Exploring the Challenges of Boundary Ambiguity Experienced by Single Women

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Introduction

SINGLEHOOD PHENOMENON
AMBIGUOUS LOSS
BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY

Singleness

- Increasing phenomenon
  - Factors: women in the workplace, advanced education, economic freedom, divorce culture, Feminist ideology, etc.
- Increasing value of marriage
- Single women in therapy
  - Cultural lag
  - Limbo years
- Ambiguity
  - Changing gender roles
  - Mixed messages about meaning
  - Why
  - How long
- Ambiguous loss
Ambiguous Loss

- Construct developed by Pauline Boss
- Losses that are hard to define and lack closure
- Two Types
  - Physical presence, psychological absence
  - Psychological presence, physical absence
- Ambiguous Losses are problematic
  - Disrupts grieving process
  - Associated with emotional dysfunction

Elements of Ambiguous Loss

- Unclear
- Uncertain

Singleness and Ambiguous Loss

- Lewis and Moon, 1997
  - "...if I knew for sure I would never meet a man, I could get on with my life. Without that, it becomes my life" (p. 126).
- Sharp and Ganong, 2007
  - "Like all or nothing, it is either—you assume it [your life] is either going to be great or horrible. You just have to get better at accepting the fact that you don’t know, it is probably somewhere in between and you are just going to have to wait and see." (p. 836)
- Koeing et al., 2010
  - Dilemma of accept singleness or remain hopeful identified.
Qualitative research conceptualizes singleness as an ambiguous loss by definition...

...yet, perception of ambiguous loss has never been measured quantitatively in a population of single women!

The perception of ambiguous loss is known as boundary ambiguity!
Purpose of the Research Study

- Measure Boundary Ambiguity in a population of single women
- Determine if or to what extent Boundary Ambiguity varies by:
  - Age (20-52)
  - Mother’s Marital Status
  - Home region of the country
  - Years of education
  - Career Satisfaction
  - Optimism for Future Love Relationships
- Validate the modified Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Single Women
  - Test/Retest for reliability
  - Fear of Being Single for construct validity
  - Satisfaction with Relationship Status for construct validity

Research Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Average score of 60 or higher on the BASS.
- Hypothesis 2: Scores on the BASS will increase based on the participants age from age 20 to 34 and decrease from age 34 to age 52.
- Hypothesis 3: Scores on the BASS will be higher for those whose mothers are married compared to those whose mothers were never married or are divorced/separated from their father.
- Hypothesis 4: Scores on the BASS will have a direct, negative relationship with scores on the Career Satisfaction Scale.
- Hypothesis 5: Scores on the BASS will have a direct, negative relationship with scores on the Optimism for Future Love Relationships Scale.

Instrument Evaluation Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Scores on the BASS test and retest datasets will have a strong, positive correlation of .9 or higher, p < .01.
- Hypothesis 2: Scores on the BASS will have a direct, positive relationship with scores on the Fear of Being Single Scale.
- Hypothesis 3: Scores on the BASS will have a direct, negative relationship with scores on the Satisfaction with Relationship Status Scale.
Study Design I

- **Sampling**
  - Method: Convenience and snowball
  - Inclusion criteria: woman, heterosexual, never-married, single, no children
  - N = 218

- **Online Quantitative Survey**
  - Demographic Information
    - Gender, DOB, children, mother’s marital status, home region of the country, and education
  - Instruments and Measures
    - Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Single Women (BASS)*
    - Career Satisfaction Scale
    - Optimism for Future Love Relationships
    - Fear of Being Single
    - Satisfaction with Relationship Status

Sample Questions from BASS

- I find myself wondering if I will find a husband.
- I feel I am able to plan my future without knowing if I find a husband.
- I will never be satisfied until I know for certain whether or not I will find a husband.
- My friends, family, and I have done everything reasonably possible to find a husband for me.
- When I meet a single man, I immediately wonder if he would be someone I would want to marry.

Study Design 2

- **Data analysis using SPSS**
  - Round 1: Correlation analysis for test-retest datasets after one week to establish reliability, N = 35
  - Round 2: Correlation and ANOVA analysis to test for relationships among the independent variables
  - Round 3: Regression analysis to test for which variables together can predict variability of BASS scores
Study Design 3

- Participant Well-Being and Confidentiality
  - No identifying information paired with data.
  - Participants may discontinue survey at any time.
  - Participants may contact researcher to discuss any distressing reactions.
  - Participants may contact researcher to request results of the study.

Results for Research Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1:** Average score on BASS was 54.71, representing 51% of the highest total possible score.
- **Hypothesis 2:** All ages and boundary ambiguity --- Slight, negative correlation (R = -.196, p<.01).
- **Hypothesis 3:** Mother’s marital status and boundary ambiguity --- No significant relationship!
- **Hypothesis 4:** Career satisfaction and boundary ambiguity --- No significant relationship!
- **Hypothesis 5:** Optimism about future love relationships and boundary ambiguity --- No significant relationship!

Figure 1. Frequency of Scores on the Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Single Women Grouped by Degree of Boundary Ambiguity
Other Results

- Boundary ambiguity and region of the county --- No significant relationship!
- Boundary ambiguity and years of education --- No significant relationship!
- Boundary ambiguity and age at time of mother’s divorce --- No significant relationship!
- Regression analysis --- Age, fear of being single, satisfaction with relationship status, and optimism about future love relationships account for 68.2% of the variance.

Results for Instrument Evaluation Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1**: Test/Retest datasets --- Strong, positive correlation of .936, p < .01. Reliability established!
- **Hypothesis 2**: Fear of being single and boundary ambiguity --- Strong, positive correlation of .726, p < .01. Supports construct validity!
- **Hypothesis 3**: Satisfaction with relationship status and boundary ambiguity --- Strong, negative correlation of -.633, p < .01. Supports construct validity!
- Strong psychometric properties! (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Frequency of Scores on the Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Single Woman (BASSTOTAL)
Limitations

- Sample method limits generalizability.
- Omission and complications of data collection for demographic information.
- Power of career satisfaction scale.
- Conceptualization of singleness as an ambiguous loss.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Study men and boundary ambiguity
- Refine test for relationship between boundary ambiguity and mother’s marital status
- Refine test for relationship between boundary ambiguity and cultural identification within the US
- Use more sensitive test to measure career satisfaction
- Longitudinal research
- Other variables: depression, self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, etc.

Review of Key Points of the Results

- Single women experience high level of ambiguous loss!
- Experience of ambiguous loss is not buffered by a variety of factors.
  - Challenges ideals of Feminism
- Researchers and clinicians may use ambiguous loss as a way to conceptualize singleness.
  - Research recommendations
  - Clinical implications
- Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Single Women is a valid measure!
Clinical Implications and Applications

AT THE LEVELS OF...

1. UNDERSTANDING/AWARENESS/CONCEPTUALIZATION
2. INTERVENTION/"TO DO"/REMEDIES

Possible Impetus for Therapy

- Struggle of being single may underlie presenting symptoms of anxiety and depression.
  - Recall that ambiguous loss is associated with emotional dysfunction.
- May not self-identify impact of singleness.
  - Aware of difficulty of singleness, but shame regarding admission of struggle with being single given mixed messages
  - Unaware of impact of challenges of being single
- Inquire about experience of being single.
  - Give space for complexity of challenges and joys

4 Keys to Addressing Ambiguous Loss

- Identify the dynamics of ambiguous loss.
- Learn to accept the ambiguity.
- Pursue meaning and hope.
- Find mutual connection and support with caring people.
Identify the Dynamics of Ambiguous Loss

- Desired husband as a missing person
- Unclear what is lost in current absence of husband
  - Begin to name what has been lost to promote grieving.
- Uncertainty if husband will be found or not
  - How long is a matter of "if" not "when"
- Ambiguity of why she is single
  - Agency and chance
- Complex grief
  - Frozen
  - Anticipatory
  - Disenfranchised

Learn to Accept the Ambiguity

- Uncertainty is certain
  - There will never be an ultimate "no"
  - Doorway to hope
- "Both-And" dialectics
  - Both loss and possibilities [how long]
  - Both agency and chance [why]
  - Both trials of being single and joys [meaning]
- Family Gamble
  - Accept a possible outcome and live accordingly
- Therapist's own ability to tolerate ambiguity

Pursue Meaning and Hope

- Explore answers to questions of why, purpose, outcome, and impact of being single
  - Spirituality and faith offers meaning to suffering
  - Recognize usefulness of being single
- Construct self-identity apart from ambiguous loss
  - Develop positive self-narrative
- Discover positive expectation and optimism for the future
  - About being single
  - About other areas of life
Find Mutual Connection and Support

- Connection as problem and cure for ambiguous loss of being single
  - Focus on deepening relationship (family and friendships)
  - Celebrate significant events in community context

- Invite others to offer support
  - Understand and validate loss
  - Grieve together

Conclusion

- RESEARCH: Quantitative, online, self-report survey of heterosexual, childless, never married, single women age 20-52, to measure boundary ambiguity

- RESULTS:
  - Single women do experience high levels of ambiguous loss! No buffer! Age slight negative relationship with BA.
  - BASS is a valid measure for boundary ambiguity among single women!

- CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS: Impetus for therapy, identify the dynamics, accept ambiguity, pursue meaning and hope, and find mutual connection and support

Key References