

“I Feel Like God Doesn’t Like Me” Faith and Ambiguous Loss Among Trans Youth

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Abstract

Transgender people are often born into religious families and faith communities that adhere to traditional religious teachings on gender and sexuality. This study employs thematic content analysis to explore experiences of Ambiguous Loss in a racially diverse, international sample of 90 transgender youth and young adults. Results suggest that transgender people experience relational ruptures in their relationships with family, faith community, and deity as a result of non-affirming theology or climate, leading to boundary ambiguity and a sense of ambiguous loss.

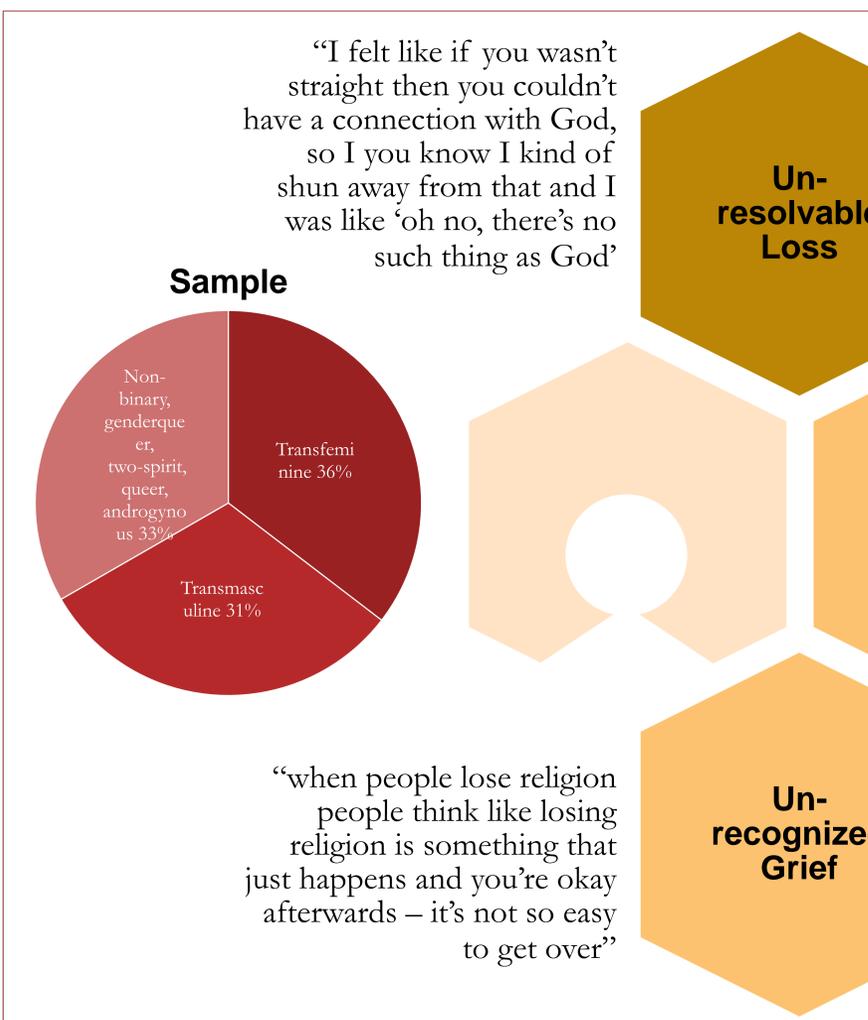
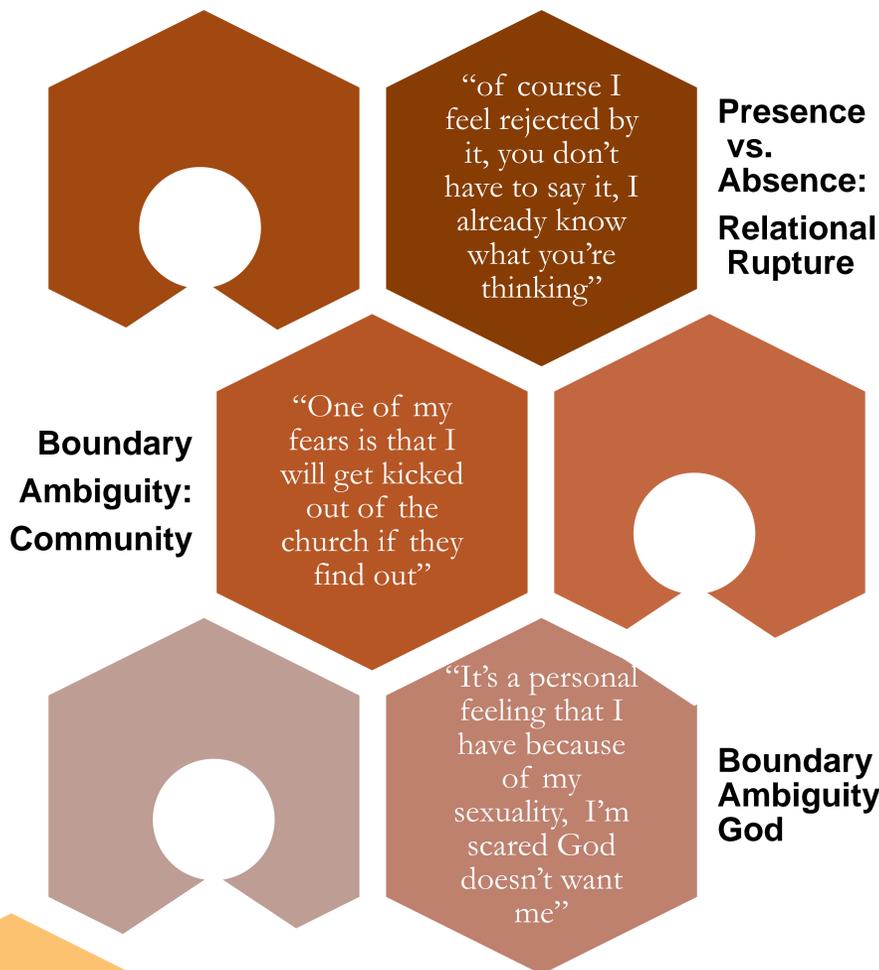
Findings

Participants experienced feelings of loss and boundary ambiguity consistent with a Type II Ambiguous Loss as articulated by Pauline Boss’ Ambiguous Loss Theory. A Type II Ambiguous Loss is one in which the individual experiences psychological absence in a relationship while maintaining physical presence, as with a loved one with dementia. In this study, participants largely had continued access to their religious community of origin, but they experienced profound psychological loss and absence from that community and from deity as a result of non-affirming theology and climate. The six primary elements of Ambiguous Loss that were represented in this sample were:

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1. Tension between presence vs. absence
 2. Relational rupture
 3. Boundary ambiguity
 4. Loss of an unresolvable nature
 5. Psychological distress
 6. Loss that is generally societally unrecognized

Implications

These findings have implications for both practice and future research. Trauma related to faith-based rejection is a common experience for queer and trans people. Examination of this phenomenon in the context of ambiguous loss could support mental health professionals in working with trans clients who are dealing with complex and ambiguous relationships with faith and spirituality. This study extends research on ambiguous loss to examine boundary ambiguity in relationship to deity and to institutions like a faith community.



73%
Of participants were raised in religious homes