

## LIFE ON HOLD – LIVING WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS

**Lili Khechuashvili, & Mariam Gogichaishvili**  
*Department Psychology, Tbilisi State University (Georgia)*

### Abstract

The study is first part of larger mixed method study, and aims at preliminary exploration of the subjective experiences of ambiguous loss in case of individuals whose family members have gone missing due to armed conflict. Thirty adults who met inclusion criteria were recruited based on random/available sampling procedures, and life stories were recorded via semi-structured in-depth life story interview. 390 stories (13 per person) were coded for narrative structure, autobiographical reasoning, generativity and motives. As data revealed, search for meaning in loss as well as in staying alive is one of the recurrent themes in the narratives of research participants. Only part of the sample was capable to construct their life stories in redemption manner – turning to autobiographical elaboration of the loss experience and extracting lessons/insights and growing out of adversity. The sample was quite low on generativity and only small portion of respondents, who did tell generative stories, mainly focused on their own family members, children/grandchildren, and afterwards on their community. As for autobiographical reasoning and finding meaning in disappearance and in life in general, most of the sample was quite low. Motivational themes of power and intimacy were presented in most of the stories told by research participants, however, motives of intimacy and close relationships prevailed in the majority of the stories whilst agency showed up in stories told as high points. Regardless hardship and pain lived by respondents, there were no stories of rejection and disillusion in human beings.

**Keywords:** *Ambiguous loss, narrative identity, meaning, generativity, motives.*

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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 a person's loved one is present or absence, alive or dead, exerts 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 aims at preliminary exploration of the subjective experiences of ambiguous loss in case of individuals whose family members have gone missing due to armed conflict.

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

The construct of an ambiguous loss (Boss, 2023), which by definition is relational and societal phenomena, is not located within a person but rather emerges in the family/social group structure, draws on the theory of family stress and describes situations where the loss is uncertain, unfinished, or partial. The term refers to ambiguous events or situations that entail a loss or separation that has no closure (Boss, 2016). In the ambiguous loss literature prolonged grief is viewed as inevitably linked to the not knowing the fate and whereabouts of disappeared person, and its causes are linked to the ambiguity, such as persistent hope, the absence of cultural and religious rituals to provide meaning to a loss, and the grief being so large as to disenfranchise community members (Hollander, 2016).

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. 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 absence and ambiguous presence. Ambiguous presence occurs when a family member is perceived as being physically present but psychologically absent. During reunion, although physically present, the family member may be psychologically absent, because of trauma from past experiences as well as of the distress from immediate resumption of previous roles and responsibilities.

Ambiguous absence occurs when a person is physically absent but perceived by her/his family members as being psychologically present. In this case the family often becomes preoccupied with the lost or absent relative, and it becomes unclear which roles family members play. As Drummet et al. (2003) claimed, family members must stretch the family boundary enough both to psychologically retain the missing person as a viable family member and to temporarily reassign his or her responsibilities. Individuals and families must deal with the latter in case of disappearance.

Disappearance, namely forced disappearance is one of the negative doings of catastrophic events such as natural disasters, earthquakes, and military conflicts (Boss, 2006). Following official statistics, there are around 2400 registered missing persons only in Georgia due to armed conflicts of 90-ies and August 2008. Being the one or part of the family that has relative/loved one gone missing, puts, individual, entire family and even broader community in special and unique position, since this is not distinct event with beginning, development and clear ending, rather than it is the ongoing, never ending, extremely demanding state of mind and the body without closure, causing individual (and her/his social network in the way) to freeze in the past and deny or ignore realms of present and perspectives of the future (Boss, 2016).

### 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:* Thirty research participants were recruited via availability sampling procedures from International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), Georgian Delegation database ( $M_{age} = 64.6(12)$ , [37 – 85]). Of all sample 18 persons (60%) were in the state of ambiguous loss and 12 persons (40%) already gained mortal remains of their loved ones before 2020.

*Enrolment criteria:* the respondent should have family members gone missing due to Abkhazia war in early 90s and/or 2008 armed conflicts in Georgia; Be either spouse or parent of the missing person.

#### 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 a written informed consent form. Research assistants answered all questions regarding research procedures, withdrawal from the study, anonymity and confidentiality, publishing, etc.

*Place and time.* Interviews were recorded in 2020-2022, mainly in participants' homes. A few of them were recorded in coffeeshops and parks upon request of research participants. Each session lasted 70-90 minutes.

#### 3.3. Data analysis

*Narrative Coding and Reliability Check.* The story served as the unit of analysis. In each narrative were coded 13 stories: Eight key points and Five challenges. In total 390 memories were coded for target variables. Two independent raters coded 39 (10%) stories and got acceptable levels of reliability by each coded variable ( $.6 < k < .9$ ). The procedure followed the complete coding manual which was developed within the presented study based on already accumulated knowledge (Khechuashvili, 2020).

*Coded Variables.* (a) *Narrative structure.* The story was rated as having redemptive structure and was assigned code 1 if there was transition from negative scene toward positive one either in causal or time sequential mode ( $k = .95$ ). The stories where positive event ended up with negative outcome, was rated as contamination sequence and was assigned code 2 ( $k = .82$ ). The code 0 was assigned to the narrative if there was neither redemption nor contamination sequential transformation in the storytelling.

(b) For *Generativity* authors employed the Georgian version of coding scheme (Khechuashvili, et. at., 2019). Each memory was coded on 3-point scale (create, preserve, offer). A score of 0 was assigned to stories that contained no generativity at all. Narratives were scored as 1 if there was mention of a generational intention or action, which contains assignment of life to people or things ( $k=.88$ ); A score of 2 was assigned to narratives that contained description of intention/action of preservation, protection, wariness or cultivation ( $k=.92$ ). Stories were scored as 3 if generational intention/action was offered to someone ruthlessly that means offer to the next generation something, that was created, reserved and will keep its own autonomy ( $k=.85$ ) (McAdams, 2013). (c) *Autobiographical reasoning* measured via sophistication of meaning was coded based on McLean and Pratt's (2006) scheme, on a 4-point scale that represents the degree of meaning-making ( $k=.93$ ). A score 0 was assigned to narratives that contained no explanation of the meaning of the event to the self. Narratives were scored as 1 if there was mention of a lesson that the narrator learned from the event. A score of 2 was assigned to stories that contained "vague meaning". Narratives were scored as 3 if there was evidence that the narrator had gained specific emotional, psychological, or relational insight from the lived experience that applied to broader areas of his/her life (McLean & Breen, 2009). (d) *Self-Event connections* were coded according the coding system by Pasupathi and Mansour (2006). It has 3 categories: No connection to the self, a stability story and a change story ( $k=.73$ ). (e) *Power and Intimacy motives*. In high points and childhood positive memories the degree of power content in a given story was estimated by coding the presence or absence of four specific content themes centered around having impact and feeling strong: Psychical or psychological strength, Impact, Action, Status. The level of intimacy content in stories was coded in terms of the presence or absence of 5 intimacy themes: Interpersonal, Friendship/love, Communication/sharing, Sympathy, Touch/physical closeness. In low points and childhood negative memories were coded according to 4 power themes: Failure/weakness, Losing face, Ignorance, Conflict. As for intimacy themes, there were 4 categories: Separation, Rejection, Disillusionment about people, Another's misfortune (McAdams, 1991). Presence of a theme was scored as "1", absence – "0".

#### 4. Results

The stories were coded for both, structure and content characteristics. Half of the narratives (49%) had neither redemption nor contamination structure, however, nearly one-third of narratives were structured with redemption sequence (23%) and another 11.8% turned to be contamination stories. Those respondents who told the redemption stories, mainly spoke about improvement, upward mobility and recovery, while half of the individuals with contamination stories mainly focused on loss and failure.

Neither Generativity nor its any dimension was not reported as strong characteristic of the research participants. More than 2/3 of respondents reported no generativity in their stories, however, those who turned to be generative in either direction, told the stories of offering (10.5%) to outer world what they already accumulated.

Autobiographical reasoning was coded via expression of meaning in the story and the ability to trace self-event connections. As data show, about one half of research participants do not look for self-event connections in their stories. In other words, They do not reflect much on the events in their lives in order to see the causal connections between events and their own personality, as well as to search the meaning the event bears for them. However, those who do see the connections (half of the sample), tell twice more stories of stability or explanation than stories of change. When it comes to meaning of the lived experience in the stories of the same half of the sample, quarter of the stories (24.6%) are with vague meaning, and small part (around 5%) speaks of either learned lesson or insight.

As for the thematic lines revealed via coding, 1/3 of the stories are about relationships. Other stories speak of tension, discomfort (18.2%), mortality (14.6%) and Self/values (10%). Coping with the problems was coded through several variables, such as intrusive rumination, and particular coping strategies. As data show 2/3 of the respondents do not turn to intrusive rumination that enables them to cope with situations more or less proactively and effectively. The most frequently used coping strategies were to be oriented on problem solving (33.6%) and to reconstruct emotional relation towards the situation (18.1%), which seems adaptive in ambiguous loss state, when one is forced to solve the problem this or that way, and reorganize emotional relation towards the situation one is not able to change.

#### 5. Discussion

Thus, as data show, the motivational themes of power and intimacy are presented in most of the stories told by research participants, however, the particular line of the motif is associated with type of the memory. Namely, the stories of power, which means expanding and realizing oneself, are told mostly as high points. There are fewer power stories in low points and childhood memories. However, when stories contain power motives, they speak of orientation on action and status.

*What I had to do, I had to do it by myself. I was only one I could rely on. If you do not pull out yourself from this deep darkness, nobody can help you (Female, 63, N23).*

As for intimacy motives, which refers to the need of being connected with other human beings this-or-that way, the most of the stories, be it high and low points, and childhood positive memories, contain intimacy motives, underlying the themes of interpersonal relationships, sympathy, separation, misfortune of other human being, and love.

*By the way, she met me kindly... When she noted that I am deeply in my thoughts, she used to come, hug me and gave me hope, that everything will be ok (Female, 74, N13).*

It should be noted that there are no stories of rejection and disillusion in human beings.

When zooming out on all collected stories, it seems logical: Urge for having another person next to oneself is inherited human need, specifically when misfortune happens in one's life, and emotional, physical and instrumental support is vital for survival. As Boss (2016) mentioned "What mourners and family members need, more than medication, is human connection, along with society's empathy, compassion, and patience". Hence, although there are stories of loss, separation and others' misfortune, there are no even single story of rejection and losing the believe in humanity.

Another trend in the stories from personal life is either to focus on negative experiences, or to give negative interpretation of the event. This leads recalling more stories with negative emotional tone. Failure, regret and challenges, also happened in personal life stories, be it health issues of oneself or one's family member, or termination of relationships. As for loss experience, it was not surprising to have stories about losing loved one, through either death or being gone missing.

*After perfect childhood and student years in Sokhumi, Abkhazia, I happily got married my high school sweetheart, who disappeared in war after 7 months, and I stayed pregnant (Female, 55, N19).*

As data show, research participants told one-third of stories in redemption manner that replicates other studies conducted on Georgian samples (Khechuashvili, 2020; Khechuashvili, et. al., 2019; Jananashvili, et. al., 2018; Gogichaishvili, et. al., 2016; Khechuashvili, 2015). Besides, such manner of telling one's experience was associated with the type of the memory one has told. Namely, people construct their nadir, turning and challenging experiences in redemptive structure.

Generativity, in general is not strong suite for given sample: There were a fewer respondents with generative intentions and their stories are about offering what they have accumulated – mainly for their offsprings and grandchildren. Besides, some of them are active in their community – having responsibilities in family comettes and other projects, this or that way linked to the issues of missing persons and their families.

*Being in this ambiguous state, I found out that I was much stronger and resilient that I ever thought. I still feel pain but I started helping other men and women whom I shared this loss with, and I found the strength in myself, new power... (Female, 65, N10).*

Being low in generativity could be one of the side effects of being in ambiguous loss state, e. i. being frozen in the past, with missing person, and individuals lack the resources to be in the present, to think and care about somebody other than their immadiate family members, such as langer groups and community, in general. Nevertheless, some of the research participants spoke about caring for family members and relatives (one of the way to be generative) served as the way of adaptation to ambiguity and as the coping mechanism. As one of them stated:

*I had to stand strong not to fall down. I had to keep my face, my humanity and think about good things and kindness. I had to survive for them – my kids and relatives (Female, 62, N23).*

Another characteristic, that might be associated with the state of ambiguity, is scoring low on autobiographical reasoning. When traumatic event happens, it discontinues the life story on the individual, and this, in turn, often triggers authobiographical reasoning, which, leads to finding the meaning and ultimately brings to elaboration of the stressful experience, restoring the story line, and higher sense of well-being. When one reflects on experience and tries to find meaning in it, and links this experience to one's current self, one moves on the grief pathway toward better well-being and adaptation. However, when individual lacks resources for doing so, or when the trauma is too severe, one is frozen in past and is not capable (without external help) to follow adaptive elaboration and grief process. All these dynamics embodies as low scores on authobiographical reasoning, meaning and self-event connections, and leave a person in never-ending suffering:

*I know nothing... [crying]. I am leaving and coming, no meaning... I am fading slowly-slowly... I lived and did only good things and still I am the one who suffers so much. Why? Can somebody tell me why? Does God give me the ordial? How many good things I did for so many people... I do not understand (Female, 80, N11).*

There are plenty of empirical evidence that only way out from frozen grief due to uncertain loss, and further social adaptation, as Boss also states (Boss, 2022), is to engage in autobiographical reasoning – to search the meaning in disappearance. This, of course, is the very long and painful process, however it brings resiliency and some peace to the individuals.

*Here is the book saying that my son is a hero. This sounds a bit strange but seeing his smily face on the pages and having him recognized as a hero, smooths my pain. Yes, not all pain but still (Femal, 66, N22).*

Search for meaning in loss as well as in staying alive is one of the recurrent themes in the narratives of research participants, as it is illustrated bellow in qualitative part of the study.

## 6. Limitations

First limitation associated with sample – only parents and/or spouses of missing persons and only those whose loved persons gone missing due to war were interviewed. Second limitations in the sample size that does not allow extensive quantitative analysis on individual level. And third, the exploration of the phenomenology of ambiguous loss was one-sided – only on individual level and from one family member’s viewpoint, and other members of the family or second generation were not taken into account.

## Acknowledgments

The study was accomplished in frame and with financial support of International Committee of Red Cross, Georgian Delegation.

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