

THEORETICAL BASE FOR THE INSTRUMENT

Degree of boundary ambiguity is a new variable presented as critical to understanding families in stress. It refers both to real uncertainty about the loss of a family member as well as to the failure of the family to alter its perception to fit reality after a loss has occurred.

A brief review of family boundaries from various research perspectives is in Figure 3.¹ The development of the boundary ambiguity construct rests on a broad base of literature, including the work of Aldous, 1978; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973; Buckley, 1967; Goffman, 1974; Hage, 1972; Hill, 1949, 1971; Homans, 1950; Kantor and Lehr, 1975; Lewin, 1951; Minuchin, 1974; Moos and Moos, 1981; Reiss, 1971,

1981; Rice, 1969; Simmel, 1964; and Whitaker and Keith, 1981.

Boundary ambiguity can result from events both *inside* and *outside* the family. From outside the family, a situation can arise in which the family *cannot get the facts* surrounding the event of loss. Examples are families with missing members or chronically ill members where the status or progression of the loss is and continues to be uncertain. The source of

¹ Note that family therapists and symbolic interactionists use similar indicators of boundary ambiguity whereas demographers and structure-functionalists use another set of indicators. Boss's development of the boundary ambiguity construct is based primarily on the family therapy/symbolic interaction perspective that perceptions, even more than structure, determine family boundaries.

Figure 3: How are family boundaries determined?

Indicators Used Primarily By Demographers and Structure-Functionalists	Indicators Used Primarily By Family Therapists and Symbolic Interactionists
Community norms and laws; societal mores.	Community perceptions and rules; societal context.
Family norms, family rituals.	Family rules, family rituals; family ghosts, invisible loyalties, communication patterns.
Family structure: physical presence of members inside the household, determined quantitatively by counting who is physically in and who is physically out of the household.	Family structure: determined by symbolic as well as physical presence of members. These members may not only be in the household, but can exist in the minds of the family members.
Family function: the roles and tasks assigned to people physically present inside the household.	Family function: roles and tasks assigned to people both physically present and psychologically present in the minds of the people in the household.
Family boundary maintenance: being certain of family membership. Reflects stability, homeostasis. Resolved through structure maintenance.	Family boundary ambiguity: not being sure who is inside or who is outside the family. Reflects instability, disequilibrium. Resolved through process of reorganizing, changing family and individual perceptions. Nonambiguous state often called "clear boundaries."

ambiguity in these situations is from outside the family and is based on a lack of facts or an inherent uncertainty about the event or loss.

From events inside the family, a situation may develop in which family members *can get the facts surrounding the event of loss but, for some reason, they ignore or deny these facts*. From within the family, then, the interpretation of reality becomes the source of ambiguity. Such families may psychologically exclude a terminally ill family member when in fact he or she is still physically present, or they may continue to center their lives around an adolescent who has physically left home. They may psychologically cut themselves off from an

alcoholic family member who is still physically present, or may continue to behave as if the family structure remains the same as before a loss or change such as divorce.

In the case of divorce, boundary ambiguity can result even when the fact of divorce is neither ignored nor denied because the interpretation of reality (who is in or out of the family) becomes different for various family members. If these differing perceptions of "family" are not openly acknowledged, the structural reorganization and family redefinition that is needed after divorce may be blocked.

These examples illustrate that while the intensity may vary, boundary ambiguity can potentially exist in any situation of loss, normative or non-