

# Family Separation and Boundary Ambiguity

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## ABSTRACT

The quality of a father's absence or presence in the family is the long-time focus of the researcher and presents a new view in the father absent literature. The variable of Psychological Father Presence (PFP) is described, operationalized and empirically verified as dysfunctional for families with physically missing fathers. Based on these findings which are reviewed, the author demonstrated how disaster research can be used to build stress theory for more normative family situations of father absence such as divorce. To illustrate, examples from the Boss boundary ambiguity project and the McCubbin coping project are presented. This author's major premise is that high family boundary ambiguity (as indicated by high PFP with physical father absence) will be predicted of high family dysfunction and that such family boundary ambiguity can be found in situations of divorce as well as in situations where families face the disaster of having a father missing from war. The overall thesis is that ambiguity in the family boundary is the critical predictor regarding the outcome of various kinds of father absence.

There have been a host of father absence studies in sociology and psychology, most of which have dealt quantitatively with father absence. That is, focus has been on quantifying his physical absence or presence within the family system. Much less research has centered on the quality of his absence or presence.

The physical presence of a father upon which quantification is based may be less critical to families than congruence between his physical and psychological presence or absence in the family. In family systems where there is incongruence between reality and perception, the ambiguity makes boundary maintenance

difficult since family members are not clear about who is in and who is outside the family system, nor on what basis they are in or out.

This qualitative view of father absence has been the subject of ongoing empirical theoretical work by this writer and is reported elsewhere (Boss, 1975, 1977, 1980). Based on these studies, the variable of Psychological Father Presence has been described, operationalized, and empirically verified as dysfunctional for families of missing fathers, especially for the wife.

Simultaneously, another research project focused on the resources a family brings to the event of father absence, specifically coping resources. This research was developed and led by McCubbin, originally from the Center of Prisoner of War Studies in San Diego and now from the University of Minnesota (McCubbin et al, 1980; McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al, 1979; McCubbin et al, 1976). Though this coping research was originally based on a military disaster sample, recent work is based on civilian populations of women who are stressed with ambiguous family separations (Boss et al, 1979; Davis and Boss, 1980; McCabe, 1981).

The purpose of this paper is to show how disaster research can be used to build family stress theory. To illustrate the process of theory building, examples from both the boundary ambiguity and the coping research projects will be used.

From 1974 to 1977, this writer was involved in a research project with the Center for Prisoner of War Studies in San Diego, California. The sample consisted of wives and children whose husbands/fathers were declared Missing-In-Action in Viet Nam or Cambodia. Out of previous work and observation in a family therapy clinic at the University of Wisconsin a theoretical proposition was developed: when families are unable to clarify their boundaries regarding who is in and who is outside the family system, the family will be dysfunctional. Conversely, the clearer the family boundary, the more functional the family system. Measurement was based on who performed what roles/tasks and who was perceived as present in the family system.

Couched in role theory and symbolic interaction, the proposition was tested on a sample where family boundary

ambiguity was extreme. Although investigating exceptional populations does not give generalizability, it meets a primary objective of theory builders for exploring all possible causes and consequences of a particular phenomenon. Previously undiscovered variables may be more easily surfaced by using extreme samples. If, as observed in the clinic, highly stressed families appear to be ambiguous in their membership, then it should follow that families highly ambiguous in their membership should also be stressed. Finding the most ambiguous situation possible was not intended to prove statements as true (which is the purpose of empirical research), but rather to discover new hypotheses for subsequent testing regarding father absence.

Using a composite research approach which moved back and forth between induction and deduction as recommended by both Hage (1972) and Reynolds (1971), the Missing-In-Action (MIA) sample was used to begin exploring and describing (1) the stressor event of family boundary ambiguity and (2) the coping mechanisms used in families with missing husbands/fathers.

Since full documentation of the research findings appear elsewhere (see McCubbin & Boss references), focus in this paper will be on how these particular research projects were found to be useful in the slow and rigorous process of building family stress theory.

### The Stressor Event: Boundary Ambiguity

In 1975, Boss (1975, 1977) defined and began operationalization of the concept of Psychological Father Presence (PFP). Correlational analysis revealed significant covariance between family functionality and psychological father presence, operating in a negative direction as theoretically proposed, regarding expressive role dimensions of PFP, but in a positive direction when the family kept the MIA father present for the instrumental role of financial providing. Apparently, there were times when keeping an instrumental role assigned to the absent father was functional to the MIA family, thus pointing toward the possibility of an instrumental/expressive specificity regarding PFP and the resultant boundary ambiguity. The data regarding wife gave support to the

proposition that boundary ambiguity was related to functionality in that her emotional health appeared to be strongly enhanced by no longer planning to seek evidence of her husband's return and by being closely involved in a new relationship with a desire to remarry. For her, it appeared to be functional to close-out the MIA husband's expressive role in the family system (Boss, 1975, 1977).

Data from this first study less clearly supported the proposition that PFP would have dysfunctional effects on the children. Nevertheless, the mother's movement toward relieving ambiguity was significantly related to children's adjustment as well as her own. The direct effect on wife versus the indirect effect on children was to be examined more closely in the subsequent phase of the study.

The follow-up study (Boss, 1980) used the same population and was based on data collected in 1977. Building on theoretical support and reformulation from the first study, a more precise operationalization of PFP was developed and is presented in Table 1.

Findings from this study added more definitive support to the proposition that in a family with a physically absent father, a high degree of PFP was related to Wife Dysfunction and was a significant predictor of Wife as well as Family Dysfunction. Though PFP remained primarily a wife-focused variable, it was significant as well in blocking the regenerative power of the entire family system. Even though PFP related more to the wife's personal psychological state rather than to her ease in performing family roles, it appeared that her psychological well-being influenced the entire family system. This finding was consistent with findings from Phase I of this study as well as with the assumptions of systems theory (Buckley, 1967) which imply a relationship between the system as a whole and the individuals within.

Based on these cumulative findings, the proposition regarding PFP is now being tested on a less extreme population but one which still manifests the phenomenon of ambiguity in boundary. The logic is that there are theoretical commonalities regarding family boundary ambiguity (or the potential of it) between the disaster MIA situation and the more usual situation of divorce.

Table 1: Psychological Father Presence Scale, 18 Items

**Wife:**

- 1 (-) I no longer consider myself an "MIA" wife.
- 2 (-) I feel I have prepared myself for a change in status (to widow).
- 3 (-) I feel I am able to plan my future without feeling guilty for not continuing to wait for my husband.
- 4 (-) I hope to remarry.
- 5 (-) The armed Services have done everything reasonably possible to account for my husband.
- 6 (+) I find myself still wondering if my husband is alive.
- 7 (+) I continue to keep alive my deepest hope that my husband will return.
- 8 (+) I feel guilty about dating (or wanting to date).
- 9 (+) I will never be satisfied until I have positive proof of my husband's death.
- 10 (+) I think about my husband a lot.
- 11 (+) I feel it will be difficult, if not impossible, to carve out a new life for myself without my husband.
- 12 (+) I feel incapable of establishing meaningful relationships with another man.

**Children:**

- 13 (-) My children are able to talk about their father without becoming emotionally upset.
- 14 (-) My children are aware of all "the facts" and have reconciled their father's loss.
- 15 (+) My children still believe that their father is alive.
- 16 (+) My children and I talk about their father seemingly quite often.

**Parents/In-Laws:**

- 17 (+) Conflicts with my own parents over my husband's change of status have presented a problem for me
- 18 (+) My in-laws do not or would not approve of my plans to develop a life for myself.

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**Key(+)**=high degree of Psychological Father Presence

**(-)** = low degree of Psychological Father Presence

Source: Boss (1980)

According to Hansen and Johnson (1979:590), ambiguity has been identified "as a fundamental and pervasive quality of a stressed condition that makes the definitional aspect of family interaction especially problematic". Though degree varies, both MIA and divorced families have in common the potential for the ambiguity:

- Both represent loss and separation.
- Both represent an unclear separation, that is, it is not absolutely clear to the family members that the person is in or out of the family system or on what basis they are in or out.
- There are no social rituals for clarifying this ambiguity of family boundaries as there are in death of a spouse. Families must find their own way to psychologically close-out the missing member from their family system in order to reorganize into a functioning system.
- Both involve different levels of role assignments, that is, *instrumental* and *expressive*, thus close-out may have an *instrumental-expressive* specificity.
- In divorce, many of the *instrumental* roles continue just as they did for the MIA wife who continued to accept her missing husband's paycheck as long as the children were still at home.
- Both involve the loss of one of the family executives, if not the family executive.

The adaptation of the instrument in Table 1 for the divorced sample is now in its beginning stages. The results of an exploratory study using a divorced co-parenting population indicate that some boundary overlap regarding instruments roles was identified as functional for co-parenting families (Moskoff, 1980). This finding supports earlier findings with the MIA population. Though further testing is needed, it appears that keeping a role open for a physically absent family member may be functional in some cases if the role is *instrumental* rather than *expressive*. If the absent family member is not completely closed out, it appears the family can still be functional if members are clear on what basis the absent parent is in or out. Just as the MIA husband's check continued to provide for the family, the divorced co-parent continues to help make decisions regarding the children.

The *instrumental/expressive* role specificity in the proposition regarding boundary ambiguity will now be investi-

gated further using a more experimental design. Suffice it to say in this progress report, that the concept of boundary ambiguity as operationalized by psychological spouse presence will provide new variables for the study of divorce.

### Coping Strategies

The coping research was begun under the direction of McCubbin at the Center for Prisoner of War Studies and is continuing at the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

There is theoretical value in exploring a phenomenon manifested in varying samples. Beginning with a military sample which represented prolonged and ambiguous father absence, an instrument was developed to elicit coping behaviors used by people experiencing varying kinds of family separations (McCubbin et al, 1975). Different samples have since been tested using a refined version of the Coping with Separation Inventory (McCubbin et al. 1979). After that military sample, the instrument was given to a non-wartime military sample of Navy Aviator wives whose husbands were routinely absent for a period of eight months. The next sample tested was a non-military sample--wives of corporate executives whose husbands were absent for an average of 1 week per month. This work has been summarized by McCubbin (1979). Since then, the Coping Inventory has been administered to two populations of women (rural and urban) who are experiencing husband/father absence due to divorce. These new findings are graphically summarized along with those from the McCubbin summary in Table 2.

It is interesting to note that in spite of qualitative variations in husband/father absence, certain coping behavior patterns remain constant across all samples: for example, maintaining family integrity appears as consistently as establishing independence and self sufficiency by the remaining parent. It appears that coping strategies involve both a focus on self as well as on the family as a system. This finding is consistent with systems theory (Buckley, 1967) as was the earlier finding regarding PFP which indicated that the psychological well-being of the remaining parent was related to the well-being of the entire system.

The coping strategies reflect the importance of both individual psychological variables as well as group variables in the building of family stress theory. In the Burr (1973) model, individual psychological variables are notably absent (Burr 1973). A dialectical balance between the self and family appears now to be the core of the coping strategies and new variables need to be incorporated into the broader family stress model to reflect this core.

Other research is in progress on samples of rural and urban widows who are coping with loss of husband from death. A replication of the corporate executive wife study is in progress at the University of Connecticut.

**Table 2: Coping Strategies in the Management of the Stress From Husband/Father Absence: Qualitative Variations**

<b>Prolonged Separation</b> average 6 years (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson, Robertson, 1976) N = 47	<b>Routine Separation</b> 8 months (McCubbin, Lester, 1976) N = 82	<b>Repeated Separations</b> average 1 week (Boss, McCubbin, Lester, 1979) N = 66	<b>Rural Divorce</b> 6 months after (Boss, Davis, 1980) N = 28	<b>Urban Divorce</b> 6 months after (McCabe, 1981) N = 50
Seeking resolutions; expressing feelings Reducing anxiety				1. Community involvement 2. Involvement in divorce-related activities/programs
Establishing autonomy; maintain family ties				3. Maintaining Family ties; seeking support from relatives
Maintain family integrity	1. Maintain family integrity & stability		1. Doing things with children; maintain family stability	4. Doing things with children; maintain family stability
Maintain the past; dependence on religion	2. Belief in God		2. Religion & relatives	5. Reliving the past & passivity
Establish independence through self-development	3. Establish self-sufficiency & independence 4. Trusting and building relationships	1. Establish self-sufficiency & independence 2. Develop self & interpersonal relationships	3. Establish self-sufficiency & independence 4. Developing relationships with people 5. Developing self	6. Self-sufficiency & concentration on hobbies 7. Expressing feelings & building close relationships 8. Developing self; establishing a new life; dating
	5. Living up to the military's expectations 6. Keeping active in hobbies	3. Fitting into the corporate lifestyle		



Also, a study involving wives of men who are absent due to incarceration is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska. It will be interesting to see if the same core of coping strategies remains or if new ones develop as variations such as age, family life cycle, and stigma are added to the husband/father absent situations.

### Summary and Conclusion

Using the composite approach of both induction and deduction, the following theoretical propositions are synthesized from the previous research and presented here for future testing regarding ambiguous family separation.

**Proposition 1.** Keeping an absent parent psychologically present is more directly dysfunctional for the spouse than it is for the children in the family. That is, the spouse may be able to perform family role responsibilities even though she is personally preoccupied and psychologically involved with her missing spouse. Thus family functioning is not always in congruence with the psychological health of the remaining spouse.

**Proposition 2.** A high degree of PFP is dysfunctional for some roles but not for all (for example MIA families keeping the missing husband as provider and more recent preliminary findings regarding instrumental role overlap in joint-custody situations). It is proposed that keeping the absent member present for instrumental roles is more functional than if they are kept inside the family to fulfill expressive roles.

**Proposition 3.** Coping strategies used by various populations experiencing separation will fall into both individual and group (family) variables. It is proposed that both individual psychological and group variables will be significant predictors of families who are coping in situations of father absence. Specifically, it is proposed that both a development of independence/self sufficiency in the remaining spouse and family cohesiveness are necessary for family functioning under the stress of family separation. It is in fact a dialectical balance between family and individual strategies that makes for successful family coping under stress of separation.

Out of an exceptional and precious disaster sample, theoretical propositions were inductively developed,

deductively tested, reformulated and prepared for further testing regarding (1) the stressor event of ambiguous father absence and (2) coping strategies employed to manage that stress. Further tests have been and are being carried out using more everyday samples experiencing qualitative variations of the same phenomenon, i.e., divorced or widowed women experiencing husband/father absence. The entire process is aimed at theory building. Though the propositions grew out of disaster research, they now appear from initial exploratory/descriptive research, to have validity for broader situations of family separation which have potential for ambiguity. This needs to be further verified with traditional deductive research strategies that focus on prediction and large sample size. Concurrent clinical testing of the theoretical propositions is also in process. It is this continuous interplay between research, theory, and application that will further scientific knowledge regarding the stress of ambiguous family separations. This has been a progress report of one such effort.