

Normative Loss in Mid-Life Families: Rural, Urban, and Gender Differences

Boss, P., Pearce-McCall, & Greenberg, J. (1987). Normative loss in mid-life families: Rural, urban, and gender differences. *Family Relations*, 36, 437-443.



Boundary ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity about who is a member of the household and what roles each person plays. In this study, researchers evaluated the relationship between boundary ambiguity (resulting from an adolescent leaving home) and psychological dysfunction in rural and urban families. Results suggested that the greater the boundary ambiguity following this normative loss, the worse the psychological outcomes for both parents; however, the effects differed between mothers and fathers.

Key Findings:

- The higher the boundary ambiguity, the worse mothers and fathers felt about their child leaving home. This was evidenced by higher somatization in fathers and lower general affect in mothers.
- Mothers tended to be slightly more preoccupied with the adolescent who had left home than fathers. However, any discrepancy within couples decreased over time.
- There were few differences between rural and urban families in terms of the psychological impact of boundary ambiguity.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could offer classes for family members to offer techniques to help them manage family boundaries and roles following Service members' separations (deployment, training, etc.).
- Programs may want to incorporate content in parent training curricula about challenges sometimes associated with adolescents leaving home.

Implications for Policies:

- Policies could recommend that the psychological adjustment of family members of a deployed Service member be tracked to enable early intervention for those struggling with boundary ambiguity.
- Policies in support of military families may want to provide support to families across the entire deployment cycle, in recognition that all phases may include unique stressors for families.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future studies may want to evaluate how boundary ambiguity affects family members following departure of a Service member.
- Future studies may want to more fully investigate gender differences in boundary ambiguity.

Background Information

Methodology:

- Surveys were sent to 100 urban, 100 rural farm, and 100 rural non-farm families selected from mailing lists purchased from a marketing company.
- Participants completed questionnaires evaluating boundary ambiguity following departure of an adolescent from the home.
- Participants also completed surveys of family stress, somatization, and general affect.
- Analyses were aimed at evaluating whether boundary ambiguity was associated with increased dysfunction.





Participants:

- The sample consisted of 70 rural and urban mid-life couples with an adolescent who had left home.
- The couples had been married for an average of 28 years, with an average of 4 children.
- All participants were White and most (~75%) were from rural areas.
- The average ages of fathers and mothers were 52 and 49, respectively.
- Most fathers had a high school education and were employed. Mothers' education varied, with an average of 12 years. Nearly 48% of mothers were employed at least part-time and 29% were full-time homemakers.

Limitations:

- Respondents to the mailed survey may be prone to self-selection bias. They may be characterized by higher functioning than families who did not respond.
- Participation was restricted to a small sample from one state (Minnesota), limiting generalizability to other geographic regions.
- The sample was quite homogeneous regarding demographic variables, making comparisons to other kinds of families difficult.

Assessing Research that Works

Research Design and Sample				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)	
The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Research Methods				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)	
The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Limitations				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent <i>Minor Limitations</i> (★★★)	Appropriate <i>Few Limitations</i> (★★★)	Limited <i>Several Limitations</i> (★★★)	Questionable <i>Many/Severe Limitations</i> (★★★)	
The limitations of this study are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Implications				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)	
The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
				<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications	
Overall Quality Rating					