

**Lost and Unfound – The Impact of Ambiguous Loss  
on Secure Attachments**

by

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### **Abstract**

This paper explored a clinical issue on the topic of ambiguous loss and its impact on secure attachment. This project was conducted to raise awareness about the long-term implications of ambiguous loss on children as there was significant gaps in literature about its impacts. The guiding research question was, “what is the impact of ambiguous loss on youth who have been removed from their primary caregivers?” To gather information key search terms were utilized which then allowed for themes to emerge. The information was then sifted through and all relevant information was included within the thematic analysis and any other information was placed in exclusion criteria. Results found that, if left unaddressed, ambiguous loss can lead to feelings of loneliness, shame, real or perceived abandonment, as well as stigma. The loss can also lead to development of cognitive behavioral concerns such as anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and long-term grief symptoms. The implications of this research are to enhance compassion and empathy to the effected demographic and to gain a better understanding of the topic of ambiguous loss and its impacts. Recommendations for future research include evaluating the impacts of ambiguous loss cross-culturally as well as at different developmental stages of life.

Keywords: *ambiguous loss, youth, primary caregivers, attachment, grief*

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## **Chapter one: Lost and Unfound – The Impact of Ambiguous Loss on Secure Attachments**

### **Background Information**

This literature review will address the experiences of children and youth aged 8-18 who have been removed from primary caregivers and placed into foster care. This placement into foster care results in the young person being exposed to ambiguous loss (Mitchell, 2018; Neimeyer et al., 2022). Specifically, the impacts of the loss on sociopsychological factors will be analyzed as they are the most critically affected. The sociopsychological consequences that occur due to ambiguous loss further complicates the formation and maintenance of secure attachments (Mitchell, 2018; Neimeyer et al., 2022).

Children and youth will enter government welfare agencies for multiple reasons (Look, 2023). In September of 2015 there were 427 910 children and youth who entered government systems, 61% were due to neglect which includes domestic violence, 40% due to substance abuse, 12% due to physical abuse, and 4% due to sexual abuse (Look, 2023). Look (2023), defines government systems as “placement of a child in a setting outside the family of origin under the supervision of state child welfare agencies who ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable children” (p. 127).

When a child or youth enter government systems there are four different routes that government officials evaluate and assess to ensure the most success for that child or youth (Look, 2023). First being relative/kinship care, where the young person gets placed with extended family members such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents (Look, 2023). If this is not a possibility the next option for these young people is non-related foster care where the child is placed in homes with familiar adults such as family friends or neighbors (Look, 2023). If this is not an option or there was failed success, then the child will be placed into foster care which is

living with families who are strangers to the child or youth (Look, 2023). Finally, if a child or youth cannot be managed in foster care due to extreme mental health concerns or behavioral issues, they then will be placed in group homes or juvenile detention centers (Look, 2023). This paper aims to examine children and youth who reside in foster care and their experiences with ambiguous loss on attachments.

This unclear and abstract transition into foster care heightens the pre-existing difficulties in comprehension of ambiguous loss (McTavish et al., 2022; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2022). The lack of communication and discussion of the placement into foster care carries the potential to further confuse or disconnect the child from understanding the loss. According to the literature there was a lack of awareness and knowledge of why the children were being removed and what foster care entails (McTavish et al., 2022). This included lack of clarity around the meaning and purpose of foster care, where the youth would be residing, who they would be living with, and what this meant for them in the distant future (McTavish et al., 2022). When children are moved into foster care, they lack the opportunity to seek clarity to any questions they have or voice any concerns that they are experiencing (McTavish et al., 2022).

According to Mitchell (2018), ambiguous loss is a common concept that young children and adolescents aged 8-15 face when entering foster care. Pauline Boss defines ambiguous loss as a condition where a loved one is psychologically present but physically absent which could include divorce or a parent abandoning a child (Mitchell, 2018; Neimeyer et al., 2022). The reverse can also take place where a loved one is psychologically absent but physically present in such cases of mental illness (Mitchell, 2018). For foster children losses can include sense of identity, stability, routine and consistency, and loss of belonging and safety (Mitchell, 2018). Young people in foster care, experience loss of hope related to how things should have been

(Harris & Winokuer, 2019). In addition to this there is a loss of concrete possessions such as toys, clothes, and personable items like photographs (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Ambiguous loss becomes detrimental when there are multiple instances and they, in turn, cause effects on a young person's self-worth, development, and identity which could be damaging for interpersonal connections (Mitchell, 2018). The concept of ambiguous loss can be invalidated and misunderstood within society due to it being an abstract concept that, unless experienced, is hard to comprehend fully (Look, 2023). Ambiguous loss does not always make sense to an individual due to its ongoing nature (Harris & Winokuer, 2019; Neimeyer et al., 2022). Problem solving is minimal due to the individual not knowing if the loss is permanent or temporary and whether things will return to normal (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Ambiguous loss creates challenges for an individual regarding family life, belonging in the world, and identity (Leitch, 2022).

### **Research problem**

There appears to be some significant gaps and deficiencies in the literature. Ambiguous loss is not well articulated in literature, leading to unclear understanding of how it impacts an individual. It is also unclear how attachment styles in the future are affected as these young people transition into adulthood. There seems to be some confusion between the difference of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief which creates a lack of understanding within the literature. When ambiguous loss occurs there is a lack of clarity of what the loss is and when the loss originated (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). There is a need to examine ambiguous loss and its impacts on the formation of secure attachments.

### **Purpose & Research Question**

The purpose of the study was to explore a clinical issue on the topic of ambiguous loss and its impact on secure attachment to raise awareness about the long-term implications of



ambiguous loss on children as there was significant gaps in literature about its impacts. In more specific terms, the research question examined in this literature review is: What is the impact of ambiguous loss on youth who have been removed from their primary caregivers? It based on the articles that discussed about the children and youth aged 8-18 who were placed in foster care following a removal from primary caregivers was examined.

### **Significance of Research**

The process of grief and loss is a topic that exists throughout different cultures and environments and therapists in the counselling world at some point will be faced with how to process this with clients (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Although not every therapist will be trained in grief counselling it is crucial to understand how grief and loss can impact an individual (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). The benefit to this is it strengthens alliance between client and counsellor as it allows for the development of a relational safe space where the client feels heard and understood. The benefits of addressing ambiguous loss for clinicians allows for understanding and compassion towards this demographic which, in turn, allows for better ability to connect with the clients affected. By gaining a better understanding of the grief, clinicians and foster care providers can improve trajectories and reduce stigma and negative thoughts towards people experiencing ambiguous loss (McTavish et al., 2022). When we appreciate the complexity of how ambiguous loss influences and impacts the young population in care, we can start to generate discussions with the children and youth around how to better support them. Further understanding of this phenomenon allows for professionals and government welfare agencies to understand the need for additional training or psychoeducation around ambiguous loss. This can look like implementing supplemental education and seminars for child

and youth care workers and social workers and incorporating these themes into harm reduction policies and approaches.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theory that guided the study is attachment theory and how different attachment styles influence the grieving process (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). A child's attachment style can significantly impact how they grieve and understand loss. John Bowlby described four attachment styles but for the purpose of this study only secure attachment will be considered (Gleeson et al., 2021). Securely attached individuals recognize that their needs will be met by a caregiver, and they feel comfortable with both interdependence and intimacy (Gleeson et al., 2021). Children who have secure attachments feel safe to explore their environments and they have a positive view of self and others (Wallin, 2007). Individuals with secure attachment styles had less anger, despair, and rumination around the loss compared to individuals with insecure attachment styles (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). Young people who have secure attachments "can access their attachment related emotional memories and present with normal grief reactions" (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Bowlby believed that grief was natural to loss and successful grief included both acceptance and emotional connection to the person or thing lost (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). The Bowlby model becomes relevant in the absence of secure attachments as there is no longer closeness being maintained in times of stress or danger, whether real or perceived (Zengel Mora, 2021). If disruptions are not repaired the child will lack emotional attunement to caregivers which will negatively impact relationships (Zengel Mora, 2021). This absence further leads into the development of anxiety, mourning, and sorrow (Zengel Mora, 2021).

### **Researcher's Position**

I worked in group homes for almost five years and recognized a pattern within the children and youth that entered the welfare system. I noticed that the more government homes a child was in the less belongings they had. Some of the young people I worked with would enter the group home facility with just a garbage bag of clothes. There were also a lot of restrictions regarding contact with the child or youth's biological family which would result in negative behavioral trajectories. When instances of losing a toy, family contact was denied, or changes such as moving schools or group homes would occur, the young individual would exhibit heightened emotions and behaviors. In my opinion, it appeared that the more government facilities a child or youth was involved with impacted how they formed attachments. The children and youth usually lacked trust, commitment, and closeness regarding new relationships, and it would take ample amounts of time to build relationships with them.

Throughout my schooling I took several courses on grief and loss and recognized that what these young people are experiencing aligns with my understanding of grief and loss, yet it was not recognized as such in the actual group home environment. In my experiences working in group homes, I have observed that there are many business minded individuals that work in child care that lack the personality traits required of a helping professional. These helper traits include empathy, compassion, and validation which makes it difficult for them to tend to the grief needs of these young people (Mitchell, 2018). Within the group home setting young people's thoughts and feelings toward loss were minimized and reduced (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). The young people were told "to get over it", "it is not a big deal," or the adults working with the children and youth would simply not acknowledge the loss (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). This minimization in turn amplifies negative behavioral trajectories within the young population which further creates a disconnect between the staff/ caregivers and the children and youth in

care (Mitchell, 2018). I became very passionate and interested in this topic due to my observations at work and wanted to understand future implications and directions to better improve these young people's experience in foster care.

There may be other factors contributing to the lack of positive attachments for these young people in foster care (Sochos & Aleem, 2022). Children and youth entering foster care have experienced trauma or mental diagnosis that inhibit their capacity to build secure and positive relationships (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). Another bias that I need to be aware of is the availability heuristic where I may exaggerate the occurrence of ambiguous loss occurring due to my experiences working directly with ambiguous loss (Redelmeier & Ng, 2020). The availability heuristic is the likelihood to judge a situation based on how easily examples come to mind, however this can be inaccurate due to fallible memories (Redelmeier & Ng, 2020). The term ambiguous loss may come easily to myself due to my extensive learning of grief and loss that I may associate what these young people are experiencing as ambiguous loss and nothing else (Redelmeier & Ng, 2020). One way to address potential biases is to be objective in the language I use throughout the paper. An example of this is being inclusive of various styles of loss and manifestations of grief rather than stating them as grief and loss. This will allow better considerations for the voices of those who are exposed to ambiguous loss. Another way to address bias is to incorporate sources from many databases and to use multiple perspectives which can include the child and youth, caregivers, and government agency officials.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Ambiguous loss:** Pauline Boss defines ambiguous loss as a condition where a loved one is psychologically present but physically absent which could include divorce or a parent abandoning a child (Mitchell, 2018; Neimeyer et al., 2022). The reverse can also take place

where a loved one is psychologically absent but physically present in such cases of mental illness (Mitchell, 2018). Ambiguous loss could include loss of home, materialistic items, sense of hope, and sense of identity.

**Availability heuristic:** The availability heuristic is the likelihood to judge a situation based on how easily examples come to mind, however this can be inaccurate due to fallible memories (Redelmeier & Ng, 2020).

**Complicated grief:** Complicated grief is defined as grief that remains intense and can interfere with daily functioning for prolonged periods of time (Khoury et al., 2022).

**Disenfranchised grief:** a phenomenon where the grief is not recognized or acknowledged within society (Mitchell, 2018).

**Foster Care:** children and youth are placed in homes with families who are strangers to the child or youth (Look, 2023).

**Government Systems:** “placement of a child in a setting outside the family of origin under the supervision of state child welfare agencies who ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable children” (Look, 2023, p. 127)

**Group home:** if a child or youth cannot be managed in foster care due to extreme mental health concerns or behavioral issues, they then will be placed in group homes or juvenile detention centers. Group homes and juvenile detention centers include constant staff observation, strict rules and routines, and restrictions.

**Juvenile detention centers:** refer to group home definition.

**Non-related foster care:** the child is removed from primary caregivers and placed in homes with familiar adults such as family friends or neighbors (Look, 2023).

**Relative/kinship care:** the young person is removed from primary caregivers and placed with extended family members such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents (Look, 2023).

**Secure attachment:** Securely attached individuals recognize that their needs will be met by a caregiver, and they feel comfortable with both interdependence and intimacy (Gleeson et al., 2021). Children who have secure attachments feel safe to explore their environments and they have a positive view of self and others (Wallin, 2007).

### **Overview**

Ambiguous loss is a phenomenon that has detrimental consequences on the emotional, mental, cognitive, and physical well-being of the young person. As well the formation of healthy and secure attachments in the present and the future is compromised. Chapter two addresses the method of literature search and how information was gathered and organized. Chapter three will present a thematic look of the current understanding of the impact of ambiguous loss on youth who have been removed from their primary caregivers. This will then be followed by summary of findings regarding how ambiguous loss impacts the formation of secure attachments.

Methodological analysis of the literature as well as ethical considerations will be addressed within this chapter. Chapter four will analyze clinical implications regarding ambiguous loss in foster care and what can be done to reduce the magnitude of this problem. The final chapter will include recommendations for future research as well as a conclusion.

## Chapter Two: Methods

### Literature Search Process

The City University Library webpage was used to gather research and gain a deeper understanding of the research topic. Databases that were utilized for this research were Proquest, Sage, Science Direct, Taylor and Francis, PubMed Central, EBSCO, National Library of Medicine, and Springer Link. Search terms that were used include “loss and grief in child welfare system AND attachment”, “loss and grief in child welfare system”, “ambiguous loss AND attachment”, “ambiguous loss AND children”, and “confidence AND interpersonal connections”. Other search terms used include “attachment AND loss and grief AND children”, “disenfranchised grief AND children”, “grief on child attachments”, and “grief on child development”. In addition, other search terms utilized included “ambiguous loss AND children AND attachments”, “ambiguous loss AND social development”, “childhood abuse AND attachment styles”, “emotional consequences AND ambiguous loss”, and foster care AND attachments “. Final search terms employed were "consequences of ambiguous loss", “grief and attachment”, and “PTSD AND attachment AND children”. Other related search terms include “ambiguous loss”, “disenfranchised grief”, “complicated grief”, “interpersonal connections”, “secure relationships”, and “attachment”. The search was further refined by narrowing down publication dates within the last five years. Utilizing literature within the last five years shows that the problem is still current, and it allows a researcher to assess the problem by using updated testing designs and measures.

Software such as Zotero as well as an annotated bibliography were utilized to assist in collecting and organizing relevant information regarding the research problem and question. Twelve of the studies reviewed were qualitative, eight articles were quantitative, and two articles

were mixed method approach. Both qualitative and quantitative research was used to offer an encompassing scope of both narrative aspects of the research as well as their statistical significance and causation. The type of literature included was largely original research, however there were some secondary research articles incorporated, and most of the literature was peer reviewed. The literature search was further refined by full text accessibility, open access and peer reviewed content. Further filtration narrowed down to strict use of journal articles specific to the psychology discipline within five years.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria encompassed age groups between 8-18 as this age group could effectively articulate their experiences with ambiguous loss. All nationalities and ethnicities were included as children and youth in government welfare systems come from diverse backgrounds and excluding participants from certain cultures and nationalities would skew the results of the study. Both men and women were utilized for inclusion criteria as the researcher wanted to see if there were differences in the ways men and women responded to ambiguous loss due to societal norms and expectations. The selected literature excluded participants who had not been removed from primary caregivers and involved with government welfare systems as children or youth. Articles investigated excluded children under the age of eight due to the reason that children that young may lack understanding and recognition of the concept of loss. In addition, self-awareness is not sufficient to articulate experiences and narratives that are align with the direction of the research. Children and youth under the age of eight also do not have the capacity to consent as they lack understanding of what the research entails. The next chapter will explore research findings regarding the various impacts of ambiguous loss for children in foster care. The methods presented in this chapter will be consistent across the literature in the following chapter.



### **Description of Reviewed Studies**

Within the analysis of the literature sampling of the participants was encompassed which includes diversity considerations such as gender, age, and ethnicity. The average age of participants ranged from 6 to 18, the research demographics represented are the population most impacted by this problem since adults do not tend to experience displacement the same way children in the social system do (Brown & Coker, 2019; Dierkhising et al., 2021; Dixon, 2019; Katzman & Papouchis, 2019). Gender was mixed within studies, some studies focused on only females or majority was female and a couple studies had higher male ratio compared to female (Brown & Coker, 2019; Dierkhising et al., 2021; King & Delgado, 2021). There is a lack of representation outside of the gender binary. To enhance future research, it could be effective to study demographics of transgender or other gendered youth who have experienced ambiguous loss in foster care. There was a wide range of ethnic diversity across the literature. Throughout the research, different instruments were utilized to measure universal concepts such as depression, PTSD symptoms, strengths and difficulties, and grief symptoms (Dierkhising et al., 2021; Sochos & Aleem, 2022). Instruments used included strength and difficulties questionnaire which evaluates health symptoms, emotional conduct, attention, prosocial strengths, and peer relationship difficulties (Brown & Coker, 2019). Inventory of traumatic grief (30-item assessments) as well as UCLA Posttraumatic stress Disorder Reaction Index (Likert scale) was utilized to explore traumatic grief reactions and symptoms presenting like PTSD (Dierkhising et al., 2021). Another instrument used was the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale which assesses symptoms of depression regarding loss (Dierkhising et al., 2021). Timing of instruments ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours (Dierkhising et al., 2021; Dominguez, 2018). In addition to these quantitative instruments used majority of the research focused on semi-

structured interviews where the participant had the opportunity to express their story from their perspective (Dixon, 2019; Katzman & Papouchis, 2022; Dominguez, 2018).

**Chapter Three: Literature Review**

This literature review focused on the impact of ambiguous loss on secure attachments for youth in foster care. There are three major clusters when reviewing ambiguous loss, this includes emotional, biological, and behavioral impacts. Within these clusters various subthemes emerged and will be elaborated on throughout the literature review. Furthermore, a methodological analysis of the literature was provided as well as ethical considerations within the literature was considered.

Table 1 below shows the ten articles that were utilized in the methodological critique of the capstone, alongside an exploration of the articles within the findings section.

**Table 1**  
Summary of Research Articles Reviewed.

Authors	Title	Year	Research method	Hypothesis/research question
Brown, E.C., & Coker, A.D.	Promoting the resiliency of African American teens experiencing ambiguous loss	2019	Qualitative	“An approach for understanding how teens experience relational changes, instability, and stigma following some loss situations” (Brown & Coker, 2016, p. 287)
Dierkhising, C.B., Sanchez, J.A., & Gutierrez, L.	“It changed my life”: Traumatic Loss, behavioral health, and turning points among gang-involved and justice involved youth.	2021	Mixed methods	“We hypothesize that gang-involved youth will exhibit higher behavioral health problems, community violence exposure, and loss experiences compared with their justice-only counterparts and that experiences of loss will stand out as a turning point more frequently for gang-involved youth. (Dierkhising et al., 2021, p. 8031-8032)
Dixon, B. A.	Loss of a sibling: A phenomenological exploration of the	2019	Qualitative	“From the experience of a Grief Counselor, what are the behaviors and expressions of

Authors	Title	Year	Research method	Hypothesis/research question
	experience of school aged children			school-aged children who have lost a sibling?" (Dixon, 2019, p. 10)
Katzman, W., & Papouchis, N.	Grief responses during the covid-19 pandemic: Difference in attachment and emotion regulation	2022	Quantitative	"Individuals whose grief reactions fell within the resolved grief group would have lower attachment anxiety, avoidance, and emotion dysregulation when compared to the other grief groups as individuals within this group have most successfully mourned the loss of their loved one." (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022, p. 763).
King, K. M., & Delgado, H.	Losing a family member to incarceration: Grief and resilience	2021	Quantitative	"1. Does loss to incarceration produce a grief response in family members? 2. How do relationship qualities and length of incarceration impact grief? 3. How do stigma, social support, and grief impact resilience for family members? 4. Do social support and stigma moderate the relationship between grief and resilience?" (King & Delgado, 2021, p. 439-440).
Sochos, & Aleem, S.	Parental attachment style and young person's adjustment to bereavement.	2022	Quantitative	"It was hypothesized that a) parental attachment anxiety, avoidance, and complicated grief would moderate the link between bereavement experience and psychological distress in young persons and b) parental attachment style

Authors	Title	Year	Research method	Hypothesis/research question
				would moderate the link between parental complicated grief and psychological distress experienced by bereaved young persons.” (Sochos & Aleem, 2022, p. 161).
Hoeg, B.L., Johansen, C., Christensen, J., Frederiksen, K., Dalton, S.O., Dyregrov, A., Boge, P., Dencker, A., & Bidstrup. P. E.	Early parental loss and intimate relationships in adulthood: A nationwide study	2018	Quantitative	“We hypothesized higher rates of relationship formation by bereaved women and nonbereaved persons than by bereaved men.” (Hoeg et al., 2018, p. 965).
Fernandez-Alcantara, M., De Los Santos-Roig, M., Perez-Marfil, M.N., Cruz-Quintana, F., Vazquez-Sanchez, J.M., & Montoya-Juarez, R.	A new instrument to assess children’s understanding of death: Psychometrical properties of the EsCoMu scale in a sample of Spanish children.	2021	Mixed methods	“We hypothesized that younger children will have lower scores in the four dimensions of the death concept, in comparison with older children. In addition, we wanted to explore the differences in the following variables: sex, existence of a previous loss and school setting.” (Fernandez et al., 2021, p. 3).
Dominguez, K.M.	Encountering disenfranchised grief: an investigation of the clinical lived experience in dance movement therapy	2018	qualitative	“How is the lived experience of disenfranchised grief experienced by dance/movement therapists who work with clients experiencing disenfranchised grief?” (Dominguez, 2018, p. 256)

### **Emotional Consequences of Ambiguous Loss on Secure Attachments**

Grieving ambiguous loss has serious ramifications for a young person's emotional well-being which, in turn, impacts healthy attachments (Look, 2023; Mitchell, 2018; Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Youth who experience ambiguous loss feel emotionally numb or paralyzed and it is common for the child or youth to experience both extravagances (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Individuals shift between incongruent emotions such as dread, relief, and hopelessness (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Additionally, emotional well-being becomes hindered as it is common for children and youth to feel shocked, devastated, and distressed when ambiguous loss occurs (Dominguez, 2018).

When ambiguous loss occurs, the young person displays emotional ambivalence and confusion regarding relationships and attachments (Cothorn, 2019; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Neimeyer et al., 2022). Due to the abrupt removal of the children and youth, relational uncertainties emerge and manifest in the form of distrust and lack of connection (Lambert, 2020; Zerach & Elklit, 2020). Children and youth are unsure whether foster parents and other types of attachments will remain in their life and disconnecting is a way to protect their sense of security from more psychic injury (Lambert, 2020; Silva et al., 2023). In addition, young people will tend to question and have conflicting thoughts regarding whether they want their primary caregiver to remain in their life or not (Cothorn, 2019). This is especially evident when a primary caregiver has been incarcerated, engaged in substance use, or if abuse and neglect has occurred. The lack of knowledge concerning the fate of the primary caregiver puts the child/youth in an emotionally liminal state between desire to return home and desire to move on. This, in turn, creates an inability for the child to pursue either choice until the ambivalence is resolved (Lambert, 2020; Mazzarelli et al., 2021).

According to the literature it appears that hyperactivation and deactivation impacts the formation of secure attachments (Blue, 2017). Attachment to the emotion may look like hyperactivation and exaggeration of the expressed emotion whereas detachment to the emotion is deactivated and the emotion becomes underrepresented (Blue, 2017). In order to instill a successful transition to new attachment bonds throughout the grieving course a young person needs to spend time in both processes (Blue, 2017). When a young person only displays hyperactivation they may seek out attention and care from unavailable attachments, display sensitivity to whether an individual is available or not, and try to gain intimacy and closeness by exhibiting distress (Blue, 2017; Zerach & Elklit, 2020). If these strategies are ineffective the child or youth will adapt their perception of the world and see others as being unresponsive or supportive of their needs (Zerach & Elklit, 2020). When an “attachment system is deactivated, the young individual will remove themselves from attachment needs, thoughts, and emotions” (Blue, 2017, p. 64). This will be exhibited by extreme independence as well as an avoidance from building and maintaining closeness in relationships (Blue, 2017). When young people engage with deactivation strategies, they will avoid loss related emotions which in turn diminishes the significance of the attachment figure (Blue, 2017).

### ***Loneliness and Sadness from Ambiguous Loss***

According to the literature, loneliness and sadness appear to be one of the major emotional consequences of experiencing ambiguous loss (Cothorn, 2019; Dominguez, 2018; Mazzarelli et al., 2021; Neimeyer et al., 2022). Loneliness occurs because of the abrupt separation of emotional ties (Cothorn, 2019; Mazzarelli et al., 2021). In addition, loneliness occurs due to there being a lack of understanding, compassion, and empathy towards the young person regarding the loss (Cothorn, 2019; Mazzarelli et al., 2021). Young people expressed that they had a deep love for

their primary caregivers yet they could not engage with them in a meaningful way which in turn created aspects of sadness and loneliness (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Loneliness also occurred due to the young person's perception that others were unaffected by the loss or protected by the negative consequences of the loss (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). This negative worldview will enhance loneliness and isolation since youth will stop using social networks as a coping resource (Zerach & Elklit, 2020).

### *Experiencing Abandonment due to ambiguous loss*

According to the literature, young people are at risk of experiencing abandonment after exposure with ambiguous loss (Brown & Gibbons, 2018). According to the literature there is an uncertainty about how to support young people who are bereaving ambiguous loss (Dominguez, 2018). Support systems tire of attempting to console and recognize the grief in the young person which leads them to disengaging or pulling back within the relationship (Harris & Winokuer, 2019; Dominguez, 2018). This can look like gradual withdrawal from the supporting attachment where limited communication is utilized between themselves and the young person (Dominguez, 2018). This can look like ceasing or avoiding conversation all together or communicating non-verbally (Dominguez, 2018). This can pose as a challenge to young individuals because they may not be as attuned to reading body language. Due to the lack of attunement, they may misinterpret non-verbal cues which has a direct influence on maintaining secure attachments. In addition, the supporting attachment may voice disapproval about the grieving process and expect the young person to move on quickly and return to their previous self (Dominguez, 2018). Attachment figures justify this withdrawal by viewing the young person as difficult to manage due to their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors not aligning with the attachment figures expectations (Sochos, & Aleem, 2022). This can lead to emotional turmoil for both caretaker and child.



### *Shame and Stigma Stemming from Ambiguous Loss*

One of the less recognized consequences of ambiguous loss is the feelings of shame that arise from the loss being stigmatized (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). Stigmatization occurs due to a lack of understanding and acknowledgement of what ambiguous loss is and how it impacts an individual. This impact is deepened in children and youth due to communication skills that are inadequate to express their experiences with this abstract concept. Furthermore, because the young population cannot express themselves, they cannot combat the stigma of ambiguous loss. The shame that a young person holds onto is masked with self-loathing which in turn minimizes authenticity and truthfulness within relationships and further complicates adaptive coping (Harris & Winokuer, 2019).

The experience of shame and stigma is especially prominent for young people who have been removed from primary caregivers due to parental incarceration (Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Brown & Coker, 2019; King & Delgado, 2021). Within society incarceration is viewed as being deserved which minimizes validation (Brown & Coker, 2019). Disenfranchisement occurs in incidents of incarceration because the parent is still alive, there are no public mourning rituals, and the family is expected to grieve without support or sympathy (Brown & Coker, 2019). Children and youth are then left to wonder if the incarcerated loved one is “bad” and deserving of their love (King & Delgado, 2021). This resulted in some children and youth distancing themselves from their incarcerated loved ones in hopes that stigma would be eliminated (Brown & Gibbons, 2018). Furthermore, young people lack a sense of control if the incarceration is kept secret or lies are told to the young person which in turn creates betrayal and a lack of trust (Brown & Gibbons, 2018). In addition, young individuals who enter foster care due to parental abuse and incarceration are exposed to disenfranchised grief as they are told they are better off

without their abusive or absent parents (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Children and youth are considered emotionally and physically safer when removed from harmful caregivers and there is a notion that children should be grateful (Brown & Coker, 2019).

### *Depression and Anxiety from Ambiguous Loss*

Research has found that children and youth in foster care are at higher risk for depression which has serious ramifications on the formation and maintenance of secure attachments (Cook-Fong, 2000). Research findings show that after experiencing removal from their homes and their loved ones, thoughts of everything being meaningless occurred (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). The notion that life has lost its meaning created a lack of joy within this young population causing depressive thoughts such as “why am I here”? (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). Young people who have experienced ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief lack clarity of their purpose in life. Having depressive thoughts impacts the formation and maintenance of secure attachments because if the young person lacks pleasure within relationships, they unconsciously distance themselves from relationships in general. Supporting individuals will also remove support because they believe that the youth distancing themselves is a normal developmental milestone not recognizing it could be something more serious such as depression from the loss.

When ambiguous loss occurs, the young person becomes conflicted towards the absent loved one where they feel indifferent towards them or curious about what their life entails (Cothorn, 2019). This contradiction in feelings creates anxiety that is hindering for the young person (Cothorn, 2019). Research participants described anxiety as a consistent worry they had towards life after experiencing ambiguous loss (Miranda et al., 2020). Separation anxiety was the most common type of anxiety observed after removal from a primary caregiver and participants described a fear of abandonment (Miranda et al., 2020). Youth who have been separated from their

loved ones try to control and adapt to the situation as well as reduce anxiety by researching and trying to get in contact with the primary caregiver (Cothorn, 2019). Participants in foster care, disclosed that they felt uncomfortable and anxious when they were alone compared to when they were in a romantic relationship (Miranda et al., 2020). When these youth transitioned into early adulthood, they would quickly jump from one relationship to another to avoid being alone (Miranda et al., 2020).

### **Biological Consequences of Ambiguous Loss on Secure Attachments**

In addition to emotional consequences, young people face exposure to biological repercussions. These repercussions, which are often paralleled, have the potential to worsen the damaging effects of ambiguous loss and in turn have a direct negative impact on secure attachments. Ambiguous loss influences physiological changes in the body such as increased or decreased levels of cortisol production (Look, 2023). Look (2023), states that lower levels of cortisol in the body have a direct result in the occurrence of conduct disorders and substance abuse whereas higher levels of cortisol influence the likelihood that depression and anxiety will occur.

Physical symptoms of ambiguous loss include fatigue, sleeping concerns, and lack of energy that affect the physical functioning of the body (Harris & Winokuer, 2019; Dominguez, 2018; Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). Ambiguous loss enhances chances of headaches and abdominalgia in the young population (Mazzarelli et al., 2021). Blue (2017), stated that when individuals experience ambiguous loss a symptom occurs called “broken heart syndrome”. When “broken heart syndrome” takes place, the individual will feel physical pain in the chest and heart (Blue, 2017). The body then starts to display elevated norepinephrine and epinephrine, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and immune dysfunction (Blue, 2017). Dominguez (2018), stated

that in the occurrence of ambiguous loss, somatic distress takes place which includes muscle tension, depersonalization, and respiratory disturbances such as breathlessness.

The final impact that ambiguous loss will influence is cognition. When our cognitive state is unbalanced, healthy relationships are influenced negatively (Look, 2023; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Harris & Winokuer, 2019). It is shown that young individuals who have experienced adversity such as components of ambiguous loss will have altered neural responses to stimuli and hyperactive brain activity (Silva et al., 2023). The regions of the brain impacted by this type of adversity include the amygdala, the insula, the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, and the dorsal anterior cingulate complex” (Silva et al., 2023). The impact on these brain regions increases bottom-up detection of stimuli which then inhibits positive social relationships to be created (Silva et al., 2023).

### **Behavioral Consequences of Ambiguous Loss on Secure Attachments**

Young people’s experience of ambiguous loss is connected to behavioral challenges and has implications on building secure attachments. Apparently young people who experience ambiguous loss have behavioral trajectories or inconsistencies in their behavior. According to the literature, experiencing ambiguous loss at a young age impairs daily functioning as the individual may suffer from mental exhaustion (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). Cognitive complaints occur when youth experience ambiguous loss which looks like preoccupation, rumination, forgetfulness, and difficulties concentrating (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). There are some key components regarding ambiguous loss which includes confusion, conflicting thoughts, difficulty problem solving, difficulty making decisions, inability to cope with new routines, and lack of rituals (Harris & Winokuer, 2019; Look, 2023). Problem solving is minimal due to the individual not knowing if the loss is permanent or temporary and whether things will return to

normal (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). In addition, when a young person experiences ambiguous loss there is a perceived threat to survival which could jeopardize perceptions and cognitions (Look, 2023). In addition, the youth exhibit poor emotional regulation, hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity (Gardenhire et al., 2019). The youth catastrophize thoughts and reactions, utilize counterfactual thinking, and lack the ability to tolerate uncertainty (Comtesse et al., 2023). When this occurs, the youth unconsciously avoid building new relationships and push familiar attachments away. These negative inner perceptions are projected onto others creating an unconscious divide within relationships. Under the umbrella of behavioral consequences a few subthemes emerged. Subthemes include social withdrawal, low self-esteem, occurrence of traumatic grief and interference on the grieving process.

### ***Social Withdrawal and Isolation After Ambiguous Loss***

Children and youth unconsciously isolate themselves due to perceived judgment from peers or lack of understanding from others regarding what ambiguous loss entails and how it can impact an individual (Cothorn, 2019). Isolating also occurs because others such as close family and friends are not aware how to support the young person and communicate with the young person about the loss; in turn this sends the message that the young person's experiences are being denied and invalidated (Cothorn, 2019). This lack of understanding towards the youth instilled a lack of enjoyment generally within relationships and social situations (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). In one research study youth expressed that they did not want to share their experiences with ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief because they did not want to bother others or give the impression they could not cope alone (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022).

Boundary ambiguity occurs where there is a lack of clarity of who remains as a support network for the youth and what those support network's role are in the child or youth's life (Semerci et

al., 2019). Boundary ambiguity creates dysfunction within the family, and in turn the young person will withdraw creating a divide within social relationships, this acts as a protective coping mechanism to avoid further pain (Semerci et al., 2019). Implications of ambiguous loss have detrimental consequences on self-concept and leads to the youth exhibiting poorly controlled behavior (Silva et al., 2023). Youth seek out relationships where unresponsiveness occurs and the youth respond with defensiveness which create feelings of exclusion (Silva et al., 2023). These defensive behaviors that do match environmental stimuli will have a direct effect on social problem solving as well as signs of empathy towards others which could create the perception that youth are cold-hearted (Silva et al., 2023). Self-protective strategies occur when a youth feels they are rejected, abandoned, or a disappointment to themselves and others due to experiencing ambiguous loss (Gardenhire et al., 2019).

#### ***Low Self-Esteem due to Unacknowledged Ambiguous Loss***

When young people experience ambiguous loss, it creates self-doubt when facing adversities which in turn impacts self-worth and confidence this then puts strain on the formation of secure attachments (Corey, 2020). Self-worth and confidence are contributing factors to building positive and secure attachments. When young individuals lack confidence, they become uncertain and weary of their skills and strengths. This creates a dependency on the adult and in turn the adult experiences caregiver burnout which subconsciously creates a lack of connection (Corey, 2020). Caregiver burnout leads to emotional exhaustion and feelings of overload where the caregiver indirectly detaches support from the child (Gerain & Zech, 2019). This will look like the caregiver distancing themselves physically and emotionally from the child to preserve their own mental well-being (Gerain & Zech, 2019). Children lack the understanding of why caregivers are responding to them any differently and they can internalize this as their own fault (Gerain &

Zech, 2019). When young people are told that ambiguous loss is insignificant or when the loss is not acknowledged it creates the notion that their grief is wrong which in turn impacts confidence. Young people who experience ambiguous loss show a reduced confidence in their ability to cope and they respond to life situations with distress and hostility (Zerach & Elklit, 2020). This has a direct consequence on the formation and maintenance of secure attachments as the hostility expressed unconsciously pushes others away or creates a distance between individuals.

### ***Occurrence of Traumatic Grief***

These young people's experiences of being removed from their environments and the people they love translates into something called traumatic grief which is when the individual undergoes both posttraumatic stress symptoms as well as grief symptoms (Dierkhising et al., 2021; Neimeyer et al., 2022; Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). Symptoms that the individual face include mourning, vividly re-experiencing moments of the loss, and avoiding thoughts or places that remind the individual of the loss (Dierkhising et al., 2021). Furthermore, the grief that is accompanied from ambiguous loss instills panic reactions, hyperventilating, feeling like they cannot breathe, and a constant state of stress (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). When youth have post-traumatic stress symptoms in relation to ambiguous loss, they will likely experience attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Zerach & Elklit, 2020). Children and youth have the desire to forget about the loss and they do this by avoiding and suppressing negative emotions (Cothorn, 2019). This in turn allows the child or youth to disassociate feelings of emotional discomfort and anxiety that the parental figure has triggered (Cothorn, 2019).

### ***Interference of ambiguous loss on grieving process***

An issue that arises is that adults see a significant loss that is different from what the young person sees and experiences (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Disenfranchised grief is a

phenomenon where the grief is not recognized or acknowledged within society (Mitchell, 2018). Disenfranchised grief occurs when the loss is not significant such as when a child loses a toy, when the relationship is not recognized such as when a child is separated from an abusive parent, and the griever is excluded such as when there is an assumption that the child lacks the ability to grieve (Mitchell, 2018). Disenfranchised grief sends a message that the loss experienced is not worthy to grieve (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Mitchell, 2018). Part of disenfranchised grief is that individuals do not have the opportunity to mourn and express their grief in ritualistic ways as they would with a death loss (Brown & Gibbons, 2018). Young people who grieve ambiguous loss are at risk of disapproval and invalidation from others (Dominguez, 2018). This creates alienation and disconnect between young people in foster care and the rest of society due to a lack of understanding and empathy (Dominguez, 2018). This could create divided loyalties within the young person, but it also sends a message that their relationship to their parents lacks significance (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Divided loyalties can occur when we force children and youth to accept new realities outside of their control (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). This causes assimilation and contentment within the young person, but this is followed by chaos if the young person is torn between conflicting values and beliefs (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012).

In some cases, disenfranchised grief leads to the young individual being consumed by something called complicated grief. Complicated grief is defined as grief that remains intense and can interfere with daily functioning for prolonged periods of time (Khoury et al., 2022). According to Dr. Alan Wolfelt (Look, 2023), young people who experience complicated grief from ambiguous loss are often subjected to several factors that impede their grieving process (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). Factors include the nature of the loss, such as the relationship to the loss, previous experience with loss, as well as the child's chronological and developmental



age (Look, 2023; Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). How children cope with loss can be dependent on parent's attachment style as well (Sochos & Aleem, 2022). When caregivers are emotionally available to children and treat them as worthy and loveable then children who have experienced loss will retain a positive memory of the loss and become more accepting that the loss is final (Sochos & Aleem, 2022). If caregivers cannot provide this type of attachment to children, then it is likely children will be unable to cope with the loss (Sochos & Aleem, 2022). Other factors that impede the grieving process are availability of family/ community support and responsiveness of caregivers surrounding the young person (Look, 2023).

There is a four-phase grief cycle that children go through when experiencing ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief (Look, 2023). First a "honeymoon" phase where affect and emotion are absent, then they undergo a phase of anxiety, anger, and helplessness where the child exerts energy on reunification, this is then followed by pain, depression, and despair, and finally detachment and adjustment occur (Look, 2023). This process becomes complicated when there are several placement changes and the losses become cumulative (Look, 2023; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Understanding the grief evolution is important as young people may not be ready to adapt and adjust to new relationships when they are still processing the old relationships.

When an individual's assumptive world is destroyed or changed grief becomes both adaptive and necessary (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). With both ambiguous loss and death related losses a young person strives to make meaning of their experiences (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). According to the literature, young participants were interviewed regarding grief around ambiguous loss and one participant responded, "there was a gaping hole in my heart" (Dominguez, 2018, p. 258). As ambiguous loss is ongoing the young person experiences

disparity between what is reality and what is dreamed or hoped for (Harris & Winokuer, 2019). This disparity interferes with coping processes and stress management (Neimeyer et al., 2022). When young people experience ambiguous loss, their reality becomes unknown, unwanted, and often terrifying, forcing them to relearn themselves and the world (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Research shows that securely attached individuals who have experienced ambiguous loss were less likely to exhibit anger, despair and rumination compared to their insecure counterparts (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). Young people who have processed and coped with grief resulting in resolution have the lowest levels of attachment anxiety (Katzman & Papouchis, 2022).

### **Summary of Findings**

There are detrimental effects on interpersonal relationships when children experience ambiguous loss that is present well into adulthood (Leitch, 2022). Children who have exposure to ambiguous loss describe feelings of “instability, transience, and detachment in their relationships with their loved ones (Leitch, 2022). Parental loss impacts the young person’s ability to form and maintain emotional ties that are required to build successful relationships (Hoeg et al., 2018). This creates a barrier when establishing new relationships as the individual will present with caution because they are fearful of new losses occurring (Hoeg et al., 2018). Ambiguous loss influences a young person’s attaining autonomy and self-identity which has negative repercussions interpersonally (Hoeg et al., 2018). Youth who have experienced consequences of ambiguous loss will start to form mental representations of others where they view others as rejecting and inconsistent which in turn lowers social support and responsiveness from others (Zerach & Elklit, 2020). When other individuals remove social responsiveness and support it feeds into the notion of rejection and validates the negative thinking patterns of the young person.

When removal occurs, youth are in jeopardy of disruptions to other relationships such as siblings and extended family (Look, 2023). Siblings and extended family provide a sense of appreciation and understanding to the young person and their experiences that most people could not comprehend. With this type of loss young individuals undergo lack of trust, comfort, and safety in other relationships. When individuals are removed from their family of origin, they are at risk of being deprived of traditions, stories, and family history (Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). In addition, children and youth removed from their families are required to reassess their beliefs about what family entails and their role within that unit (Leitch, 2022). The consequence of being forced to leave their childhood home also means that they are being forced out of their communities (Mitchell, 2018). Communities could include schools and peers, and according to personal accounts in the research it can be difficult to create friendships when you are always moving around (Mitchell, 2018).

When ambiguous loss is experienced, research shows that youth create negative inner perceptions that questions their own ability to succeed and utilize resources to enhance self-efficacy and in turn may create feelings of inadequacy (Cothorn, 2019; Cook-Fong, 2000). Research shows that when youth experience ambiguous loss they start to lack trust in others and shield themselves from being vulnerable within new relationships such as foster parents or peers at a new school (Miranda et al., 2020). Young individuals who have experienced ambiguous loss have challenging thoughts that include being cheated by injustice, self-blame, and believing they are not truly happy nor do they deserve happiness (Blue, 2017). This instills avoidance behaviors and the young person circumvents any reminders of the loss which may include other support systems, locations, or tasks associated with the loss (Blue, 2017). Some individuals described that experiencing grief from ambiguous loss allowed them to appreciate the little things in life

and share the good and the bad times with people which in turn strengthened relationships (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022). The way attachment is formed and created is dependent on the young person's "personality traits which include resilience and emotional reactivity, history of previous stressors and losses, available support systems at the time of the loss, and circumstances of the loss" (Johnsen & Tommeraas, 2022, p. 2).

Experiencing ambiguous loss in foster care had detrimental consequences on future relationships such as when these young people entered marriage or became parents (Miranda et al., 2020). Research shows that non-bereaved women are more likely to enter marriage or cohabilitating relationships compared to their bereaved counterparts (Hoeg et al., 2018). In addition, bereaved men and women were at higher risk of separation from their partners (Hoeg et al., 2018). Research participants described their parenting style as overprotective and they were hyper focused on their children's safety (Miranda et al., 2020). These individuals removed from their primary caregivers and placed in the system were fearful of repeating parental patterns they experienced throughout their childhood (Miranda et al., 2020).

## **Methodological Analysis of the Literature**

### ***Sampling of Participants***

The inclusion criteria of diverse ethnic cultures are a strength as it allows for the problem to be examined cross-culturally so that strategies and solutions can be applied globally. If there was an overrepresentation of one ethnic group the literature would not apply to larger sample sizes and the data would be skewed. Criteria to be part of the research included having experienced ambiguous loss, mental health distress, and a loss of a significant person (Brown & Coker, 2019; Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). Not all studies within the literature defined the parameters of ambiguous loss hence why it was crucial to incorporate ambiguous loss, mental

health distress, and loss of a significant person. Participants were recruited both by purposeful and convenient sampling. Limitations to utilizing convenient sampling is that younger children experience grief from ambiguous loss but they are being excluded due to the researcher's interest in the sample age that fits their convenience. Convenient sampling poses as a limitation as it limits generalizability and may skew results (Dierkhising et al., 2021; Dominguez, 2018). Convenient sampling eliminates experiences of other populations which could create a bias (King & Delgado, 2021).

### ***Recruitment of Participants***

Recruitment of participants varied from going into school systems and community organizations to reaching out to grief counselors and advertising through Facebook groups and online forums (Brown & Coker, 2019; Dierkhising et al., 2021; Dixon, 2019; Katzman & Papouchis, 2019). Researchers did not consider which schools had higher demand for grief related work. In addition, if children and youth are not attending or enrolled in school as well as if administration staff are unaware which children are in foster care this may affect the findings and recruitment process. However, a benefit to entering school systems is that there is a multidisciplinary team that can speak to the issue at hand. Reaching out to grief counsellors can be a limitation due to their binds of confidentiality which restricts them from disclosing which children and youth are having concerns. Researchers advertising through Facebook groups may experience concerns with validity considering that online platforms make it easier to falsify certain credentials. Strengths of utilizing online platforms include that the researchers can reach more people in a timely manner.

### ***Data Collection Processes***

Utilizing assessments that lasted up to two hours is very time consuming for the researcher to analyze as well it can pose as a challenge for youth to engage for that long. The inclusion of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire highlights positive aspects of the child's character which in turn instills a sense of hope. More qualitative information would have been beneficial to encompass lived experiences of ambiguous loss. Open-ended questionnaires and interviews can allow for elaboration of the impact of ambiguous loss.

### ***Data Analysis Procedures***

Data analysis procedures consist of reading the description in its entirety, clarifying the participants meaning, analyze the concrete language of the participant, transform the language of the participants into concepts of science, and integrate and synthesize insight of the meaning (Dixon, 2019). A critique of this qualitative process is that the researchers are not defining what constitutes the concrete language nor the transformation of this language used by the participants. The lack of clear definition of concrete language allows for the potential to misunderstand or misinterpret the data presented by the children and youth.

### ***Critiques of Quantitative Methods***

A limitation with quantitative research is that self-reports may be over-represented or under-represented by the participant (Dierkhising et al., 2021; Katzman & Papouchis, 2022). There could be false reporting for fear of stigmatization or to protect themselves from upsetting thoughts and feelings (Dierkhising et al., 2021). With survey and standardized questionnaires, the researchers do not have room to ask more questions and to clarify the young person's narrative. One study did critique recruitment difficulties as well as obtaining samples that are not representative of the population (convenient sampling) as this may limit the validity of findings (Hoeg et al., 2018).

### *Strengths of Qualitative Methods*

Several studies utilized prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation where several participants are used to analyze data, peer debriefing, and member checking where participants are asked to review conclusions (Dixon, 2019; Hoeg et al., 2018; Brown & Coker, 2019). Transferability was attained by including a thick description of the research (Dixon, 2019). Dependability was attained by including other researchers to assess whether there is accuracy in the information (Dixon, 2019). Finally, confirmability was reached by having the researcher consistently evaluate the approaches being used (Dixon, 2019). Researchers also did a self-interview with the same questions the participants are asked to minimize biases and judgements (Dominguez, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are some limitations to the consenting process due to these young individuals lacking capacity for autonomy (Panel on Research Ethics, 2022). Due to this limitation, it was required to seek consent from legal guardians who could provide knowledge of the vulnerable person's wishes and well-being (Panel on Research Ethics, 2022; Fernandez et al., 2021). This could present as an ethical dilemma if the legal guardian and the young person have differing worldviews. Researchers provided participants with pertinent information in a language that they can understand (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; Corey, 2020). This required the researchers to be developmentally aware of what children and youth can comprehend as this would affect the results of the study (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Researchers upheld the respect and dignity of the participants by ensuring confidentiality by not publishing any identifying information of participants (Panel on Research Ethics, 2022; Corey, 2020; Cothorn, 2019). Researchers protected confidentiality by using anonymous or anonymized data

and coded information (Panel on Research Ethics, 2022; Dixon, 2019). In addition, one research article utilized psychoeducation groups over a six-week period and found that this type of modality fostered a collective voice and supportive empathetic relationships (Brown & Coker, 2019). In addition, research that utilizes narrative group modalities promotes resiliency, self-esteem, and conflict resolution (Brown & Coker, 2019). This adheres to ethical principle two: responsible caring (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

A final ethical consideration to keep in mind is cultural awareness and competency. An ethical dilemma arises when diversity is not considered or participants are not given equal opportunity to participate in the study. This occurred in Mctavish et al (2022) study, where the researchers excluded any participants that did not speak the English language and only included participants from high income countries (United States, Canada, England, etc.). This is a violation of ethical principle one: respect for the dignity of persons and peoples (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter some of the key themes that emerged were the emotional, biological, and behavioral impacts that occur from experiencing ambiguous loss and how this impacts secure attachments. The detrimental consequences from ambiguous loss that young people face create an emotional and physical divide between themselves and their foster parents. This divide is fostered by the young person either overly attaching or avoiding attachment to their foster parent and the foster parent presenting with uncertainty in how to support the young person (Dominguez, 2018). If disruptions from ambiguous loss are not acknowledged, validated, or repaired children and youth will lack emotional attunement to caregivers (Zengal Mora, 2021). This creates a lack of trust, security, and sense of belonging for the young person when they seek



out new relationships or try to maintain old ones. Attachment to others can very much be influenced by our emotional, behavioral, and psychological well-being. Experiencing ambiguous loss has detrimental consequences for a young person such as increased feelings of loneliness, shame, and depression. Furthermore, social isolation, abandonment, and withdrawal are all common occurrences for this young population to withstand due to a lack of awareness and understanding of what ambiguous loss entails and how it affects an individual. These damaging consequences are hard enough to process for adults who can articulate and communicate what they are feeling and thinking let alone for this young population who struggles to do so due to developmental adjournments. These consequences that arise due to experiencing ambiguous loss have a direct and damaging impact on the formation and maintenance of secure relationships both in the present and into the future.

### **Chapter Four: Implications for Counselling Psychology**

The findings derived from the reviewed literature have important clinical implications to psychotherapists and the broader mental health community. Clinical implications include enhancing therapists' compassion and empathy towards this young population and offering validation and acknowledgement. Different theoretical modalities such as narrative, play therapy, and dance movement therapy have been shown to be a benefit for individuals coping with grief and loss and will be included within this chapter. Recommendations at a professional or clinical level will be included to better understand how clinicians can support this demographic. Under the community level recommendations, peer support groups were encompassed. Furthermore, recommendations at the national level will be addressed within this chapter.

#### **Validation and Acknowledgement**

It is crucial that when children and youth enter foster care their experiences with ambiguous loss should be identified and cared for in a sincere and authentic way (Mitchell, 2018; Leitch, 2022). When ambiguous loss is experienced, it is important for the young person to be given the space to recognize and name the loss (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Within this process the therapist can offer knowledge on the unique effects ambiguous loss has on individuals which in turn validates the loss and leads to relief, improved self-concept, and reduced self-criticism (Neimeyer et al., 2022; Harris & Winokuer, 2019). A therapist's role is to reassure the young person that they are worthy, have personal agency, have a purpose, and belong (Mitchell, 2018). Without this type of validation and acknowledgement children will enter a cycle of despair which in turn impacts physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Mitchell, 2018). In addition, both therapists and other adults such as foster parents should be normalizing the grief that these young people are experiencing as this is a normal and expected reaction to loss (Neimeyer et al.,

2022; Dixon, 2019). Furthermore, therapists should identify with the young person what was not lost, this allows for a focus of innate strengths (Neimeyer et al., 2022). There should also be a recognition that children may need individual time to process the grief that comes with ambiguous loss, will require supportive peer groups, and subtle changes can be an indication that there is something triggering external behavior (Dixon, 2019). Finally, therapists should not push for closure and resolution regarding ambiguous loss due to this being an individualistic and timely process (Harris & Winokuer, 2019).

### **Theoretical Modalities for grief and loss**

Traditional therapeutic modalities may be overwhelming to children and youth which is why it is necessary for the therapist to be competent in different therapeutic techniques (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Throughout the literature review a theoretical modality that was commonly used for grief and loss with children and youth was narrative reconstruction therapy (Elinger et al., 2021; Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020; Neimeyer et al., 2022). This type of work can be broken down into a three-part model which included restoration of resilience, reconnecting with the loss, and retelling the story in a coherent manner (Neimeyer et al., 2022; Leitch, 2022). Both the client and the therapist reconstruct the memories associated with the loss into a timeline or detailed narrative (Elinger et al., 2021). The power of co-creation of the narrative between the young person and the therapist can allow for a foundation of therapeutic relationship to be built but also it allows for identification of strengths (Neimeyer et al., 2022; Dominguez, 2018). Within this co-creation of the narrative, it is important to allow the young person to express any emotions that arise such as anger or disappointment to alleviate self-blame (Leitch, 2022). This theoretical method allows the client to engage in self-focus, emotional involvement, and emotional regulation which in turn permits meaning towards the loss to be shaped (Elinger et al.,

2021; Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020). Furthermore, narrative therapy externalizes the grief into its own identity past, present, and future which increases clarity for the population grieving ambiguous loss (Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020).

In addition to a therapist being familiar to multiple theoretical approaches it is also beneficial for them to be knowledgeable in expressive art therapies such as dance, art, and play therapy since some children and youth have a hard time engaging in talk therapy (Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020). Creative approaches to therapy allow for abstract thinking which is directly linked to growth and discovery (Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020). Utilizing multiple creative approaches within the therapeutic setting can enhance elaboration and understanding as several of the senses become engaged (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Creative modalities stimulate imagination and can assist the young person in transforming and revising their life after ambiguous loss takes place (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Research shows that dance movement therapy is an effective strategy for grief work as it allows for a creative outlet as well as more in depth expression (Dominguez, 2018). Dance movement therapy allows for the young person to be empowered by expressing the uniqueness of processing and adapting to the loss (Dominguez, 2018). Ambiguous loss will impact individuals differently and this type of therapy allows for expression that is congruent with how the young person feels (Dominguez, 2018).

### **Recommendations at Professional/Clinical Level**

In order to best support these youth who have experienced ambiguous loss, therapists are required to assess their own professional practice and evaluate what they can do to enhance well-being of these youth (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Therapists need to have an understanding as well as competence in grief and loss, trauma, and working with children (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Additionally, therapists need to have an awareness

and recognize the scope of loss and how this can impact individuals differently. It is crucial for psychotherapists to keep up with annual trainings and psychoeducation around different aspects of grief and loss which can include what is defined as normal or pathological grief and recognizing internal and external stimuli associated with the loss (Elinger et al., 2021; Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Psychologists can keep up to date with the topic of grief and loss as well as working with children through reading relevant literature, peer consultation, and supervision (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Therapists need to be sensitive and knowledgeable about characteristics and vulnerabilities of this demographic to distinguish what will be harmful or beneficial when trying to address the loss (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). In saying this a therapist should be as flexible as possible in providing services for these young people and try to adapt interventions that matches the young person's attachment style (Neimeyer et al., 2022). Clinicians need to provide a safe therapeutic environment to allow the client to explore, share, learn, and retell their story in a way that contributes meaning (Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020). This can look like the therapist exhibiting empathetic listening, validation, and asking open ended questions. Furthermore, therapists should give control back to the youth by allowing them to take therapy in whatever direction they deem as beneficial and helpful. Finally, it is crucial for a therapist to evaluate and assess their own opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and values to increase objectivity and minimize biases within the therapeutic setting (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

### **Recommendations at Community Level**

Ambiguous loss is defined as a relational loss which means treatment also needs to be relational, and this is completed by building and forming authentic human connection with others (Neimeyer et al., 2022; Dominguez, 2018; Pataky & Parent, 2018). One way to achieve this is

through peer support groups that focus on loss. Peer support groups in the community can alleviate feelings of isolation and normalize the adolescent's narrative (Pataky & Parent, 2018). According to Pauline Boss, comprehension of the loss stems from interactions with other peers and should occur in a collaborative supportive setting (Pataky & Parent, 2018). Boss highlighted six therapeutic activities to work on for young people who have experienced ambiguous loss (Pataky & Parent, 2018). The first of these activities is to assist in finding meaning for the young person around the loss which allows the individual to move forward (Pataky & Parent, 2018). The second activity is tempering mastery where the young person recognizes their ability to be resilient and that they do not always have control over losses (Pataky & Parent, 2018). Thirdly the goal for the individual with assistance from other peers, family, or professionals is to reconstruct their identity where self-perception and roles are reevaluated (Pataky & Parent, 2018). The fourth activity when processing ambiguous loss is to normalize ambivalence and permit labeling of conflicting feelings (Pataky & Parent, 2018). The next activity is revising attachment where students learn that forming new attachments is possible while maintaining ties to old connections (Pataky & Parent, 2018). Finally, the last activity Boss encompassed was discovering hope where the young individual accepts the uncertainty that shadows ambiguous loss (Pataky & Parent, 2018). Support groups for young individuals offer adequate information about what loss entails, a sense of routine, and a sense of belonging (Pataky & Parent, 2018). In addition to these facilitators can model and demonstrate appropriate coping mechanisms and mourning behaviors to the young people (Pataky & Parent, 2018).

### **Recommendations at national level**

In order to minimize the detrimental consequences ambiguous loss has on this young population systemic changes need to occur. This includes explaining foster care processes and

what foster care will entail, this is especially important when a young person is moving into care for the first time (McTavish et al., 2022). The information that these children receive should be developmentally appropriate and phrased in a way that is easy to understand (McTavish et al., 2022). Children need to be given the opportunity to speak and be heard regarding fears, questions, or concerns about moving into foster care (McTavish et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2018). Children and youth should be considered in the decision-making process as best as possible as these decisions will have a direct impact on their life (McTavish et al., 2022). When being placed into care, government welfare agencies should incorporate culture, race, ethnicity, and diversity and match children in the most desired or best fit environment (McTavish et al., 2022). When considering placement for a child, government welfare agencies need to be child centered and examine the needs of the child and build strong relationships in communities and with foster parents (McTavish et al., 2022). In addition to being child centered, strength-based approaches need to be implemented to further enhance self-efficacy (McTavish et al., 2022). Research shows that youth who receive enfranchising statements and acknowledgement of their loss are more receptive to engaging in relationships and are more likely to build secure attachments (Mitchell, 2018). Mitchell (2018) states the elements of enfranchising interactions include the acronym C.A.R.E which stands for communication, affirming, recognizing the loss and grief experienced, and ensuring emotional needs are met (Mitchell, 2018).

### **Chapter Summary**

Throughout this chapter recommendations for clinicians, the community, and the overall nation were addressed. To enforce growth for our young population in foster care experiencing ambiguous loss we need to implement and execute the recommendations suggested within this

chapter. As we continue to put forward these steps, we enable the children and youth the ability to process and cope with the loss and enhance their emotional, biological, and behavioral health.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

In this capstone project, the phenomenon of ambiguous loss and the detrimental consequences it has on secure attachments were explored. Attachment theory was the framework that guided the paper by highlighting what it means to have secure attachment and how the experience of grief hinders the formation and/or maintenance of the attachment. To synthesize and analyze the research ambiguous loss was defined and organized into themes. The three major themes that emerged was emotional, behavioral, and biological consequences of how ambiguous loss impacts an individual. When ambiguous loss does occur it creates emotional turmoil and distress for the young person which in turn creates a disconnect in the formation of secure attachments. These disconnects are also prominent in the physical and biological presence of grief, which, if ignored or left unaddressed, feed into the emotional turmoil and distress. Additionally, the untreated loss causes disturbances in the cognitive processing of the individuals that lead to rumination, catastrophizing, and disruptions in executive functioning of the youth. These factors should be analyzed holistically as they each play a role in the behavioral disturbances and presentations that come about from the improper attention given to the concept of ambiguous loss. The content that was utilized throughout this literature review was specifically selected as it contributed relevant information to the addressed themes. Any content that had little relation to or that added no relevant information to the themes was placed in exclusion criteria. This chapter will conclude with a short reiteration of the presenting concerns as well as providing recommendations for future research such as developmental considerations as well as societal differences in views on grief.

### ***Take-Home Message***

There needs to be greater awareness and understanding of what ambiguous loss is and how it can impact an individual. This can be achieved through psychoeducation and seminars to inform caretakers, practitioners, and other supporting adults of different types of ambiguous loss and its consequences. In addition, as a society we need to understand that ambiguous loss is a form of grief and there is no wrong way to grieve nor is there a time limit on the grief. Furthermore, as a society we need to recognize that even after the initial loss has occurred it is likely that ambiguous loss will continue to manifest and additional losses may arise. As a society we need to provide the opportunity for young people to express and talk about the loss they have experienced. When we allow for this opportunity, we give the child or youth a voice and give them the space and support they need to process the loss. Most importantly with a phenomenon that is so obstruse we need to provide support to these youth in whatever way the youth deem beneficial. This may look like seeking out professional help such as a psychologist, support groups, and day to day conversations.

### ***Future Research***

Throughout this capstone project, there were numerous gaps in the literature that emerged. Some of the most notable are the lack of clarity of how ambiguous loss affects children and youth in their adulthood as well as parenting and other relationships. The research also focuses predominantly on individualistic cultures and gives no considerations to how grief may present differently if occurring in collectivist societies. Having this in mind, two future research questions arise: 1) What are the outcomes of adult relationships for children and youth who have experienced ambiguous loss and grief at a young age? 2) What are the impacts of ambiguous loss and grief cross culturally and in collectivist societies vs individualistic? Future research could also consider the experience of grief at different developmental ages and its impacts in those

developmental windows. To improve upon this research, it would be crucial for future researchers to incorporate the young person's perspective in a mixed methods and longitudinal approach. If researchers implemented longitudinal research, they may be able to see how children and youth adjust differently over time to ambiguous loss. It would also allow for the researchers to see if there was any difference in presentation of behavior for the young people after implementation of clinical, community, and national standards and strategies. It is important to incorporate quantitative data because it allows researchers to measure the phenomenon at hand as well as qualitative data which allows for self-reporting and case studying. The combination of both data types in future research would allow for a more comprehensive and in depth understanding of the research question at hand. With respect to methodology, gaps were also present in terms of sampling data. Researchers often used convenience sampling to their advantage and only recruited participants that fit into a specific developmental window. In doing this, the opportunities to analyze grief and loss beginnings in younger children and well as its developments in adulthood are intentionally excluded.

### ***Final Reflecting Thoughts***

Throughout this capstone process I have learned a great deal about how grief and loss can manifest differently for individuals. I have also learned that grief can be an ongoing and the healing process takes time. Within the healing process it is likely that an individual will go through waves of grief and sorrow as they rediscover who they are without the person, place, or thing that they have lost. Through this literature review I was able to become self-aware of how different losses in my own personal life have impacted me and I was able to draw more attention to ambiguous loss I have experienced. This can offer important insight within the therapeutic milieu as I can offer compassion and understanding to someone who has experienced ambiguous

loss. However, with saying this it is crucial to note that grief and loss is an individualistic process and not everyone will respond to therapeutic techniques and interactions the same way.

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