

MEASUREMENT OF BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY IN FAMILIES

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INTRODUCTION: THE MEASUREMENT

OF FAMILY BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY

Family boundary ambiguity is increasingly used in family research to describe and predict the effects of family membership loss and change over time. Boundary ambiguity is defined as the family not knowing who is in and who is out of the system. The family may perceive a physically absent member as psychologically present or may perceive a physically present

member as psychologically absent (Figure 1). In either case, the family boundary is ambiguous.

Based on clinical observation and early research, the authors of this publication believe there is often an overtly or covertly agreed-on family perception of who is in and who is out of the family. However, sometimes individual members will perceive family membership and boundaries differently.

Figure 1. High and low boundary ambiguity

High Boundary Ambiguity		Low Boundary Ambiguity	
Physical Absence	Physical Presence	Physical Absence	Physical Presence
Psychological Presence	Psychological Absence	Psychological Absence	Psychological Presence
<p><i>Example:</i> Families with a missing member(s). There is a preoccupation with the thought of the absent member(s). Process of grieving and restructuring cannot begin since the facts surrounding the loss of the person(s) are not clear. May also happen in divorced families since the loss is not clear-cut.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i> Families in which a member(s) is physically there but not emotionally available to the system. Family is intact, but a member(s) is psychologically absent due to preoccupation with something outside the system (e.g. work, another person, chemicals) or due to chronic illness (e.g. Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, chemical dependence, AIDS, dementia).</p>	<p><i>Example:</i> Families in which a member(s) is both gone and grieved. Member(s) may still be thought of and missed, but there is no longer a preoccupation with the loss. System has restructured without that person and goes on.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i> Families in which a member(s) is both physically and psychologically inside the system, such as in a marriage where the spouses are constantly together, physically and psychologically.</p>

The instruments in this publication are individual measures of boundary ambiguity. The authors believe group measures of boundary ambiguity are also needed to fully examine the degree of boundary ambiguity in a family system. Work on developing such measures is underway.

The objective in this publication is to review the boundary ambiguity research and theory development project, and to provide measures of boundary ambiguity for researchers to use when studying different situations or events of loss.

The construct of boundary ambiguity and the Boundary Ambiguity Scale (originally called the Psychological Presence Scale) were developed inductively out of clinical observation (Boss, 1975a,b), tested deductively with a population of military families experiencing extreme ambiguity in their loss (a male member missing-in-action in Vietnam) (Boss, 1977, 1980a), and recently tested again with a civilian population experiencing a more normative loss (mid-life families launching an adolescent from the home) (Boss, Pearce-McCall, and Greenberg, 1987).

Research is presently in progress using other populations experiencing ambiguous loss, specifically, chronic illness (e.g., Alzheimer's disease; Boss, Caron, and Horbal, 1988) and divorce (Pearce-McCall, 1988).

The scales presented in this publication measure boundary ambiguity through self-reports of family members' perceptions of psychological presence with physical absence (MIA, divorce), or physical presence with psychological absence (chronic illness). It should be noted that this is only one way of operationalizing and measuring the construct of boundary ambiguity. Present research on families of Alzheimer's patients and on divorce and remarriage families are providing other methods for measuring boundary ambiguity, including individual and family measures.

The boundary ambiguity project is an example of how systematic theory building over time can produce a more general variable in the family stress literature (Figure 2). Such umbrella variables allow better understanding of stressed families because they direct our focus to family process rather than to specific stressor events. The authors believe family process is the primary medium for interventions, as stressor events are often not amenable to change.

Figure 2. Propositions regarding boundary ambiguity: induction of a more general theoretical proposition regarding loss in families: family boundary ambiguity*

