

The Emotional Consequences of Being Single for Women

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Overview

INTRODUCTION
RESEARCH STUDY
CLINICAL APPLICATION
Q&A

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**
 - Anxiety and depression
 - Limbo years

Ambiguity > Loss?

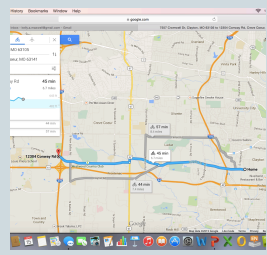

- **Ambiguity of being single**
 - Changing gender roles
 - Mixed messages about meaning
 - Cultural lag
 - Why
 - How long
- **Ambiguous loss**

Ambiguous Loss

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

Elements of Ambiguous Loss

UnclearUncertain



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
 - Identifies the dilemma of accept singleness or remain hopeful.

Gap in the Literature...

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!

Getting technical...

The **PERCEPTION** of ambiguous loss is known as boundary ambiguity!

Research Study

PURPOSE
HYPOTHESES
STUDY DESIGN
RESULTS
LIMITATIONS
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
REVIEW OF KEY POINTS OF THE RESULTS

Purpose of the Research Study

- Measure Boundary Ambiguity in a population of single women
- Determine if or to degree of 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

Study Design I

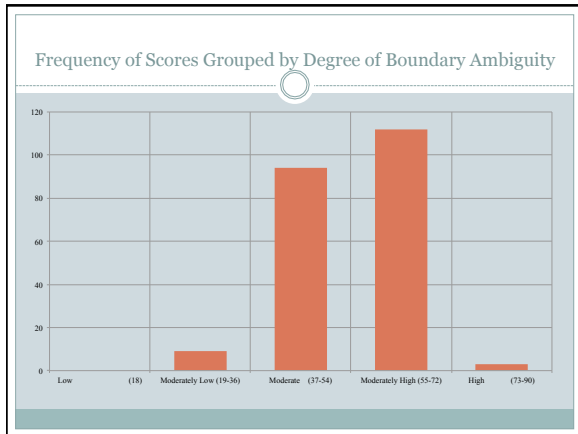
- **Sampling**
 - Method: Convenience and snowball
 - Inclusion criteria: woman, heterosexual, never-married, single, no children
 - N = 218
- **Online Quantitative Survey**
 - Demographic Information
 - Gender, DOB, children, mother's marital status, home region of the country, and education
 - Instruments 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.

Research Results 1

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



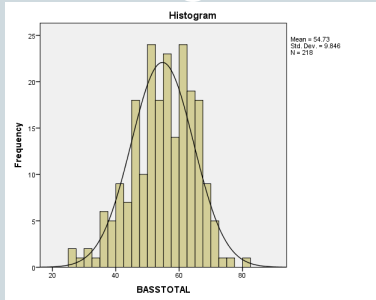
Research Results 2

- 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.

Instrument Evaluation Results

- Test/Retest datasets --- Strong, positive correlation of .936, $p < .01$. Reliability established!
- Fear of being single and boundary ambiguity --- Strong, positive correlation of .726, $p < .01$. Supports construct validity!
- Satisfaction with relationship status and boundary ambiguity --- Strong, negative correlation of -.633, $p < .01$. Supports construct validity!
- Strong psychometric properties!

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.

Review of Key Points of the Results

- Single women experience high level of ambiguous loss!
- Experience of ambiguous loss is **not buffered**.
 - 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.
 - Impact of church culture focused on marriage and family.
- **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 absence of husband**
 - Genesis creation account offers clarity about loss
 - Naming loss promotes grieving
- **Uncertainty if husband will be found or not**
 - How long is a matter of “if” not “when”
 - Christian hope supports honest appraisal
- **Ambiguity of why she is single**
 - Agency and ordinary providence
 - Gospel allows honesty with areas for growth
- **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* [in regard to how long]
 - *Both agency and providence* [in regard to why]
 - *Both trials of being single and joys* [in regard to meaning]
- **Focus on certainties of God’s character**
- **Identify with uncertainties of people in the Bible**
- **Family Gamble**
 - Accept a possible outcome and live accordingly
- **Therapist’s own ability to tolerate ambiguity**

Pursue Meaning and Hope

- **Explore meaning and fruit of suffering**
 - What is God doing? How am I changing/growing?
 - Intimacy with God – Psalm 34:18
 - Perseverance, character, and hope – Romans 5:3-5
- **Hope deferred makes the heart sick! Proverbs 13:12**
- **Develop both big “H” Hope and little “h” hope**
- **Grieve with hope – 1 Thessalonians 4:13**
- **Nurture self apart from ambiguous loss**
 - Focus thoughts, feelings, actions in relationship with God, self, and others on other areas of self

Find Mutual Connection and Support

- **Connection as problem and cure for ambiguous loss of being single**
 - Absence of “daily person”
 - Need for long-term relationships
 - Deepen existing relationship (family and friendships)
 - Celebrate significant events in community context
- **Invite others to offer support**
 - Supportive and mutual relationships
 - Understand and validate loss
 - Grieve together
- **Single women at church**
 - Feel both visible and invisible
 - Involvement in the lives of families
 - Service as leaders
 - Don't presume excess free time

Conclusion

- **Ambiguous loss is a useful framework for understanding the experience of single women.**
- **Single women may address struggles inherent to the ambiguous loss of being single by:**
 - (1) identifying the dynamics, (2) learning to accept the ambiguity, (3) pursuing meaning and hope, and (4) finding mutual connection and support
- **Christian faith supports acknowledging and understanding the difficult dynamics of being single and provides hope for coping with the uncertainties.**

Time for...

Q & A
