

Impact of parental boundary ambiguity on children's adjustment to divorce

by

Erin Jane Guyette

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Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Melinda Stafford Markham

Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Glade Topham

Abstract

Due to the large number of children who experience parental divorce, researchers have focused on the impact of divorce on children and protective factors to reduce negative consequences. Divorce requires a re-negotiation of relational boundaries to be forced to be negotiated due to the change in the family system and transition from parents being romantic partners to coparents. Using data from 739 divorced mothers and fathers with a child between the ages of 4 and 18, I examined the influence of coparental boundary ambiguity and time since separation on three child well-being factors: prosocial skills, externalizing behaviors, and internalizing behaviors. Boundary ambiguity between coparents was found to negatively affect children's prosocial skills and externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Boundary ambiguity was found to decrease over time; however, time was not significant as a moderator between boundary ambiguity and child well-being factors (externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and prosocial skills). Mental health professionals and other practitioners working with divorcing families can use these findings to prompt discussions between coparents about establishing child-focused boundaries.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Melinda Markham and Glade Topham for their leadership in family studies and relentless encouragement through my master's education and clinical work.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Each year more than one million children in America experience parental divorce or separation (Cohen & Weitzman, 2016). Researchers have studied extensively the impact of divorce on children. Less is known, however, about parental behavior during the divorcing process in relation to the impact of divorce on children. What is known is that new or continued interparental conflict is problematic for children (Amato, 2006; 2010). Before and after a divorce, a child is at greater risk for a variety of emotional and behavioral problems compared to a child not experiencing parental divorce (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Amato et al., 2011)

Parenting during divorce has received a lot of attention as one's ability to parent effectively can be compromised due to the stress of the divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Peris & Emery, 2005). Parents who have difficulty maintaining support for their children put their children at greater risk for poor post-divorce adjustment (Peris & Emery, 2005). A secure attachment between a parent and child in which children come to trust that they are lovable and that their parent will be responsive to their needs (Ainsworth, 1979) is an ideal relationship; however, in the midst of divorce, children often develop insecurity in the relationship with one or both parents (Emery & Dillon, 1994). The beginning stages of divorce are when children are in most need of parental support and reassurance; however, this is typically the same time period that parents are more preoccupied with their own stressors and do not have the ability to respond appropriately (Emery, 1999; Peris & Emery, 2005).

Children have to adjust to major changes and reach to their parents for support and guidance. However, parents are going through their own transitions regarding how their lives are going to look after divorce. The emotional divorce is often a prolonged process beyond the legal

divorce, especially for those who share parenting responsibilities (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). One of the most significant potential sources of stress is boundary ambiguity as a family unit changes because of divorce (Emery, 1994). Boundary ambiguity is defined as the family not knowing who is in and who is out of the family system (Boss et al., 1990). Boundary ambiguity creates conflict as individuals navigate a change in roles within a system. Boundaries between coparents become ambiguous as there is a change in the relationship as they transition from romantic partners to coparents. Boundaries in a romantic relationship are negotiated throughout the duration of the relationship, whereas, with the new status of being coparents, there is uncertainty in the new role as coparents (Emery, 2012). This could also be a source for arguments between coparents as each partner may interpret their boundaries differently. For example, one coparent may assume it is appropriate to walk into the home that they lived in together before separating unannounced, while the other may disagree.

Knowing more about the impact of parental boundary ambiguity on child well-being will inform parents, counselors, mediators, educators, and other professionals of the importance of parents setting healthy coparenting boundaries early in the divorce process. From studies that look at parenting after divorce, it is widely believed that cooperative coparenting is associated with fewer adjustment problems for children (Whiteside, 1998). If boundary ambiguity is recognized as an important factor in child well-being post-divorce and benefits the coparenting relationship, parents can be informed of the role of clear boundaries and guided in negotiation of boundaries as they move from partners to coparents.

This study will look at boundary ambiguity and how it impacts child well-being during the time since couple separation. It is expected that the longer time since the separation, the less

boundary ambiguity there will be between coparents, which is expected to be associated with less child externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The Parental Role During Divorce

Divorce tends to bring challenges and stress for parents such as poverty, psychological problems, and health problems (Amato, 2010), which can impact their level of engagement with their children. Parenting strains such as difficulties within the parenting role and poor well-being, can lead to poorer developmental outcomes for children (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Parenting problems such as a decrease in enforcing consistent discipline and maintaining an authoritative parenting style brings challenges to parents in marital disruption (Kelly, 2000). Children who do not live in a two-parent household are more likely to have poorer health, learning difficulties, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, emotional and behavioral difficulties, and more emergency department visits than those in nuclear families (Blackwell, 2010).

However, there are parenting-related factors that can help with a child's adjustment to parental separation. Parental warmth and support, parental knowledge, and consistent discipline are important aspects of a child's well-being (Beckmeyer et al., 2019). The quality of the parent-child relationship after a divorce is a consistent predictor of positive child well-being after divorce (Nielsen, 2017). Preserving parent-child relationships in divorce is important for child well-being. The initial period after a divorce is when children are most likely needing extra reassurance and support (Peris & Emery, 2005).

Divorce, Family Structure, and Boundary Ambiguity

Even though the legal process of divorce is what legally changes the spousal relationship, the emotional changes of the spousal relationship is often a lengthy process for the entire family, especially when children are involved (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Researchers have

moved to viewing divorce as a multistage process of family change instead of a single event (Amato, 2010). Parents face several challenges when parenting after divorce such as living separate from one another, separation-related acrimony, dissatisfaction with legal results of the divorce, and feelings from the marital dissolution (Fischer et al., 2005).

Divorce results in the change of relationship roles and the establishment of separate households' forces relationship boundaries to be reconfigured (Petren, 2017). One of the most significant potential causes of stress due to divorce is boundary ambiguity (Emery, 1994). The level of boundary ambiguity in a divorce can be determined by the congruence between an individual's psychological perception and the physical reality of who is in and out of the family system (Boss, 1988; 1999). Early coparenting relationships often predict long-term relational patterns and post-divorce adjustment (Emery, 2012). Coparents who have ambiguous boundaries may be unable to adjust to the change and focus on the needs and well-being of their children, which in turn creates an unstable and stressful environment (Beckmeyer et al., 2019).

Impact of High Boundary Ambiguity on Children

Conflict typically decreases and children's adjustment concerns become less severe over time following divorce, but 8 to 12% of parents remain highly conflictual with their former partner in the years following a divorce (Kelly, 2012; Lansford, 2009). When parents involve their children in ongoing marital disputes, pressure is put on the children and children are likely to experience distress (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Most children want to be close to both of their parents and will often try to mediate their parents' disputes; however, children also fear that their interventions will be interpreted as being disloyal to one or both parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006). According to Emery and Dillon (1994), to reduce the level of intense interparental conflict and

stress for a family post-divorce, boundaries must be restructured (Peterson & Hendriksen Christiansen, 2002).

When emotions are challenging and parents do not seek adult support, parents will turn to their children to fill their emotional needs and share distress, this is known as boundary dissolution (Peris & Emery, 2005). Not only are children dealing with the divorce but are asked to do things from their parents beyond a child's typical role. Children's efforts to intervene in highly emotional adult matters is linked to higher levels of internalizing symptoms in children (Davis & Forman, 2002). Another type of boundary diffusion that occurs between children and parents is triangulation. This is when a child is pulled into the parent dyad in order to resolve parental disagreements (Grych et al., 2004). This role pulls the child into marital discussions and the child is asked to act as a referee or "messenger" between parents (Perrin et al., 2013). Researchers have shown that ambiguous individuation is related to poorer psychological well-being for children (e.g. Mattanah et al., 2004).

Coparenting and Boundary Ambiguity

After a divorce, those who have children change roles from spouses to coparents. Post-divorce coparenting is defined as ex-spouses' ongoing management of coordinating children's care, activities, and needs (Beckmeyer et al., 2019). From a family systems perspective, relationships between coparents are multi-dimensional as they include responsibilities relating to child rearing, moving from romantic partners to former partners, communicating post-divorce, and navigating the legal aspects of divorce (Beckmeyer et al., in press). Each dimension of a coparenting relationship has the potential to influence a child's well-being as it shapes the dynamics of a family after a divorce. As a result, it is important for successful coparenting

relationships to occur between former spouses to create a family context that supports a child's well-being (Beckmeyer et al., in press).

When former spouses engage in cooperative coparenting, they work collaboratively to manage their child's care and activities through frequent, child-centered communication, and minimal conflict (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006). Children seem to benefit when parents communicate frequently, have similar rules in both households, and parents support each other's authority and parenting role (Amato et al., 2011). However, this is often not a reality as many post-divorce coparenting relationships are parallel, conflicted, or uninvolved (Beckmeyer et al., 2019).

If parents are able to acknowledge the transition into their new coparenting role with their former partner, they may be better able to prioritize limiting their child's exposure to conflict, providing intentional parenting, and ensuring greater stability for their children after a divorce (Ahrons, 2011). Emery (2012) recommends establishing a "businesslike" relationship with the "business" being the child(ren). This would be communicating solely for the sake of the children and not making decisions based on personal emotions. Establishing a more businesslike relationship can be a difficult task as former partners, but often results in reduction of boundary ambiguity. This change in relationship is asking them to disentangle their marital and parental roles as they move from a place of intimacy to a place of business (Emery & Dillon, 1994). A lack of clarity in roles after the divorce negatively influences the family system's ability to restructure (boundary ambiguity), which results in family stress and conflict (Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

Family Systems Theory and Relational Boundaries

As a family transitions through divorce, new boundaries are established due to the structural change. Family Systems Theory emphasizes the importance of appropriate boundaries for healthy family functioning (Minuchin, 1974; Peris & Emery, 2005), which also applies to non-traditional families such as families of divorce. Families of divorce or separation can still function in many respects like a healthy two-parent family (Amato et al., 2011). The importance of clear, hierarchical boundaries is emphasized in family systems theory. Families with poor boundaries are at risk for drawing their children into unhealthy roles (Perrin et al., 2013). Continuous boundary ambiguity may be caused by coparents not moving on from their previous roles as spouses, delay in establishment of new roles as coparents, and/or inability to adapt to new family structures (Beckmeyer et al., 2019).

After a divorce, parents need to establish specific boundaries between spousal and parental roles to meet the needs of their children as the family adjusts to the new physical boundaries (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Families with prolonged high boundary ambiguity experience higher levels of stress and increased individual and family dysfunction (Boss, 2002; Carroll et al., 2007). Price and colleagues (1992) found that high boundary ambiguity in divorced families may contribute to low parental involvement and coparent communication. Boundaries must be clear and established due to the impact on individuals and the family as a whole unit (Rosenberg & Guttman, 2001). Examples of poor boundaries include ex-spouses who still live together, have frequent contact, or continue a sexual relationship (Mathis, 1998).

The Current Study

Researchers have found that children who have experienced a parental divorce show more externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, depression symptoms, and lower academic

achievement and these concerns are related to parental boundary ambiguity (Amato, 2001); however, these adjustment concerns are more common shortly after divorce and become less severe over time (Lansford, 2009). Due to time since divorce having an impact on adjustment, it is important to look at the relationship between time since separation in relationship to boundary ambiguity and the impact this has on a child's well-being. If boundaries are more established years after the divorce due to the elapse of time and we see this is positive on a child's well-being, this may necessitate the need for boundary negotiation to occur early on in the divorce process to establish new family structure and roles for the well-being of children. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between time since separation and parental boundaries in relation to child well-being. Based on previous findings about child adjustment to divorce and boundary ambiguity between coparents, this study will test three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Boundary ambiguity between coparents will decrease over time as coparenting routines become established.

Hypothesis 2: Boundary ambiguity between coparents will be associated with children's decreased prosocial skills and increased externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors.

Hypothesis 3: Time since separation between parents will moderate the relationship between boundary ambiguity and child outcomes, specifically looking at the increase of prosocial skills and decrease of externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

Chapter 3 - Methods

Procedure

Participants were recruited and prompted with a survey using a crowdsourcing platform, Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk facilitates online access to a diverse pool of participants for research (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). MTurk participants are not representative of the general U.S. population as they tend to be younger in age, more female, higher education, and more liberal than the general US population (Shank, 2015). However, participants are more demographically diverse than other standard internet samples and significantly more than the average American college samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

To participate in the survey, individuals had to fit the criteria of having at least one child 18-years-old or younger and being divorced from that child's other parent. If a participant had more than one child, they responded to the survey in regard to their oldest child. Before starting the survey, participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey where they first read informed consent information. Once they gave consent to participate, they were directed to the survey. Participants were paid \$4.00 in compensation for completing the survey.

A total of 849 divorced mothers and fathers completed the survey. Thirty-five participants were removed from the sample for not meeting criteria including (a) 11 participants reported not having a child with a former spouse, (b) 10 participants with significant missing responses, (c) 6 participants who had children over 18 years of age, and (d) 8 participants who straight-lined the survey. This removal of 35 participants ended with 739 in the total sample.

Participants

The current study is based on the responses from 739 participants with their oldest child being between 4- and 18-years-old (see table 1). This age range is due to the fact that this is the

age range for the measure used to assess for child well-being, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. The average child age was 10-years-old (range = 4-18). Most of the target children were White (83.6%) and 16.4 were another race. Participants had been married an average of 7.13 years (Range = 1-25) and divorced/separated an average of 4.65 years (Range = 1-17 years). As for custody of children, 58.6% of participants had shared custody while 31.8% had sole custody. A majority of participants (57.7) made between \$30,000 and \$74,999. The average age of participants was 36-years-old and 51.4% were male. As for ethnicity of participants, 83.5% of participants were White and 16.5% were non-White. Full listwise deletion was used to account for missing data.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Participants (Parents) and their target child (N = 739)

Variables	% or M (SD)
Parent's age	35.74
Parent is male	51.4%
Parent's ethnicity	
White	83.5%
Non-white	16.5%
Household income	
Less than 20,000	9.9%
20,000-29,000	16%
30,000-49,999	28.7%
50,000-74,999	29%
75,000-99,999	10.4%
100,000-149,999	4.7%
150,000 or more	1.4%
Highest Level of Education	

Less than high school	0.1%
Highschool diploma or GED	10.4%
Some college	27.6%
Associates Degree	13.7%
Bachelor's Degree	39.6%
Post Graduate Degree	8.5%
Child's age (in years)	10.07
Child is male	59.5%
Child's ethnicity	
White	83.6%
Non-white	16.4%
Physical Custody arrangement	
Sole	41.1%
Shared	58.6%
Length of former marriage (in years)	7.13
Time since divorce/separation (in years)	4.66
Cohabiting or Repartnered	27.3%

Measures

Boundary ambiguity. Boundary ambiguity was measured with the Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Divorced Adults (21-items; Boss et al., 1990). Items assessed participants' recognition of ambiguity in the relationship with their former spouse. The assessment has been shown to be reliable with a Chronbach alpha of .86. A sample of 12 family researchers and clinicians with experience in divorce examined the items and judged the scale as having content validity (Boss

et al., 1990). Sample items included: “I feel that in some sense I will always be attached to my former spouse,” and “I still consider some members of my former spouse’s family to be part of my family.” All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never to 5 = always). Boundary ambiguity scores were computed by averaging across the items, after reverse-coding 6-items. Item 9 of the questionnaire was not included due to it being forgotten in the online survey. Higher scores reflect greater boundary ambiguity between former spouses.

Child well-being. Three aspects of child well-being (i.e., prosocial behavior, externalizing behavior, and internalizing behavior) were measured with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 2001). Prosocial behavior (e.g., being considerate of others, sharing readily, and being helpful to others) was assessed with 4-items ($\alpha = .75$), externalizing behavior (e.g., loses temper, bullies others, and lies or steals) was assessed with 8-items ($\alpha = .77$), and internalizing behavior (e.g., seems worried, unhappy, and easily scared) was assessed with 9-items ($\alpha = .80$). Each item was rated on a 3-point scale (1 = not true, 2 = somewhat true, and 3 = certainly true).

Time. For the independent variable, time since divorce, participants were asked, “How long have you been separated from your ex-partner?”

Control Variables. Analyses controlled for variables in regard to participant (parent) demographics, child demographics, and divorce-related variables. Participant (parent) variables included age, sex (male = 1, female = 0), race (White = 1, all others = 0), current partner status (1 = repartnered or cohabiting, 0 = not repartnered or cohabiting), current household income (<\$20,000; \$20,000 to \$29,999; \$30,000 to \$49,999; \$50,000 to \$74,999; \$75,000 to \$99,999; \$100,000 to \$149,999; >\$150,000), and education (less than high school, high school diploma or GED, some college, associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, post graduate/professional degree).

Child characteristic variables included sex (male = 1, female = 0), age, and race (White non-Hispanic = 1, all others = 0). Divorce related variables included legal custody status (sole custody of one spouse or shared custody) and length of marriage.

Data Analysis Plan

This study employed SPSS for Windows software to analyze data. First, I ran bivariate correlations between time since separation from former spouse, boundary ambiguity, and each child well-being variable (i.e., externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and prosocial skills). Second, I used a 2-Step Hierarchical Multiple Regression (HMR) with covariates in step 1, adding boundary ambiguity in step 2 to examine the relationship between boundary ambiguity and time since separation (Hypothesis 1). Next, I ran three hierarchical multiple regression analyses to see if boundary ambiguity predicted child adjustment outcomes (i.e., internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and prosocial skills; Hypothesis 2). Lastly, I ran three linear regressions for each of the child well-being factors with the covariates, boundary ambiguity, time since separation, and the interaction of time since separation and boundary ambiguity as predictor variables (Hypothesis 3). Boundary ambiguity and time since separation were mean centered in order to create the interaction variables of boundary ambiguity x time since separation.

Chapter 4 - Results

Bivariate Correlations

Boundary ambiguity was positively correlated with child externalizing behavior ($r = .219$, $p < .001$) and child internalizing behavior ($r = .158$, $p < .001$). Boundary ambiguity was negatively correlated with time since separation ($r = -.163$, $p < .001$). Child externalizing behavior was positively correlated with child internalizing behavior ($r = .547$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Correlations among boundary ambiguity, time since separation, and child outcomes.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Boundary Ambiguity	—				
2. Time since separation	-.163***	—			
3. Child Prosocial Skills	-.43	-.006	—		
4. Child Externalizing	.219***	-.033	-.055	—	
5. Child Internalizing	.158***	.046	.007	.547***	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 1

A Hierarchical Multiple Regression was used to see if time since separation predicted coparental boundary ambiguity. In step 1, parent age ($\beta = -.021$, $p < .001$), having a male child ($\beta = -.128$, $p < .01$), having shared legal custody ($\beta = -.214$, $p < .001$), length of former marriage ($\beta = .018$, $p < .01$), and being repartnered or cohabiting ($\beta = .162$, $p < .001$) were significantly associated with boundary ambiguity. Step 1 accounted for 20.6% of the variance in boundary ambiguity, $R^2 = .206$, $F(1,723) = 17.09$, $p < .001$. In step 2, the more time elapsed since

separation was significantly, negatively related the level of boundary ambiguity ($\beta = -.025, p < .001$), accounting for an additional 0.9% of the variance in levels of boundary ambiguity, $R^2 = .009, F(1,722) = 6.54, p < .001$. The total model explained 21.6% of the variance in levels of boundary ambiguity, $R^2 = .216, F(1,722) = 16.54, p < .01$.

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Boundary Ambiguity (N=739).

	Steps and Predictor Variables	<i>Boundary Ambiguity</i>				
		<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	Step 1					
	Parent Age	-.021	.004	-.218	-4.986	.000
	Father	-.095	.045	-.075	-2.103	.036
	White non-Hispanic Parent	.125	.098	.073	1.274	.203
	Child age	-.017	.007	-.112	-2.520	.012
	Male child	-.128	.044	-.100	-2.950	.003
	White non-Hispanic Child	-.167	.098	-.098	-1.703	
	Household income	.022	.018	.046	1.211	.226
	Shared legal custody	-.214	.048	-.159	-4.489	.000
	Cohabiting	.162	.030	.198	5.417	.000
	Education	-.032	.020	-.06	-1.621	.105
	Length of former marriage	.018	.006	.112	.122	.003
	R^2	.206				<.001
2	Step 2					
	Time since Separation	-.025	.008	-.139	-2.914	.004
	ΔR^2	.009				<.001

Hypothesis 2

For hypothesis 2, three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were run to see if boundary ambiguity predicted child adjustment outcomes (internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and prosocial skills; See Table 4).

Externalizing behavior. For step 1, I ran a hierarchical multiple regression model with the covariates. In step 1, male child ($\beta = -.056, p < .01$), White non-Hispanic child ($\beta = -.110, p <$

.05), White non-Hispanic parent ($\beta = .097, p < .05$), and education ($\beta = -.020, p < .05$) were significantly related to child externalizing behavior accounting for 6.5% of the variance, $R^2 = .065, F(1,725) = 4.60, p < .001$). Boundary ambiguity was added into step 2, and accounted for an additional 5.7% of the variance in child externalizing behavior $R^2 = .057 (F(1,724) = 8.42, p < .001)$. Boundary ambiguity significantly predicted ($\beta = .109, p < .001$) child externalizing behavior.

Internalizing behavior. For step 1, I ran a hierarchical multiple regression model with the covariates. In step 1, household income ($\beta = -.032, p < .001$) was significantly related to child internalizing behavior and the covariates accounted for 4.5% of the variance, $R^2 = .045, F(1,725) = 3.11, p < .001$. For step 2, I added boundary ambiguity to examine the relationship between boundary ambiguity and internalizing behavior. The level of boundary ambiguity accounted for an additional 5.1% of the variance in child internalizing behavior, $R^2 = .051 (F(1,724) = 6.44, p < .001)$. Boundary ambiguity was associated with more ($\beta = .113, p < .001$) child internalizing behavior.

Prosocial skills. For step 1, I ran a hierarchical multiple regression model with the covariates. Male child ($\beta = .174, p < .001$), father ($\beta = .156, p < .001$), and length of former marriage ($\beta = .010, p < .05$) were significantly related to prosocial skills, accounting for 7.5% of the variance, $R^2 = .075, F(1,725) = 5.43, p < .001$. For step 2, I added boundary ambiguity to examine the relationship between boundary ambiguity and prosocial skills. The level of boundary ambiguity accounted for an additional 3.8% of the variance in levels of child prosocial skills $R^2 = .038 (F(1,724) = 7.60, p < .001)$. Boundary ambiguity was associated with fewer ($\beta = -.163, p < .001$) child prosocial skills.

Table 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Models for Boundary Ambiguity and Child Well-Being ($N = 739$).

Steps and Predictor Variables		Externalizing					Internalizing					Prosocial				
		<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		<i>B</i>														
1	Step 1															
	Parent Age	-.003	.002	-.072	-1.520	.129	-.003	.002	-.074	-1.552	.121	.000	.003	.003	.072	.943
	Father	-.026	.020	-.051	-1.316	.189	.004	.022	.008	.198	.843	.156	.037	.160	4.173	.000
	White non-Hispanic Parent	.097	.043	-.158	-2.541	.026	.021	.048	.028	.439	.660	.093	.081	.071	1.146	.252
	Child age	-.002	.003	-.380	-.797	.426	.006	.003	.092	1.890	.059	-.004	.006	-.038	-.790	.430
	Male child	-.056	.019	-.107	-2.914	.004	-.008	.021	-.015	-.397	.692	.174	.036	.175	4.825	.000
	White non-Hispanic Child	-.110	.043	-.158	-2.541	.011	-.011	.048	-.014	-.225	.822	-.061	.081	-.046	-.749	.937
	Household income	-.013	.008	-.070	-1.721	.086	-.032	.009	-.155	-3.758	.000	-.001	.015	-.003	-.079	.937
	Shared legal custody	-.022	.021	-.041	-1.064	.288	-.019	.023	-.032	-.814	.416	-.001	.039	-.001	-.017	.986
	Cohabiting	-.018	.013	-.055	-1.298	.163	-.028	.014	-.077	-1.937	.053	-.034	.025	-.054	-1.372	.170
	Education	-.020	.009	-.093	-2.291	.022	-.009	.010	-.037	-.902	.367	.016	.016	.039	.964	.336
	Length of former marriage	-.003	.002	-.072	-1.520	.227	.002	.003	.031	.703	.482	.010	.005	.086	1.982	.048
	<i>R</i> ²	.065				< .001	.045				< .001	.075				< .001
2	Step 2															
	Boundary ambiguity	.109	.016	.268	6.867	.000	.113	.018	.255	6.422	.000	-.163	.030	-.213	-5.407	.000
	ΔR^2	.057				< .001	.051				< .001	.038				< .001

Hypothesis 3

Based on results from hypothesis 2, we know that boundary ambiguity is significantly related to child outcomes, which prompted me to test if time moderated the relationship between boundary ambiguity and child outcomes. To investigate hypothesis 3, three moderation analyses were performed using SPSS to see if time since separation moderated the relationship between boundary ambiguity and the three child outcomes (internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and prosocial skills; See Table 5).

Externalizing Behavior Moderation. The covariates, boundary ambiguity, time since separation, and the interaction between boundary ambiguity and time since separation accounted for 12.15% of the variance in child externalizing behavior ($R^2 = .1215$, $F(1, 7.11) = 14$, $p = <.001$). Boundary ambiguity ($\beta = .11$, $p = <.001$) and time since separation ($\beta = .00$, $p = .448$) were both significant. The interaction effect between boundary ambiguity and time since separation on externalizing behavior was not significant ($\beta = .00$, $p = .949$), indicating no moderation effects.

Internalizing Behavior Moderation. The covariates, boundary ambiguity, time since separation, and the interaction between boundary ambiguity and time since separation accounted for 10.22% of the variance in child internalizing behavior ($R^2 = .1022$, $F(1, 5.85) = 14$, $p = <.001$). Boundary ambiguity ($\beta = .11$, $p = <.001$) was significant and time since separation ($\beta = .00$, $p = .66$) was not significant. The interaction effect between boundary ambiguity and time since separation on externalizing behavior was not significant ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .081$), indicating no moderation effects.

Prosocial Skills Moderation. The covariates, boundary ambiguity, time since separation, and the interaction between boundary ambiguity and time since separation accounted

for 11.33% of the variance in child prosocial skills ($R^2=.1133$, $F(1,6.57) = 14$, $p = <.001$).

Boundary ambiguity ($\beta = -.17$, $p = <.001$) and time since separation ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .153$) were both significant. The interaction effect between boundary ambiguity and time since separation on externalizing behavior was not significant ($\beta = .00$, $p = .792$), indicating no moderation effects.

Table 5. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Models for Boundary Ambiguity, Time since Separation, and Child Well-Being ($N = 739$).

Predictor Variables	Externalizing Behaviors				Internalizing Behaviors				Prosocial Skills			
	β	SE B	t	p	β	SE B	t	p	β	SE B	t	p
Parent Age	.00	.00	-.59	.552	.00	.00	-.65	.518	.00	.00	-.50	.614
Father	-.01	.02	-.67	.504	.02	.02	.78	.435	.14	.04	3.80	.000
White non-Hispanic Parent	.08	.04	1.91	.056	.00	.05	-.03	.976	.12	.08	1.50	.134
Child age	-.00	.00	-.59	.556	.01	.00	1.63	.104	.00	.01	-.41	.684
Male child	-.04	.02	-2.23	.026	.01	.02	.25	.804	.15	.04	4.23	.000
White non-Hispanic Child	-.09	.04	-2.18	.030	.01	.05	.22	.824	-.09	.08	-1.08	.279
Household income	-.02	.01	-2.12	.035	-.04	.01	-4.35	.000	.00	.01	.04	.964
Shared legal custody	.00	.02	-.03	.978	.00	.02	.09	.930	-.04	.04	-.94	.347
Cohabiting	-.04	.01	-2.82	.005	-.04	.01	-3.09	.002	-.01	.03	-.55	.585
Education	-.02	.01	-1.77	.077	-.00	.01	-.34	.734	.01	.02	.67	.506
Length of former marriage	.00	.00	-1.18	.240	.00	.00	.64	.523	.01	.01	1.53	.127
Time since Separation	.00	.00	.76	.450	.00	.00	.44	.661	-.01	.01	-1.43	.153
Boundary Ambiguity	.11	.02	6.77	.000	.11	.02	6.13	.000	-.17	.03	-5.46	.000
Time since separation x boundary ambiguity	.00	.00	.06	.949	.00	.00	-1.75	.081	.00	.01	-.26	.792
R^2	.1215			<.001	.1022			<.001	.1133			<.001

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The present study was designed to explore the influence of time on boundary ambiguity and its impact on child well-being. To my knowledge, there is no research examining the relationship between coparental boundary ambiguity and time. This is important because boundaries may shift and are not stagnant in relationships, especially transforming relationships.

The first hypothesis in this study was supported in that boundary ambiguity between coparents decreased over time. Perhaps, this is because boundaries become more established as parenting routines form and emotions from the divorce have softened over time. The second hypothesis was supported in that boundary ambiguity negatively affected three child well-being factors: externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and prosocial skills. From a family systems perspective, this is consistent as boundaries are often unspoken and the task of renegotiating family relationships and their respective boundaries is often lost or not prioritized in the divorcing process (Peris & Emery, 2005). The results support the negative impact of boundary ambiguity on children as higher levels of boundary ambiguity resulted in increased child internalizing and externalizing behavior and decreased prosocial skills. The results are similar to previous findings such as Beckmeyer and colleagues (2019) and Madden-Derdich and colleagues (1999).

The first two hypotheses prompted analyzing the relationship between all three of the variables. The third hypothesis was created to see if time influenced the relationship between boundary ambiguity and child well-being. This study added to existing literature as it examined the moderating influence of time since separation (time) on the relationship between boundary ambiguity and child outcomes. This study failed to find support for the hypothesis that the

relationship between boundary ambiguity and child outcomes will vary based on how much time has elapsed since the separation. Perhaps, if boundaries are never established, the lack of boundaries continues to have a negative impact on child well-being no matter how long the coparents have been separated. Being intentional about creating boundaries may be necessary no matter how long a couple has been separated to prioritize children's on-going needs. If parents are purposeful in creating boundaries early on in their relationship, this can positively affect their child's well-being.

Implications for Practice

Professionals working with divorcing families need to be aware of the importance of reducing coparental boundary ambiguity, no matter how much time has elapsed since the separation. Because the results of this study indicate that boundary ambiguity negatively affects child well-being, it is important for divorcing parents to engage in purposeful discussions around boundaries. Boundaries create invisible barriers between former partners and allow for space to separate hurt in the past form of the partnership (i.e., marital roles, romantic interactions, cohabitation) to create a new child-focused parenting alliance to prioritize child well-being.

It is important for professionals working with divorcing couples (i.e., therapists, mediators, family life educators, etc.) to be deliberate in facilitating boundary-oriented conversations. Conversations could include off-limit topics (i.e., new partners, personal finances etc.), how to handle parenting disagreements, relationships with the former partner's family members, and other contexts that are changing or have changed due to the separation. Professionals who may be only working with one parent can discuss personal boundaries that the parent wants to establish as they navigate their coparenting relationship moving forward.

Examples would include their personal off-limit topics, how they want to constructively interact with their partner, and how they want to talk with their children about their ex-partner.

Professionals working with both parents conjointly can discuss mutual boundaries. As partners make contextual decisions, professionals can assist in discussing what boundaries should be in place. For example, if a couple comes to the decision that they are both going to be present during school-related events, a suggestion to create a boundary would be that they are not going to discuss parenting concerns at the events. These can often be uncomfortable discussions for parents as often one partner is typically the leaver or the person who initiates the divorce and the other person is left (Emery, 2012) and they can be emotionally charged topics. With this, it is important for those working with these families to have the proper training in conflict resolution or de-escalation practices.

The findings of this study could also be used to expand on resources for parents and professionals, including literature surrounding topics of boundary ambiguity discussion and importance of having discussions early in the separation process. These resources could focus on topics such as communication with the former partner's extended family members, inappropriate discussion topics (e.g., new partners, personal finances, etc.) and what things should still be communicated about (e.g., children's needs, childcare, school-related decisions, etc.). This would help facilitate conversations to solidify boundaries.

Limitations and Future Directions

As for limitations of the study, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and Boundary Ambiguity Scale are both parent-report and only completed by one parent instead of the dyad. Although these are both commonly used assessments, there may be alternative assessments to better capture boundary ambiguity in coparenting relationships and child

behaviors in connection to parental separation. The Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire may be replaced with an assessment that is directed towards post-divorce child adjustment, which would connect behaviors towards divorce instead of a general child well-being assessment.

Although time was not found to moderate the relationship between boundary ambiguity and child well-being, further research is needed to see if there are other factors that moderate or mediate the relationship. Another future direction for research is to separate children into age groups. Boundary ambiguity may affect teenagers differently than children due to parentification, triangulation, etc. that young children may not understand. Parents may have a different approach to their boundaries with their ex-partner with a teenage child due to their level of understanding. The influence of a child's age on boundary ambiguity is an additional area for further exploration.

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