. The way she talked about this situation suggested that this also is a common practice. She said: "Being a virgin also provides respectability for a woman. Women choose to be dishonest to be freer and more comfortable in the society."

By successfully pretending to comply with the dominant social order, "virginal facades" engage in acts of doubling, as mirroring but subverting the social order, and over time these acts might result in the same kind of material change that Pérez (1994) describes. Even though unmarried non-virgins do not openly admit they have broken a taboo, they nonetheless have indeed "got away with it." Over time "getting away with it" repeatedly has the effect of changing things, according to Pérez (1994).

### **Young Circles**

Participant mothers also emphasized how young people, or "young circles" in the literal translation from Turkish, increasingly do not give credence to virginity. I see this argument by the participant mothers as another indicator of social change happening in Turkish society. Ipek, who teaches English in a high school, said, "I look around, and I see that virginity is not important anymore. Teenagers can think more critically and reject oppressive limitations. It is not the same anymore, especially in young circles."



Similarly, Pervin, who is a retired teacher, said, “I don’t think young people care about this [being a virgin] anymore.”

Moreover, Damla, who is also an English teacher, emphasized the importance of context in determining whether one resists the dominant social discourse or upholds it. She said:

I don’t think it [virginity] is very different in small, rural villages, but it is definitely changing in urban areas. As youth get more education, they become more aware of their freedoms and the limitations surrounding them. And eventually they start owning and protecting their freedom more and more.

That is why I think young people are changing the discourse around virginity today.

Participant mothers argued that Turkish youth do not think virginity is important to their happiness and even resist its role in the society through sexual experimentation and losing their virginity at an earlier age and before marriage. However, it is important to note that these “young people” speak from privileged positions, as they might not feel family pressure in their lives and do enjoy more freedom than other young people living in more conservative rural areas of Turkey. Nonetheless, I think this shows that, in the minds of participant mothers in their “modern woman” mode, virginity is not valued in urban “young circles” and that young people are subverting the discourse of virginity in Turkish society by ignoring it as irrelevant to their lives.

### **Pedagogical Practices**

Another way participant mothers contribute to social change in Turkey is rearing their children with progressive ideals, including the framing of virginity as oppressive. Similarly writing about teaching and learning relationships between Chicana mothers and daughters, Villenas (2006) identifies this act of cross-generational pedagogy as a space of “doubling” where

mothers both practice traditional mothering through teaching dominant discourses to their children but also emphasizing the importance of individual self-worth and resistance to oppression. Turkish mothers in the present study practice this act of doubling through presenting a modern approach to virginity but also making sure that not only their daughters but also their sons are aware of the conservative nature of the discourse of virginity in Turkish society. Nevertheless, because of their modern approach to virginity, these mothers provide a freer and more supportive environment, one that embraces premarital sex and offers familial support to their children who then challenge dominant conservative approaches to women's sexuality in Turkey. As modern mothers, participants teach their children to accept more contemporary ideas about women's sexuality and sexual partnerships (all heterosexual in the present case). As caring mothers, participants moderate the idea of sexual freedom with responsibility to be safe and emotionally, physically, and politically cautious.

#### **Other Agents of Change: Sons**

Participant mothers also talked about how they address virginity with their sons. When asked about how they talk to their sons about virginity, participant mothers claimed the importance of respecting and caring for women's choices. For instance, Ipek said: "It is hard to talk about virginity with him. He doesn't listen, but I told him to be respectful in his relationships. He has a responsibility to his girlfriend."

Likewise, Melis, who has a son and a daughter, favors her daughter. She said: "I'd want my daughter to enjoy more freedom than my son. He has all the freedom in this society anyways. I'd want him to be respectful and knowledgeable, that's all." Here, Melis emphasized how society favors men when it comes to sexuality and that is the reason why she wants her daughter to enjoy more freedom.

Berrin said that even though she does not have a son, she observes in her close social circle how mothers teach their sons respect for women. She said: “In recent years, I saw that mothers teach their sons how to be careful with their actions, like they emphasize responsibility and care. They don’t favor their sons but rather see them as equals to their daughters, and teach the same things.”

These responses illustrate how mothers can create a space for change in their pedagogical relationships with their children. Teaching about virginity and responsibility both to their sons and to their daughters, the mothers described by Berrin, along with participant mothers, make sure that their children know about the broader social structure controlling the discourse of virginity and how the discourse might affect their lives and the lives of people they are involved with. This resists a monolithic, gender-specific understanding of virginity in Turkey and results in a subtle social change exhibited by participant mothers and passed on to the next generation.

I believe that positive change is happening because of mothers like the ones I interviewed who support their daughters’ sexual freedom and teach their sons to respect women’s self-determination about virginity and premarital sex. In concluding her article, Villenas writes, “So look closely because somewhere in the dark shadows of a women’s *sufrimientos* [suffering] we might find, as Collins (1999) emphasizes, a mother’s immense capacity to dream and prepare us for lives she could not imagine” (p.157). Following Villenas’ argument, I see the daily pedagogical practices of mothering by these Turkish participants as a form of resistance that surreptitiously displaces the dominant discourse around virginity. Although these practices are not enough to fully transform oppressive social norms such as virginity, they are points of departure for creating social changes and constructing a more liberating discourse about women’s sexuality in Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis analyzes accounts of heterosexual Turkish mothers, 45-60 years old, well educated, urban, and financially stable, speaking on the topic of virginity in Turkey. I draw from the works of postcolonial Chicana feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Bañuelos 2006; Pérez 1994; Sandoval, 1991, 2000; Villenas, 2006) and use third space feminism to understand how participant mothers navigate an interstitial social location created by two distinct ideologies: secularism versus conservatism. When talking about virginity in Turkey, participant mothers speak from three different tactical subjectivities: modern women, modern mother, and caring mother. While switching among these positionalities, participant mothers describe a subtle social change happening within “young circles” in Turkey. By respecting their heterosexual children’s sexuality and creating a safe space from which their children can choose to challenge normative understandings of virginity, participant mothers themselves also create the social change that they say they are witnessing.

Existing literature on women’s sexuality in Turkey primarily focuses on the religious grounds of virginity (Gelbal, Duyan & Ozturk, 2008), the idea of being “marriageable” (Cindoglu, 1997), the notion of an honor/shame society (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003), the importance of familial support (Yalcin, Aricioglu & Malkoc, 2012), “virginal facades” (Ozyegin, 2009), a common sexual disorder called vaginismus (Tugrul & Kabakci, 1997), and Turkish youth challenging the discourse of virginity (Ellialti, 2008).

My thesis adds participant mothers’ perspectives on virginity to the existing literature, which primarily focuses on the society in general or Turkish youth. By examining participant

mothers' strategic pedagogical practices, this thesis analyzes how mothers teach their children about virginity by tactically shifting their subjectivity from modern women espousing their belief in women's equality to mothers cautiously enabling and supporting their daughters' toward the changes their mothers would like to see. In other words, this work brings together broad public negotiations, which situate virginity as women's most valuable trait, and Turkish women's personal perceptions of virginity, which argue for more liberated understanding of women's sexuality.

Participant mothers voiced their discomfort with watching a conservative group gain power in Turkey to gradually dominate the social and political agenda. In their Kemalist worldview, Turkish society should be moving toward more progressive ideals, yet over the last decade Kemalist modernity has been challenged by conservatives who are bringing back repressive patriarchal rules for women. Participant mothers, having been reared on Kemalist principles that privilege progressive interpretations of Islam, secular social values, and Western ideas about women's equality, now find themselves trying to make sense of the contradictions of being modern well-educated career women living in a society that is reinstating pre-Kemalist gender relations. From a third space feminist perspective, I see the participant mothers as deploying resistant tactics that covertly subvert the social order that oppresses women. Today in Turkey, women, including mothers of adult daughters, live in a borderland, a society in flux among shifting religious, secular, political, economic, geographic, and generational tensions. They are forced to shift their subjectivities moment-to-moment, day-to-day, depending on the social context. If the discourse of virginity in Turkey represents an either/or binary—virginal/pure or non-virgin/sullied—then participant mothers reveal different attitudes about virginity that, like virginal facades, need not be either repressive or promiscuous.

Participant mothers argue for gender equality in sexuality, but they also feel the urge to emphasize the importance of long-term relationships to ensure their children's safety when it comes to losing virginity. Being positioned between resisting virginity and protecting their children, these women hedge their bets by urging caution with regard to premarital sexual relations in a society that does not necessarily support their "modern" ideas or their children's. In doing so, participant mothers unconsciously shifted positionalities when talking about virginity. They became modern women when talking about the oppressive nature of virginity in Turkey, modern mothers when referring to their daughters' agency in choosing to protect or lose their virginity, and caring mothers when referring to the difficulties of surviving as a non-virgin in the Turkish society by urging emotional attachment, respect, care, and long-term relationships as prerequisites to premarital sex.

Berrin uses all three subjectivities in her responses and exemplifies the shifting tactical subjectivities the participant mothers employed to navigate their contradictory social locations as secular well-educated Muslim career women in an increasingly conservative national social context. As a modern woman in the Kemalist tradition, Berrin argued that women "should be free to have sex" before marriage, and in the modern mother mode, she said that she wants her daughter to be "have choices" about premarital sex. But, in the caring mother mode, Berrin hopes her daughter will temper her choices with making good decisions" to avoid being ostracized in good society.

Pérez (1999) argues that third spaces allow women interstitial locations from which to create social change and put their voices in conversation with the dominant narrative. Participant mothers in this study also talked about how Turkish youth do not value virginity as much as in the past. Although participant mothers referred to urban Turkish youth, this still suggests a subtle

social change is happening in Turkey. I argue that this change is made possible by women such as the participant mothers who resist the discourse of virginity and respect their children's agency.

In doing this research, I had both advantages and disadvantages as a heterosexual cisgender young Turkish feminist researcher who is attending graduate school in a Western institution. As a Turkish researcher, I connected to my participants on a personal level since I grew up in Turkey learning about Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's life and his principles. I also felt oppressed by the very same normative understanding of virginity that expected me to stay a virgin until I get married. Since my participants were recruited from my social circle, they were aware of my political stance. Participant mothers said that they felt comfortable talking to me about virginity, which is a controversial topic in Turkish society. My familiarity with the current social and political structure also allowed them to use phrases ("today's Turkey") or pronouns (them) to refer to the conservative government and groups in Turkey. This acknowledged my presence as a Turkish researcher and enabled participants to comfortably share their opinions.

However, when talking about participant mothers' children with whom I am friends, my closeness to the participants became a limitation. Even though I tried to distance myself from the participants' children by referring them as "your daughter" or "your son" rather than calling them by their names, participant mothers acknowledged that I am their children's friend and that I might know what they said to their children about virginity. I believe this had an impact on their answers and what they chose to share with me. Participant mothers might have refrained from sharing every detail because they believe I already know the specifics of their children's sexual lives.

I conducted and analyzed seven interviews. I do not argue that this study represents the perspectives of all urban, college-educated, financially stable, 45- to 60-year-old, heterosexual Turkish mothers, let alone all Turkish mothers or Turkish women. This study specifically focuses on these seven Turkish mothers and their ideas about virginity in Turkey. I do not claim to draw general conclusions about Turkish women or Turkish society, but rather present how these seven participant mothers negotiate the discourse of virginity in Turkish society and in their children's lives.

In this study, the presumption of heterosexuality was central to participant mothers' negotiations of virginity in contemporary Turkey. As modern women, their definitions of virginity mainly focused on a sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Moreover, as modern and caring mothers, participant mothers emphasized the importance of knowing your "husband" before marrying them, which points to a heterosexual marriage. Participant mothers' arguments show that the understanding of virginity heavily depends on heteronormativity and does not take into account lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships. Therefore, the findings of this study support that in contemporary Turkey, women's sexuality is understood within boundaries of heteronormativity.

Going forward, I believe larger number of participants is needed for a broader understanding of virginity in Turkey. I also think conducting comparative studies across groups of women with different education and socioeconomic backgrounds will better present the multilayered structure of Turkish society. Additionally, conducting multiple interviews with the participants can also present a richer understanding of how each participant defines virginity.

Based on the present study, however, I argue that the participant mothers live in a "borderland" country where their modern ideals rooted in Kemalist principles contradict the



conservative perspective on virginity. This conflict presents itself as one of the most prevalent conditions in the participant mothers' lives and a primary factor determining how they talk about virginity. Participant mothers deployed three "tactical subjectivities" when talking about virginity: modern women, modern mothers, and caring mothers. This unconscious shift among different subjectivities is a product of the peculiarities of their social situation and their desire to protect their children, especially their daughters, from the material consequences of being unmarried non-virgins, such as shaming, alienation, and marginalization. Moreover, I see the ways the participant mothers strategically navigate their lives as one of the reasons why their children are positioned to challenge the normative patriarchal understanding of virginity and subvert its role in women's lives.

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## Appendix A: IRB Study Approval Letter



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813)974-7091

June 1, 2016

Asli Aygunes  
Women's & Gender Studies  
Tampa, FL 33617

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**  
IRB#: Pro00025392  
Title: Women's Perspectives on the Discourse of Virginity in Turkey

**Study Approval Period: 5/31/2016 to 5/31/2017**

Dear Ms. Aygunes:

On 5/31/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Turkish Virginity Protocol \(Version#1\)](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Consent Form English Version.docx.pdf](#)

[Consent Form Turkish Version.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:



(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D.".

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board