

## “I GAINED SOMETHING BUT I HAVE LOST MORE” – BEHIND THE SCENES OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Lili Khechushvili, Mariam Odilavadze, & Mariam Gogichaishvili

*Department Psychology, Tbilisi State University (Georgia)*

### Abstract

The study explored the subjective experience of ambiguous loss as reported by work immigrants. Fifteen Georgian work immigrant women ( $M_{age}=47.5(10)$ ) living in Italy were recruited through accessibility and snowball sampling procedure. Data were collected via adapted version of the life story interview protocol, analyzed by employing the deductive content analysis strategy and major thematic lines were identified, such as ambiguity/ambiguous loss, psychological family, resilience, boundary ambiguity and family roles, and legal status. The participants experienced loss that was either directly or indirectly related to their immigrant status. However, ambiguity accompanied not the loss experience per se, but the legal status, timeline and relational patterns of the immigrants and their families. Participants reported being unable to live day-by-day life with their families as the state of ambiguous loss and being concerned upon the fate and challenges of their family members left behind. However, the expansion of the psychological family boundaries through including either fellow immigrant workers or employer family members was repeatedly reported. As for the boundary ambiguity, mostly was not mentioned in the narratives since family boundaries in the majority cases remained clear as the transnational families reconsider roles and redistributed responsibilities among them. The main challenge, as participants stated, were the mechanisms to remain resilient in immigration. Further, the identity reconstruction was reported as the main coping strategy in this case. The status of an illegal immigrant worker served as an impediment to the identity reconstruction process.

**Keywords:** *Ambiguous loss, boundary ambiguity, immigration, life story narrative.*

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### 1. Introduction

Living with someone who is both gone and not for sure – or here and gone – is a bizarre human experience that produces sadness, confusion, doubt, and anxiety. Expanding on years and even decades, this state causes even more damage to the individual, her/his everyday functioning as well as to her/his family networks and broader community. Being in ambiguity – not knowing whether person's loved one is present or absence excerpts unique influence on human beings on both, individual and relational level. To denote this incomparable state and this ongoing, never-ending stressful experience, Boss (2006) coined the term Ambiguous Loss.

The presented study aimed at exploration of the subjective experience of being in the state of ambiguous loss in case of work immigrants. First-person life story narratives were scrutinized to observe the phenomenology of the experience as well as to trace the salient thematic lines, defining the identity, inner dynamic and behavioral patterns of the Georgian women living and working in Italy.

### 2. Ambiguous loss, immigration, and related experiences

The concept of Ambiguous Loss refers to ambiguous events or situations that entail a loss or separation that has no closure. Psychologically, ambiguous loss can be a problem, in that it can create feelings of hopelessness, uncertainty, and confusion that can lead to depression, guilt, anxiety, and immobilization (Boss, 2016). Structurally, ambiguous loss can be a problem when it leads to boundary ambiguity, described as “a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system” (Boss & Greenberg, 1984, p. 536).

Boss distinguishes between two types of ambiguous loss: ambiguous presence and ambiguous absence. Here we focus on the latter. Ambiguous absence occurs when a person/family is physically

absent but perceived by her/him and/or her/his family members as being psychologically present. Immigration is named as one of the most common experience of this type of ambiguous loss. In this case the person/family often becomes preoccupied with the absent relative, and it becomes unclear which roles family members play. As Drummet et al. (2003, cited in Boss, 2006) claimed, family members must stretch the family boundary enough both to psychologically retain the gone person as a viable family member and to temporarily reassign his or her responsibilities, as must the gone person herself/himself. In many cases, the ambiguity is tightly linked to the length of the separation. Both, immigrants, and their families often believe that separation is temporary, however it may last for years and decades. Solheim and colleagues (2015) reported that none of the interviewed 17 transnational family members could name a specific time when they would be reunited.

When the family member immigrates, family members in both countries may experience grief and loss due to separation (Solheim & Ballard, 2016), that, in turn, leads to less contact and support and eventually results in worry, suffering and experiences of loss (Silver, 2011).

Boundary ambiguity and redistribution of the roles and responsibilities are associated with the concept of psychological family, which implies (Boss, 2011) not only one's biological family members, but also any person who one chooses to be (either physically or mentally) with at personally important times. When a person is physically or psychologically gone out of the family system, the notion of a psychological family intensifies, and serves as one of the most valuable coping tools with loneliness, depression and uncertainty, and as a motivation for movement and advancement as opposed to inaction (Boss, 2006).

Resilience is another quality which is closely linked to the ambiguous loss experiences. It is defined as flexibility in response to life pressures and tensions that includes daily life stress as well as anticipated family changes (birth, death, etc.). In case of the ambiguous loss, one's resilience depends on the ability to live comfortably and more-or-less quality life with ambiguity (Boss, 2006).

According to the theory, although immigration is accompanied with ambiguity, family members successfully provide emotional and material support beyond boundaries (Dominguez & Lubitow, 2008). Roles can be changed, implying that family members, on both sides of the border, taking new responsibilities (Boccagni, 2012). Further, reinterpretation of the situation is one of the ways leading to resilience and better well-being (Boss & Carnes, 2012). Yes, another way is find meaning in loss and reconstruct identity (Boss, 2010) to fit new reality, hence achieve greater resilience.

### 3. Method

The study employs social constructivism framework and interpretive paradigm. Hence, the data collection and analysis are qualitative and revolves around the subjective experiences, feelings, and interpretations reported by the research participants.

#### 3.1. Participants

*Demographics and sampling:* Fifteen Georgian immigrant women ( $M_{age}=47.5(10)$ , range 29 – 63) were recruited via accessibility and snowball sampling procedure in Rome, Italy. The reasons of immigrations were poor economic and/or living condition of the family, difficulties in paying family debts, or the inability to provide children with the proper education. Ten out of the fifteen respondents were married, four were divorced and one widowed. The average length of immigration was 6.1 years (range 2–14 years). 10 women were illegals.

*Enrolment criteria:* the respondent should (a) have spent at least 1 year migration, which is enough time for the respondent to already have some experience of living in a new country, and (b) be in the destination country without some family members.

#### 3.2. Instrument and procedures

*Instrument.* Georgian adapted version of life story interview (Khechuashvili, 2020; McAdams & Pals, 2006) with some modifications is a semi-structured interview containing questions about key points (high, low and turning points, positive and negative childhood, vivid memory and mystical/religious experience), challenges (life and health challenges, stories about loss and failure/regret), and future chapter, dreams/hopes and plans. Audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

*Ethical Considerations.* All participants read and signed written informed consent form. Research assistants answered all questions regarding research procedures, withdrawal from the study, anonymity and confidentiality, publishing, etc.

*Place and time.* The interviews were recorded in September 2019 in Rome, Italy, at the immigrants' regular gathering place. Each session lasted 60-70 minutes.

### 3.3. Data analysis

*Data Analysis Strategy.* Deductive content analysis strategy (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) implies the analysis of data via the already existing conceptual framework and aims to expand the model by adding new understanding to existing concepts, to test the suitability of the model by adapting to different experiences, or to generate new research questions.

*Preparation stage.* The whole interview was selected as a unit of analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In the initial phases second and third authors reviewed all data to create the general context and preliminary analysis. Further, they reflect and discuss the insights and primary findings. Based on the elaborated shared perspective on the data, all three authors jointly analyzed and interpreted the data for ambiguous loss and other targeted variables.

*Categorization matrix.* The next step was to create a categorization matrix, i.e. a table of initial categories of coding reflecting the basic constructs of the theory being tested (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The aim was to agree on the operationalization of the concepts. Although the basic constructs of ambiguous loss were already defined in the theory, categories for analysis have been revised multiple times until researchers achieved consensus on all discrepancies of understanding narratives (see Kohlbacher, 2006).

## 4. Results

The interpretation of the stories shared by the Georgian work immigrants living in Italy are presented alongside the predefined salient thematic lines, such as ambiguity/ambiguous loss, psychological family, resilience, boundary ambiguity and family roles, and legal status. All quotes are taken from the interviews. To serve the confidentiality, all names have been changed.

*Ambiguous Loss.* The experience of emigration involves the loss related to the physical separation from family, failure to fulfill one's roles and maintaining long-distance relationships.

*It has been 8 years I have been separated from my family. It is not a short time, it is lost, and nothing can change this. It cannot be compensated. I will always be followed by the sense of wasted time. Yes, I gained something, but I have lost more. I regret (Mari, 46).*

*Psychological Family.* Social relationships acquired in a new country, even a few friends, became part of their psychological family and, hence the second most important source of support and sharing for immigrants.

*We still have a hard time here, but we manage. There are five of us, who are tightly bonded to each other. We support, encourage ...and each other stronger. We are close to each other even in the difficult times. We have created our world here (Ana, 63).*

Job-related relationships also became part of a psychological family. In some cases, immigrants received a positive treatment from the employer leading to job-based support and positive outcomes. "She helped me to obtain the document letting me to work and live here legally... the proof of respect and appreciation from that family."

However, this was not the case for everybody. Some women reported range of discrimination and humiliation. "My second job was a terrible experience. I was not allowed to eat properly or bring food from outside. However, I disobeyed several times. I went to bed, I covered myself with a blanket and I ate like that," one of the participants said.

*Boundary Ambiguity.* The family boundaries remain clear and family members reconsider roles and responsibilities among them; However, family boundaries may become blurred and lead to conflict and alienation when there is uncertainty and family members see differently the ways of distribution of the roles and responsibilities, and what expectations they have regarding the tasks to be performed by the family member.

*There was detachment with my husband, mother, and sister. I liked doing things in my way and they did not agree, that caused conflicts. They could not get used to it. The family told me that I had to come back, however, they did nothing to help me. I lived here but I was there, and I was drowning in problems. I solved one, and another problem emerged repeatedly (Inga, 47).*

Another type of ambiguity and uncertainty was associated with timeline of immigration. As one immigrant stated, "It's a quite difficult to say when I'll be back... I should have gone back in three years after arrival, and unfortunately, I have no answer now."

*Resilience.* The resilience of participants, coupled with their real-life circumstances, such as the need of reevaluation and reconstruction their identities and obtaining the legalization paper, resulted in different levels of adaptation and higher levels of wellbeing. Namely, those with higher resilience settled down and adjusted themselves to new reality. Based on the narratives, can be claimed that resilience, as individual trait, might serve as the buffer for reconstruction of the identity and restarting the life for

immigrants. So, their stories were saturated with the themes of resilience, overcoming, flexibility, and adaptation in everyday life.

*Now I find it easier to utter the word what we call our job. At first, I had a hard time saying the word out loud at all. I must admit that I had a hard time grasping this situation that I was somebody back then and I was not always who I am now. This moment was difficult, and I can't say that I overcame it (Nana, 39).*

*Legal Status.* The right to live and work legally has several important outcomes for immigrants: To be able to proceed with identity reconstruction with more success and less stress. Another benefit lays on more instrumental level. Having a document is a way to get a better job and salary, and most importantly, it is a direct way to go back home once a year to visit the family.

*My problem is that I have been working illegally for many years... If I were legalized officially, I would not be staying here for so long. I would go see my children. Having the paper helps in many ways. If you have it, you are eligible for 13<sup>th</sup> salary and paid vacation. They pay you nothing, if you are illegal... On the first place, you cannot travel abroad, to go to your country and come back... You just must wait for years that someday the law might change or new one will be introduced, and something will be changed (Ana, 29).*

## 5. Discussion

Close reading of the transcripts of Georgian work immigrants living in Italy revealed the experienced loss either directly or indirectly was associated with being far away from the family. Research participants provided the stories of the years spent in immigration, inability to physically participate in family life and to share important moments with them. Although they spoke of loss, data do not align nicely with the theory – they have not mentioned ambiguity related to the loss. Moreover, research participants were fully aware what they have lost and what remained with them. Namely, they knew the whereabouts of their family members in the home country. They claimed that loss was associated with time – the years spent without their families. Thus, based on our data, we suggest preliminary conclusion, that immigration might not be classified as either type of ambiguous loss, as the theory states. This leads us to the necessity of further exploration and possible reconsideration of the concept of ambiguous loss, as defined in theory. However, as data showed, ambiguity is inseparable part of immigrants' life embodied in boundary ambiguity.

The inevitable changes in the responsibilities and roles after the immigration of the family member, are documented in past research (Pribilsky, 2004). The precondition for boundary clarity is the clear vision of immigrant's current role in the family. However, when the interpretations of the family and immigrant diverge, disagreement upon the distribution of roles and responsibilities is expected.

Another source of ambiguity was the uncertainty of reuniting with the families, which is also nicely fits with relevant research literature (Solheim et al., 2015). Perez & Arnold-Berkovits (2018) suggest that leaving family and friends without clear timeline of reunion is common scenario.

The psychological family consisting of the family members left behind is in the focus of daily thought and care. As Boss states (2006), the psychological family supports in difficult times when the physical family is not around. Besides, new relationships in the destination country – friends or people one works for – may become a part of one's psychological family. In the most cases, immigrants established new relationships with strong emotional bonds, however, this is not always a case in work-related relationships. Job-related connections may serve as either source of stress or support. In either case, immigrants call their employers "my family", since they live with the family as caregiver.

Being resilient in immigration appears as the main challenge in presented study. Those with showed higher levels of resiliency, reported less stress, contrary to those who were lower in resiliency. The latter respondents seemed to be more stressed and told more stories containing negative emotions. Further, after moving to Italy, highly resilient individuals reconstructed their identities and accepted all outcomes they faced.

In conclusion, research participants living and working in Italy perceive their experience of leaving the families as highly stressful. Living in emigration, far away from the family, is accompanied by sense of loss. The experienced loss is unambiguous, which challenges the theory of ambiguous loss. Instead, family boundaries and roles are marked with ambiguity. However, the boundary ambiguity does not always remain problematic as family and the immigrant renegotiate roles in the family structure and tolerate the situation considering their shared goals. Research participants keep the family present in their mental and affective life as psychological family. However, new relationships extended its boundaries. To remain resilient, one must reconstruct the one's identity in the new country, which sheds light on how successfully the immigrant is adjusted to new life and copes with challenges in everyday life. Finally, those with higher resiliency find it easier to deal with the ambiguity, the loss and the stressful experience of emigration in general.

## 6. Limitations

First limitation associated with sample – only women, only work immigrants and only those living and working in Italy were interviewed. Second limitations in the sample size that does not allow quantitative analysis. And third, the exploration of the phenomenology of ambiguous loss was one-sided – only on individual level and from immigrants' viewpoint. As research (Solheim et al., 2015) suggest, the alleged ambiguous loss caused by immigration manifests itself not only with the immigrants themselves but also in the family left behind. Accordingly, extending the research to the family level is highly recommended.

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