Abstract

Ambiguous loss is experienced and constructed relationally. As a result, the social and political context plays a role alongside psychological factors as elements that both mediate the impact of ambiguous loss and can aid or retard effective coping. By considering the case of persons disappeared in political violence, an approach to addressing ambiguous loss is theorized that can use community-based therapeutic approaches. Beginning from post-structuralist ideas of discourse as being constitutive of human subjectivity, the role of discourse is discussed in terms of its capacity to both construct ambiguity and mold social relations that can build resilience. A therapeutic approach is postulated with families of the disappeared that seeks explicitly to impact discourses circulating in communities affected by disappearance, in ways that positively influence the well-being of the families of those missing, as well as impacting the meanings and identities that affected persons construct from them.

Discursive approaches to ambiguous loss:

Theorizing community-based therapy after enforced disappearance

This article takes as its point of departure the theory of ambiguous loss developed by Pauline Boss, understood as a concept and related clinical practice to provide a therapeutic foundation to deal with loss that is unclear (Boss, 2007). My goal is to advance theoretical understandings of ambiguous loss by examining the particular implications of ambiguous loss that are politically mediated, that is, where individuals’ fates are unknown as a deliberate tool of policy. As such, my focus is on the families of those missing and disappeared in conflict and political violence. The specific purpose of this article is to provide theoretical input that can build on Boss’s articulation of the relational and social aspects of ambiguous loss, applying and extending the theory in ways that I hope can generate novel practical applications to benefit families of the disappeared.

Disappearance has emerged as an explicit tactic of states and other armed actors because of the power it has to induce collective anguish that can be exploited for social and political ends. Disappearance is defined legally as “[T]he arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State [...] followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person” (UN Convention on Enforced Disappearance, UN, 2006, Article 2). In many cases, disappearance is a euphemism for an extrajudicial execution that remains denied and unproven. The needs of the families of the disappeared are thus principally for information about the missing, including whether they are dead or alive, and - where death is known or suspected – a need for the return of human remains. The phenomenon of disappearance can be used as a tool to investigate both therapeutic approaches to address the impacts of ambiguous loss, and the very particular social and political factors which can create and enhance those impacts.

Efforts to theoretically frame human attitudes towards death and absence construct our understandings of mental health and human well-being. In this article, a particular type of traumatic loss, that which is unresolved, is discussed in terms of therapeutic approaches that are formulated discursively and provide a foundation for community-based methods to address its impacts. A discursive approach, rooted in the cultural discourses that circulate around enforced disappearance, is postulated to permit a greater understanding of how the social and political can be used as elements that can either heighten or ameliorate the impacts of ambiguous loss. As such, this article explores the impact of social interaction on both the perception of ambiguity and on building therapeutic approaches to the ambiguous loss that can result. Just as theories to address traumatic loss emerge from discourse, so do the very understandings that construct and shape that loss in any one individual. Adopting a social constructionist conceptualization of the self, I argue that the notion of self-contained individualism – at the heart of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) approach, for example -- is culturally biased, as well as problematic epistemologically and ethically. Since the meanings of ambiguity are socially constructed, therapeutic approaches must also be embedded within the social environment from which ambiguity has emerged, including the family and social networks beyond it.

Ambiguous loss theory has been tentatively used to guide community-based approaches, most notably in response to the needs of families of workers missing as a result of 9/11 attacks in New York City (Boss, Beaulieu, Wieling, Turner, & LaCruz, 2003). However, community-driven approaches to ambiguous loss have yet to be adequately theorized: This article represents an effort to create a theoretical framework for this emerging practice to better understand ambiguous loss and its relationship to the “social” and to further inform therapeutic approaches based on my experience of working with families of the disappeared in a range of contexts, in particular an assessment of the impacts of disappearance on families in Nepal (Robins, 2013) and an intervention to address these (ICRC, 2013).

## Ambiguous Loss

The ambiguous loss model has begun to be used as a basis for understanding the impacts of disappearance on families, and in steering interventions (see Hollander in this special issue; Robins, 2013; ICRC, 2013). Human rights interventions with families of the disappeared have habitually emphasized issues of‘truth and justice.’ However, for the families of the disappeared “closure is a myth” (Boss, 2004, p. 560), both because the majority will never receive an answer concerning their loved one, and because even if an answer and a body are received the psychological impacts continue. Interventions driven by a search for ‘closure’ or for ‘truth’ focus attention on ending ambiguity, rather than living well despite it, and can of themselves construct meanings that are both negative and that encourage the worst types of coping. Such emphases resist a coming to terms with ambiguity and, at their worst, can serve to valorize the trauma of ambiguity where closing emotional wounds is perceived as betraying the disappeared.

Ambiguous loss is ‘‘a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present’’ (Boss, 2004, p. 554). Where a family member is absent in an unclear way, the lack of knowledge about the loved one gives rise to a challenge to transform the experience into one with which the family can live. A range of studies (Boss, 2006, 2004) indicate that situations of ambiguous loss predict symptoms of depression, anxiety, and family conflict: ambiguous loss is the most stressful type of loss precisely because it is unresolved. The ambiguous loss model has been developed to understand the impact of unresolved loss and shape interventions. In the absence of routes to truth, approaches must be found for families to continue living their lives:

The goal is to find meaning in the situation despite the absence of information and persisting ambiguity. Here, resiliency means being able to live with unanswered questions. Instead of the usual epistemological question about truth, we ask, “How do people manage to live well despite not knowing?” (Boss, 2007, p. 106)

Because ambiguous loss is presumed to be a relational condition, a relational intervention is called for. Typically, these interventions address a small system, notably a couple or family. The argument made here extends a suggestion made by Boss (2006) that a system of great relevance to interventions around ambiguous loss is the community – particularly relevant in the case of enforced disappearance, and more so when it has occurred on a large scale:

Therapists are just temporary connections in this process, so we must set the stage for linking patients and clients to where they live their lives. It is in their community that ongoing human connections build and sustain individuals and families when loved ones are missing. (Boss, 2006, p. 44)

It has become clear in interventions around political violence that the community and the broader social and political environment will impact on how ambiguity is understood and strongly mediate its impacts. Social structures that can provide support to families of the disappeared will ideally be integrated into a therapeutic approach reaching beyond affected families.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, the foregrounding of discourses that circulate in the community and beyond becomes a focus of intervention.

The following section seeks to theoretically inform therapeutic approaches with those suffering from ambiguous loss as a result of political violence. Such loss is characterized by at least two elements. First, violence often occurs on a massive scale targeting entire communities, and as a result impacts will have an enhanced social effect. Second, power relations will play a role, since the meanings given to loss are socially constructed subject to those power relations. For example, where perpetrators maintain control of meanings that impact upon families of the disappeared, the disappeared can be understood as ‘terrorists’ or criminals, rather than victims.

# A Discursive Approach to Ambiguous Loss

## Discourse

The theoretical approach taken here is based on Michel Foucault’s understanding of discourse, power and the way in which human beings are made subjects (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Foucault defined discourse as ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which are an inherent part of such forms of knowledge and the relations between them. Discourse reflects the social, epistemological, and rhetorical practices of a specific group, and as such serves to *construct* truth and knowledge.

Discourse contributes to the constitution of all those dimensions of social structure which directly or indirectly shape and constrain it: its own norms and conventions, as well as the relations, identities and institutions which lie behind them. Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning. (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64)

Discourse is a way of representing knowledge about a particular domain, which defines the domain and produces the objects of knowledge within that domain. The principle role of discourse then is nothing less than the construction of the identity of the human subject. Subjects are never complete or static but are endlessly reconstituted in the multiplicity of discourses of which they are inescapably a part, changing throughout time and place. Subjectivity, in the Foucauldian sense, denotes the way in which ‘the person’ comes to be known and understood by others, as well as by herself or himself, by imposing and locating the subject within finite identity categories (e.g., race, gender, missing, wife/widow).

The power of this idea in relation to ambiguous loss is that ambiguity, and the meanings and identities that shape understandings of it, are created by discourse. The family members of a disappeared person see the meaning disappearance has for them, and thus their own identity, emerge from social interactions with others. Just as ambiguity is created by the acts of perpetrators and how they are communicated and interpreted, so the work of the therapist and the community-based approaches that have been used to address ambiguous loss (Robins, 2013; ICRC, 2013) can themselves be seen as an alternative or counter discourse that reconstitutes meanings. This resonates with the goal of family therapy more broadly, which in general is used to co-create with clients a new ‘reality’ through conversation with the therapist (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). The role of the therapist is to assist in the *production* of new meanings or the transformation of the current ‘story.’ Such an approach recasts both the emergence of ambiguous loss and the therapy to address it as part of a larger social whole by focusing on the social context as a source of meaning and identity and by extending a therapeutic approach to include the broader social environment. Given that social realities are largely constructed outside the therapeutic relationship, this approach provides a theoretical basis for appreciating both the impact of broader social structures on coping and the possibility of therapeutic approaches that involve a network of community relationships.

## Power

According to Foucault (1980), the construction of meaning is also intimately tied to issues of power, such that knowledge and power constitute a dyad that must always be considered together. The dissemination of everyday knowledge is subject to the operation of power through the daily interactions and exchanges which are the primary means by which a person constitutes him or herself as a subject, conforming to cultural models which are “proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his societal group” (Rabinow, 1994, p. 291). From this perspective, power is radically relational, instantiated in and through networks of relationships: “In the language familiar to family therapy, social practices, discourses, subjectivity, and knowledge are recursively linked […] in a necessarily enmeshed relationship.” (Flaskas, 1993, p.38). Meaning making can be viewed as both contested and negotiated, embedded in a social context that promotes specific meanings and hinders others. Thus, discursive practices serve to construct and support whatever becomes the dominant, prevailing discourse, whereas exclusionary practices both reflect and reinforce the marginalization of deviant discourses.

Disempowerment, both as a result of victimhood and that which preceded it, will also be crucial in constructing meanings of and around ambiguity, since the marginalized will be subject to others’ understandings. This has been seen in contexts where the ambiguity of a woman missing her husband is contested by community members who ‘know’ he must be dead after being missing for so many years. A Foucauldian perspective reveals how meanings and identities emerge subject to the power relations that exist within families and communities, and how the frictions between divergent understandings as a result of ambiguity can be a source of ambivalence. Seeing power as quite literally productive of social relations reveals the role it plays in creating the subjectivities that are the input to and product of a therapeutic process.

Discourses are also vehicles for power in a cultural sense. That ambiguous loss as a concept emerged from North America reflects the contemporary intellectual and political hegemony of the United States. Just as PTSD has been criticized as internalizing an extreme individualism that is particular to the contemporary global North, there is a danger that ambiguous loss as a discourse contains within it cultural assumptions about the families and societies that experience political violence. This is especially problematic when ambiguous loss is used with reference to disappearance in collectivist cultures, potentially constituting a form of epistemic violence, discussed in more detail later.

## Agency

Given the disempowerment that traditionally both facilitates becoming a victim and is a consequence of victimhood, agency is at the heart of discussions of work with victims of conflict.

The agency of the subject in the therapeutic context discussed here, is understood as that which makes her able to contest discourse through language, despite being a product of discourse. This also reflects the experience of people constrained by the worlds they are forced to occupy, despite being quite able to articulate their awareness of those constraints, and on occasion being able to remake those worlds by constructing new discursive realties. A narrative therapeutic approach seeks to develop ways of thinking and working that bring forth the stories of specific people in specific contexts so that they can lay claim to and inhabit preferred possibilities for their lives.

## Discourse, power and family therapy

Pauline Boss has recommended narrative intervention to address ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). Narrative therapy can be considered a poststructuralist form of therapy positioned within the social constructionist domain of social psychology, and premised on:

[T]he idea that the lives and the relationships of persons are shaped by: the knowledges and stories that communities of persons negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences: and certain practices of self and of relationship that make up ways of life associated with these knowledges and stories. A narrative therapy assists persons to resolve problems by: enabling them to separate their lives and relationships from those knowledges and stories that they judge to be impoverishing; assisting them to challenge the ways of life that they find subjugating; and, encouraging persons to re-author their own lives according to alternative and preferred stories of identity, and according to preferred ways of life. (The Dulwich Centre, quoted in Besley, 2001, p. 127)

This perspective clearly echoes the goals of therapy for ambiguous loss. White, one of the founders of the narrative therapy tradition, explicitly referenced Foucault’s thinking in his practice: through externalizing problem discourse he was able to help bring forth what he called “counter discursive practices” of a person’s local knowledge (White, 1991), that is, those that can challenge dominant understandings. The self as the center of narrative gravity (Dennett, 1992) stresses the discursive production and reproduction of the self while at the same time preserving a notion of narrative agency. Agency in narrative therapy is summarized by the idea that the subject must become the privileged author of his or her subjectivities (White & Epston, 1990). Part of White’s practice is also to ask questions which act to situate people in their restrained narratives and cultural context, necessarily acknowledging the extent to which social and political constraints contribute to the challenges faced. As a therapist White proposed that people become linguistically radicalized against the culture’s dominant practices of knowledge and power, acknowledging that the social is a driver of people’s problems and potentially the locus of some of the solutions.

There are also issues of power to be discussed concerning therapy itself, particularly since the foundational ideas of Gregory Bateson have driven a failure to engage with power in family therapy (Flaskas, 1993). Locating therapeutic potential in the community demands that community-based approaches engage intimately with everyday power relations. There are also politics around a community-based approach. In many therapies, rather than seeing people as experts in their own lives, counsellors take that role. For example, Payne (2000) argues that the person-centered approach, “puts the therapy room at the center of the process of therapy and makes the relationship with the therapist the person’s primary relationship,” which excludes and minimizes the influence of the broader web of relationships someone is immersed in. The therapeutic relationship is privileged as a problem-solving social space over and above a persons’ other relationships. In a discursive sense, the therapist can work to counter the impact of discourses of the broader social world, but cannot challenge them. A community-based approach seeks to do precisely that: to contest existing discourse that negatively impacts well-being through the creation of counter discourse.

White signaled the possibilities of therapy conducted in a non-therapeutic environment by challenging the idea of the therapist as in possession of ‘expert knowledge.’ The impact of discourse as a therapeutic tool is the potential to see therapeutic benefit from discourses that emerge from the broader social environment, beyond the explicitly therapeutic relationship of affected person and therapist. Both the incidental and deliberate use of the social environment as therapy for ambiguous loss and social approaches to the construction of novel discourse can challenge dominant practice and understandings that are negative for the families of the disappeared. Such approaches resonate with the idea that a community can constitute a system that is discursively therapeutic. Network therapy (Speck, 1998), or social network intervention, describes therapeutic work with a ‘social network’ of tens of individuals connected by family ties or other social links, driven by an understanding that the relevant system that needs to be addressed goes beyond the individual presented for therapy and their immediate family. It is an approach that explicitly links to traditional ritual approaches among indigenous peoples (Attneave, 2004), and rather than using expert therapists seeks to appoint network members to the role of change agent. While in Western urban settings network therapy seeks to create a ‘Tribal Unit’ that can “support, oppose, expose and protect its members in effective ways” (p. 192), such units already exist in the traditional societies in which much disappearance occurs.

There will always be a need for professional therapeutic services, but experience in many contexts of enforced disappearance reveals that the low income states most impacted by such violations rarely have significant capacities. In Nepal for example, where a community-based intervention with families of the disappeared drove much of the thinking presented here (ICRC, 2013), the majority of the population has no access to any mental health facility: Kohrt and Harper (2008) report just one clinical psychologist per 4.5 million population. As such, community-based approaches offer the only support that affected individuals and families are likely to receive. Beyond simple necessity however, community-based approaches can better inform a range of interventions with those suffering from ambiguous loss and provide a better understanding of the social impacts that can both enhance ambiguous loss and its symptoms, and that aid coping.

# Socializing Therapeutic Approaches to Ambiguous Loss

The discourses that construct ambiguity and drive the impacts of ambiguous loss are significantly different from the canonical therapeutic approaches to treating ambiguous loss. In light of the previous theoretical discussion, I now describe discourses that perpetuate ambiguous loss and propose socially-based approaches to generating different discourses, as well as discuss how those affected by ambiguous loss can be supported to interpret such discourse in a preferred way.

## Constructing ambiguity

Disappearance is understood legally as the state or state agents depriving someone of their liberty without acknowledging so. In practice it is most often a mechanism for states to kill opponents covertly. Discourse constructs both ambiguity and the meanings and identities around it, most notably from the meanings that perpetrators communicate through their actions. In many contexts, a political message of denial dominates in which perpetrators seek to ensure that as little information about the abduction or fate of the disappeared emerges. In Argentina, for example, the junta sought to deny that the disappeared had ever existed, seeking to erase them as individuals. Often, disappearance will be preceded by a violent arrest, such as a man pulled from his bed at night at gunpoint, which may be witnessed by family members. In addition to the potential trauma of witnessing such an event, the deliberate use of violence to intimidate is an integral part of the strategy of disappearance to keep dissident communities cowed and frightened. The social exclusion that typifies many of the contexts where disappearance occurs can be seen as a qualification for or prelude to disappearance also creates a space for social approaches, centered on processes of empowerment, to address its impacts.

The politics of disappearance is defined by the fact that it is a demonstration of power and of the ability of the state to exercise control over individual life. More than simple killing however, disappearance confronts those impacted by it with the power of perpetrators; power to not only deny life, but to deny even confirmation of death. As a result, power is embodied not only in the very present absence of the bodies of the disappeared but also in the minds and bodies of their families through trauma and somatism. It has been argued by Agamben (1998) that the abandoning of enemy bodies to spaces beyond legality, as most exemplified by disappearance, is simply the extension of other forms of disempowerment. Hegemonic discourses, particularly those that have the imprimatur of the state, exclude certain outcomes, options or questions from the public realm, constraining what meanings can be imagined. State and national level discourses are reflected and interpreted by the communities in which families live, providing both additional stressors and potentially support. Challenging state discourse, including lies and silence, is unlikely to be a task of therapeutic approaches, but rather a role for activists. It does however serve to demonstrate how truth and justice are themselves therapeutic for victims.

Although discourse is potentially driven by formal state narratives around disappearance, it ultimately emerges locally, translated and filtered through local understandings, cultures, and power relations. Assimilating rumor and personal agendas, such discourse constructs both ambiguity and the meanings and identities it implies for families. The goal of a discursive method is to identify the nature of the person that discourse constructs and determine how this social construction is discursively related to other categories. The focus is most obviously on the victim of disappearance but also on the family members he leaves behind, with whatever labels discourse assigns. Such labels can include passive victim, terrorist accomplice, woman without a man, and so on. All such labels are saturated with power; none of these are simply unproblematic descriptions. For the relative of a disappeared person to challenge the accuracy of such a label demands a counter discourse, and their acting, potentially collectively, as agents contesting discourses of power.

## Discourses around ambiguity

Ambiguity is constructed by disappearance and its impacts emerge from the narratives around the absence of the disappeared. While these reflect existing power relations, their impacts are the result of the interaction of discourse with interpretive acts of family members. Every telling of a story is a re-telling in which those affected by ambiguous loss participate, shaping lives, identities and relationships. An example of how meanings can be constructed from the partial and politically instrumentalized discourses around disappearance has been seen in Nepal (Robins, 2013). In one rural district security forces arrested people from their homes at night and announced several days later that they had been killed when the army encountered Maoist rebels. Where the army was seeking to cover up extrajudicial execution, families seeking hope for their loved ones interpreted this message as meaning that their loved ones could still be alive since the story of their death - in an armed clash - was clearly false. News of death was interpreted through the lens of ambiguous loss as confirmation of the potential for life, as an external discourse was reshaped and given a meaning by families seeking hope. This reveals discourse as always having impacts, potentially positive or negative, on the families of the disappeared. To use discourse to shape meaning is not a therapeutic choice but a fact: the challenge is to find ways in which the well-being and effective coping of affected individuals can be advanced.

It is the pursuit of ‘an answer’ and people’s understandable need for a binary interpretation (dead or alive) of the absence of a loved one that drives much of the pain of ambiguous loss. Boss’ model suggests that for people to live with ambiguity they must learn to accept living with *both/and* rather than with *either/or*, replacing the need for closure with an ability to find positive meaning in either possibility. The need for closure can be amplified as a result of the dominance of human rights discourse that sees victims through a legal lens and defines families as having a legal right to truth. This legal perspective emphasizes identification of victims and perpetrators, and institutional process to punish the latter. Rights and law represent discourses with a low tolerance for uncertainty and one result of the ubiquity of rights language around armed conflict is a tendency to elide or ignore uncertainty, highly negative for those suffering from unresolved loss. Those who have coped least well with ambiguous loss have become fixated with the ambiguity of their loss and with seeking closure. This strongly suggests that human rights discourse and the resulting interventions with families of the disappeared, which emphasize – and to some extent promise - truth over all other aspects, can be potentially damaging by reinforcing such negative coping.

Discourse also constructs the victim identity, with victimhood not emerging naturally from the experience of being harmed, but arising socially and subjectively, with a range of factors determining who will be accorded victim status. Rombouts and Vandeginste (2000-2003) call these “public recognition selection processes” (, discourses through which some “‘have the ‘power’ to enforce recognition (socially and legally)” (p. 114). Most formally, bodies established to deal with victims after conflict, such as truth commissions or prosecutorial bodies, will determine who is considered a victim. More locally, in many contexts victims’ groups and NGOs will engage with victims and define criteria that may impact on understandings of victimhood within communities. These understandings may or may not coincide with those of victims themselves, usually being created by those with authority in the capital and remote from affected communities, again emphasizing the link between power and subjectivity.

Empirical studies with families of the disappeared demonstrate the range of impacts on families, and how discourses rooted in particular power relations drive many of them, with negative outcomes in particular for women. Identity becomes a problem for wives of the disappeared because they are women without men in societies that define them through their relationships with men. In Indian Kashmir, wives of the disappeared are called “half-widows” (Qutab, 2012), precisely because their identity is poorly understood in local cultural discourse, which defines a woman as a daughter, wife or widow. Ambiguity in the fate of a husband results in ambiguity over a woman’s identity. The result of this is stigma and exclusion, as seen in Nepal where such women are perceived as being sexually predatory and thus the object of suspicion in family and abuse in the community (Robins, 2013). Impacts are heightened by women’s refusal to give up their visible identity as a wife, wearing the clothes and other markers of a married woman – as a physical manifestation of their hope in their husband’s return - causing frictions with perceptions that emerge from discourse in the community. A woman’s relationship to the household, particularly where it is patrilocal,[[2]](#footnote-2) will be defined through a husband and if he is missing, discourse constructs her as someone no longer linked to the family. This is exacerbated by the fact that she is also unlikely to be contributing financially, leading to stigma and often exclusion.

In many contexts those with no connection to the disappeared commonly believe that those missing for many years must be dead, and this becomes a common understanding in communities. Communities who believe that the disappeared are dead expect families to perform death rituals, not least because in traditional societies the spiritual implications of not doing them is perceived to have implications on the broader community (Robins, 2013). Public rituals instantiate discourse, and – just as a death ritual confirms someone has left the community – so a ritual that commemorates the disappeared and advances an understanding that someone is missing, not dead, can challenges social meanings that refute this.

## Spaces of discourse

The social networks in which people are immersed have a stress mediating function. Although traditionally characterized as offering support, such networks in family or community can also be highly stressful where relationships center on friction or ambivalence. A primary function of social networks is norming: the validation and enforcement of beliefs and behaviors. It is the frequent interactions of social network members which communicate and activate network norms constructed through discourse. Such norms dictate how a particular class of person – such as the wife of a disappeared man - should behave, and what interactions with others are appropriate. Many of the social impacts of ambiguous loss are a direct result of the ongoing judgement of behavior relative to those norms. Even though discourse is necessarily everywhere, one can attempt to divide spaces according to the discourses that circulate within them.

Meanings and identities in the community will be shaped by cultural assumptions that reflect social hierarchies that will assign women or particular minorities certain identities and roles. (This explains why pre-existing marginalization can have a magnifying effect on the impact of ambiguous loss and reduce resilience.) These discourses will both be driven by and sustain those hierarchies, reflecting a certain locus of authority. There will also however be social spaces that are more inclusive, and where different forms of power relation inhere, and thus where different discourses circulate. Such spaces include those where peers of persons affected by ambiguous loss choose to come together. In the intervention in Nepal this would include spaces where women did daily work, such as where water is collected or in the fields. In such spaces men are largely absent, power relations are flatter and discourse is modified as a result, and the subjectivities that emerge have a greater space for agency. Another example is where families of the disappeared meet others in the same position, creating spaces where meanings could be constructed on their own terms. Such intentional reconstruction of meaning and the resulting identities emerge from discourses that cannot circulate in different spaces. An example is this statement from the wife of a missing man in Nepal who is part of an association of families of the disappeared:

In the very beginning every one of us was alone. […] Before meeting friends who were facing the same sort of problem, I was in despair and nobody would listen to my problem. Other people did not like to talk about our problems since they were scared that they could also be arrested if we talked with them. But it was only when we met other families of those disappeared, we felt that we had common problems; we knew that we had the same pain. For this reason, we could share our sorrows. We wept and cried together and that helped us ventilate our sorrows. Then we formed this association. It helped us to meet friends having similar problems. Then we organized the sit-ins. As many friends gathered we felt greatly relieved. From that time onward, we felt courageous to fight for our cause.

A telling example of such a space is those that were explicitly created by the interventions in Nepal (ICRC, 2013), where women affected by ambiguous loss were brought together, wives of the disappeared with other wives, and mothers with other mothers. The separation of wives and mothers was driven by the fact that in the Nepali family – as in many parts of the world – there are rigid hierarchies, with mothers-in-law having authority over their sons’ wives. This reveals the family home in such societies as a different type of space, private but still subject to often quite extreme power relations. Where the meanings the wife of a disappeared man gives to her situation differ from those of her mother-in-law, domestic discourse will potentially challenge rather than support her resilience.

The telling of stories and the sharing of experiences that defined these spaces that women claimed for themselves in Nepal represent the conscious creation of subjectivities that can confirm their own understandings, even those these are not shared by the broader community.

Telling and listening to stories in interaction with others who suffer the same ambiguous loss sets the stage for one’s identity to be relationally expressed through the symbolic interaction of language, rituals and cultural, gendered, and generational patterns of coping and adaptation (Boss, 2006, p. 129).

Such spaces – whether naturally emerging or created as ‘intervention’ – work precisely because of the room they provide for the circulation of novel discourse which can challenge those that are stigmatizing. The social support that facilitates such spaces and the associated discourses in this context can then be understood as crucial elements of resilience. We see that a community-based approach can both impact on discourses circulating in a community by seeking to modify them, and create spaces in which new meanings and identities can be created through the emergence of novel discourses.

## Ambiguous loss: Therapeutic guidelines

The ambiguous loss model provides a framework for understanding the impact of disappearance on families and formulating appropriate interventions. Since the understanding of disappearance is constructed socially within family and community, so its impact must be understood in the same terms, and interventions need to be initiated at the multiple levels of individual, family and community. The discursive focus of addressing ambiguous loss is confirmed by Boss’s observation that:

When relationships are unclear and closure is impossible, the human need for finality can distress or traumatize families. […] Bereft of rituals to support them (because the loss is unverified), families are left on their own. Because of the ambiguity, relationships dissipate as friends and neighbors do not know what to do or say to families with unclear losses. For all of these reasons, ambiguous loss is a relational disorder and not psychic dysfunction. (Boss, 2007, p. 106)

The result of the ambiguity of their loss is that families display a range of symptoms that have been described in various empirical studies (Boss, 2004, 2006; Robins, 2013). These include intrusive and repeated thoughts and dreams about the missing person, disturbed sleep, and sudden feelings of anxiety. Impact on function has also been reported, as well as somatism. Social impacts include stigmatization in family and community and family conflict. The impact of disappearance is the sum of the emotional, psychological, cultural, economic and social effects, subject to the resources of individuals and communities to cope.

Boss defines six therapeutic guidelines for working with those impacted by ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006):

* **Finding meaning:** The loss of a loved one deprives life of meaning, and finding meaning is difficult when the loss is ambiguous. Discursively, we understand all meaning as constructed from social interaction.
* **Tempering mastery:** Mastery is the ability to control one’s life and agency and is perceived in the West as something that moderates stress. Since families of the disappeared have little control over the ambiguity of their loss, seeking mastery can increase helplessness (Boss, 2006) and thus Boss posits that mastery must be *tempered* to maintain health, that is, by ceding a degree of control rather than being stressed by the lack of it. Empirically, this understanding is challenged by evidence that, where families of the disappeared come from communities that are marginalized in their societies, *increasing* mastery through empowerment aids coping (Robins, 2010). In a discursive approach this mastery can be recast as an individual being in control of the construction of their own subjectivity: even where external discourses cannot be controlled, individuals can maintain agency over how such discourse shapes their lives and relationships.
* **Reconstructing identity**: ambiguous loss threatens the identity of family members, with women for example not knowing if they are wives or widows

[A] woman whose husband has physically vanished wonders if she is a wife or a widow. [...] Such situations can traumatize unless people are able to reconstruct who they are. [...] Symptoms [of identity confusion] may include uncertainty, indecision, inattention and lack of concentration - [...] these symptoms reflect a form of mental blocking that is externally caused. (Boss, 2006, pp.115-116)

In a post-structuralist approach, subjectivity tends to replace identity because such approaches adopt social constructionist viewpoints that do not assume that people’s identities are primarily stable and singular, rather that they change and are contradictory (Gergen, 1990, 1991). This emphasizes that how someone is perceived and indeed how they perceive themselves is subject to discourse, and so construction and reconstruction of identity is largely discursive. More than just individual identities, family identity can be challenged by ambiguous loss, and where an ethnic or other community is targeted politically by disappearance the identity of the community, its place in the world, and in particular its relationship to the state, can become unclear.

* **Normalizing ambivalence**: Ambiguity is related to cognition, that is something one knows, but ambivalence arises from conflicted feelings and emotions, caused by the conflict between the belief that the disappeared is dead and that he will return. This ambivalence is most apparent in conflicting feelings towards family members, immobilization and a loss of personal agency. Acknowledging and externalizing ambiguity is the best route to managing it and is directly linked to ensuring agency.
* **Revising attachment:** Revising attachment means learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment, even as finding new human connections. In contrast to detachment, implied by closure, it suggests remaining attached to a loved one, but not denying their loss, that is living with ‘both/and’ rather than feeling torn between ‘hope and doubt.’
* **Discovering hope**: The focus of the above therapeutic guidelines is to discover newhope: dealing with ambiguous loss demands knowing which hopes to relinquish and which to pursue (Boss, 2006). Ultimately, hope is a meaningful and positive outcome despite ambiguous loss.

These guidelines demonstrate the resonance between ambiguous loss and a discursive approach. The fact that these guidelines are labelled ‘recursive’ echoes the understanding from Foucault that subjectivities are in constant negotiation, shaping and being reshaped by social interaction. More than this, almost of the focal points of the therapeutic guidelines are rooted in social understandings: meaning, identity, ambivalence, attachment, and even hope--are all constructed by discourse. These therapeutic approaches demonstrate the influence of post-structuralism in their formulation: therapy driven by an understanding of ambiguous loss seeks to work with subjective identities and meanings. People can follow these six recursive processes to access new cycles of meaning and hope, as they relinquish the ‘‘hunger for closure’’ (Boss, 2006, p. 17) and embrace the paradox of learning to live well with the ambiguity of unanswered questions about their family members. Most importantly, recursive discovery and shaping of meaning, hope, and identity will occur through discourses circulating in communities and families. The challenge for those working with families of the disappeared is to consciously modify discourse and/or create new discourses that can shape positive meanings and identities.

## Resilience and discourse

Any intervention should seek to work to support and promote the “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001) of resilience, the ability of individuals to withstand the impact of traumatic events. The importance of peer support in coping with a range of traumatic experience suggests that resilience is not intrinsic but can be boosted (or indeed depleted) by all elements that impinge on an individuals’ well-being, including social interaction. In empirical studies with families of the disappeared, one of the most discussed coping mechanisms is to share problems with someone. This appears to be the articulation of the value to resilience of a space where very particular meanings and identities can be created that are not possible in the presence of others, who do not share the same experience (see above). The same study reported that having contact with a family association can reduce the levels of problems, socially and emotionally, that women experience: meaning is constructed relationally, and is best achieved through interaction with others in the same position.

One concept from White and Epston (1990) that is applicable to ambiguous loss is that of *externalizing* a problem. The lives of those suffering from ambiguous loss become *ambiguity-saturated*,[[3]](#footnote-3) with those failing to cope organizing their lives around ambiguity, and fixated with the search for the disappeared. By naming the problem as ambiguous loss, and externalizing ambiguity as something outside the individual, the family and indeed the community, enables an affected person to describe themselves and their relationships in terms that highlight new understandings and drive new stories. This allows life experience to assert itself over external discourse and drive a reconstitution of a person’s life from beyond the dominance of ambiguity.

The impact of political discourse on resilience is seen in how the identity of the disappeared is constructed. Victims are the most heavily invested in memory, precisely because their resilience in the light of their experience can depend on affirmation of their own understanding of events. Whether a missing relative is a hero or a terrorist, a martyr or a victim, determines how both the disappeared and their families are perceived and in turn how they perceive themselves. War myths serve multiple functions, including the creation of meaning out of pain: this meaning can be a crucial aid to resilience of families of victims. Issues of memory and acknowledgement can enable political acts, such as awarding medals or the status of martyr, to the disappeared, to construct meanings that give value to the experience of families, and impact upon how they are perceived.

The power of political narratives over victims is however a demonstration of the lack of agency they typically enjoy. In a discursive sense, resilience can be defined as the ability to be the driver of one’s own subjectivity, and to maximize the possibility of good outcomes whatever discourses circulate. That subjectivity can be consciously constructed is clear from ideas of ‘active coping’ (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003), that involve an awareness of the stressor, followed by attempts to reduce the negative outcomes. In this case it can be encouraged by being made aware of ambiguous loss and the impacts it can have. However, there are many examples of families of the disappeared consciously seeking to confront perpetrators and the individuals and institutions that perpetuate ambiguity in ways that are highly positive emotionally and socially. In particular, female relatives of the disappeared in contexts such as Argentina and Bosnia (Bosco, 2006; Leyersdorff, 2011) have become activists, challenging discourse that constructs them as passive victims through collective mobilization and empowerment. Such activism firstly creates spaces where peers can collectively reconstruct meanings around disappearance, and secondly provides conscientization that can empower victims to become agents of change. Such a challenging of the disempowerment of victimhood provides the most solid foundation for affected people to become drivers of their own subjectivity, challenging the victim of trauma as passive and individual. This emphasizes that resilience is as much about unmaking subjectivities as making them. This resonates with Butler’s idea of *performative subjectivity* (Butler, 1997) since activism goes beyond private spaces to construct very public meanings and identities through highly visible acts in streets and squares. Such activism shows the potential for families of the disappeared to impact on national discourse as political actors, and in a context such as Argentina they became drivers of a movement that ultimately toppled the junta that perpetrated disappearances. This challenges the effort to draw a line between activism and therapy.

## Restorying: Interpreting discourse

Even as meaning emerges from discourse it does so through the interpretive acts of those subject to it: problems are produced or manufactured in social, cultural and political contexts, in a discursive way. A discussion of the therapeutic impact of seeking to change the nature of discourse must be accompanied by efforts to positively affect how discourse is interpreted by those impacted by ambiguous loss. Discourses serve as the basis for life stories that people construct and tell about themselves. Although these discourses emerge externally (in the case of families of the disappeared, from perpetrators and from their own communities), people inadvertently contribute to their problems through the specific meanings they construct from their experiences. In addition to resilience that emerges from being able to mold discourse, is that which emerges from an individual’s life experience that along with external discourses are constitutive of people’s lives. A person’s story or self-narrative provides meaning in their lives and steers interpretation of ongoing experience.

The discursive approach being explored here understands that constructing meanings is about re-constituting subjectivities on the terms which most advance the well-being of those affected by ambiguous loss, and that demands considering not only external discourse but what any one person makes of it. When someone is situated in stories that others have about herself and her relationships, these stories become dominant to the extent that they allow insufficient space for the performance of her preferred stories (White & Epston, 1990):

[P]eople can change the stories they tell themselves about their lives by recovering events at odds with the dominant story and performing meaning on those events as a way of authoring new stories. These new stories can then change people's ideas about themselves and about what is possible for them (Freedman & Combs, 1993, pp. 294-295).

It is this need for restorying, linked to construction of positive subjectivities, that it is the typical goal of family therapy. The discursive approach will also consider ways in which such restorying can occur in the absence of a professional therapist.

## Decolonizing therapeutic approaches

Almost all studies to date of ambiguous loss (Carroll, Olson & Buckmiller, 2007) have been made in a Western culture, largely in the United States among families who reflect contemporary North American social and cultural norms, with conclusions that are perceived as being universally generalizable.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is a dearth of efforts to understand needs of those from other cultures and to understand how cultural elements impact on needs of victims, and their addressing. The family that is the unit of analysis of ambiguous loss is itself a concept that is culturally dependent, with families in the ‘majority world’ being largely patrilocal, patriarchal (often highly so) and multi-generational. The functions of the family: sexual, economic, reproductive and educational are universal, but are expressed in such radically different ways across societies that it is inevitable that they will impact significantly on the needs that arise when a member of the family is missing. Here, a vision of socially-driven approaches to ambiguous loss therapy have been presented that, although rooted in an external discourse, seeks to be culturally and contextually customized as far as is possible. The goal of presenting a ‘decolonized’ approach is to ensure an awareness of the power relations that drive the dissemination of all such therapeutic discourses.

Foucault pointed out how dominant discourse excludes ‘subjugated knowledges,’ both through burying, hiding or masking them through revisionist histories, and marginalizing or denying space to local, popular and indigenous knowledges. Just as PTSD has displaced indigenous discourses around spirits as an approach to mental health after trauma, there remains a risk that ambiguous loss becomes an orthodoxy that traditional understandings are unable to resist. A discursive approach is a corrective to this, being dependent upon local narratives, and able to access and use “alternative stories that incorporate vital and previously neglected aspects of lived experience” (White & Epston 1990, p. 31). White has claimed that the remaking of identity and relationships that emerge from narrative therapy practice stand within the discourses of culture, and yet are not necessarily culture bound (White, 1997). Discursive approaches privilege inherent notions of identity such as kinship and spirituality rather than reproducing a Western ‘self’ (Besley, 2001).

Trauma is understood through the lens of culture and as such the repeated dreams and other emotional impacts associated with trauma may be seen in traditional societies as evidence of the spirits of the disappeared voicing their disquiet. Because traditional societies are so highly collective, trauma is manifested more communally than in individualistic Western societies (e.g. Igreja, 2003; Eppel, 2002). In contrast to cathartic approaches to trauma, as seen in PTSD therapies such as Narrative Exposure Therapy, in traditional contexts there is evidence that the trauma of conflict is best addressed non-narratively through ritual process and ‘starting afresh’, consciously avoiding the recalling of traumatic experience (Marratto, 1996). The individualism that drives modern Western approaches to violence and trauma, as seen in human rights and mental health approaches, represents an epistemology alien to many cultures. Discursive and post-structural perspectives challenge this with an understanding of the individual as a subject constructed by environment and social interaction, which resonates with a wide range of traditional beliefs globally. Therapeutically this demands an approach rooted in local idioms of distress, rather than DSM-driven diagnoses, and privileging culturally particular understandings of relationships, spirituality, family or social structure, and so on.

# Community-based therapeutic approaches to ambiguous loss

Therapeutically a discursive approach should address three areas. First, discourse which constructs ambiguity - the language and messages, often from perpetrators, that define someone as disappeared - and the meanings and identities that are constituted by it; second, discourses around meaning and identity that differ between the person affected by ambiguous loss and others in family and community which lead to social and emotional frictions, family conflict and ambivalence; and third, the meanings or stories that affected persons give to the situation in the light of these discourses, which would normally be the goal of a therapist. All three can however be seen to be interlinked in ways that are likely to demand an integrated approach. The goals of an intervention are summarized in this section.

*Molding discourse*: Community-based approaches seek to focus on perceptions in the community of both ambiguity and of persons suffering from ambiguous loss. The process can involve challenging discourses that are informed by a failure to understand the feelings and emotions of those suffering from ambiguous loss, as well as unfounded assumptions such as the death of the disappeared. These active effort to impact the discourse around disappearance and families affected by it privilege the understanding of and empathy for affected families and individuals and the provision of space for affected people to be heard. Very direct approaches can be involved, such as sensitization, through briefing community leaders on what ambiguous loss is and how it is impacting families, and the use of media, such as radio or TV to disseminate information about the impact on the families of the disappeared. Indirect approaches can also be undertaken, such as through the construction of memorials or commemoration events that remember the disappeared, but emphasize that their fate remains unknown: this can challenge perceptions in communities that they should be considered dead. Memorials also support the revision of attachment of families to the disappeared, by creating a physical or social space of memory of the disappeared.

*Empowerment*: A principle reason why discourse is antagonistic to the understandings and well-being of those affected by ambiguous loss is that it is driven by others. Enhancing the agency of affected persons, particularly women and other marginalized groups or of the families of the disappeared as a population, can increase their ability to impact on discourse. In practice, this may require not just intervention around disappearance but a broader, potentially rights-based, approach to tackling social exclusion. Ensuring that affected families and individuals have a voice is a route to increasing the influence they have on circulating discourse and thus the ability they have to shape their own subjectivities. This can initially involve creating spaces where affected persons can best create meanings that are positive for them, as for example in a family association. As shared meanings emerge within groups of those affected, so the solidarity it builds can be turned outwards, to create empowerment in a broader community. An example of this was a group of wives of the disappeared who were meeting as a part of the *Hatey Malo* intervention (ICRC, 2013) in Nepal. At one point a wives’ group left their meeting together to march on the school to demand that the headmaster give their children, as sons and daughters of the disappeared, reduced fees.

The most powerful forms of empowerment involve engaging in active coping processes such as challenging perpetrators and others whose power led to the disappearance, with victims becoming political actors whose activism represents the strongest form of reconstructing subjectivity.

*Addressing frictions between discourses*: The different perspectives of affected families and others, such as neighbors, as well as within families (such as between men and women, or between wives and mothers of the disappeared) create ambivalence and frictions that act as additional stressors. A community-based intervention can seek to bridge the gaps between understandings by creating space for those most affected to confront negative discourse. In one district in Nepal, an association of the families of the disappeared created what it called ‘community harmony discussions’, precisely to collectively address challenges of stigma and exclusion linked to the legacies of conflict-era violence. These echo the extended family groups of network therapy (Speck, 1998).

*Re-authoring stories and identity*: These represent counter-practices to objectifying discourses that offer space for persons to re-author or re-constitute themselves and their relationships, and to promote new forms of subjectivity. Although typically considered something that happens within a therapeutic relationship, such practices can also happen effectively in any space where subjectivity can be reconstructed. A central part of the re-authoring process must be for affected persons to separate their lives and relationships from discourse that is impoverishing. These can also be guided by someone with relevant training who can ‘accompany’ peer groups of affected persons and guide a counselling approach (ICRC, 2013b).

## Towards a community-based practice

None of the above goals is discrete: all are highly interdependent and will ideally be pursued as multi-stranded strategies of a single approach. A community-based intervention around ambiguous loss can be designed on the basis of the above discussion. It will require clinical expertise, but will ideally be led by the families of the disappeared as change agents, in the style of network therapy. A comprehensive intervention is likely to require two distinct components: one, a focus on discourse in the community, and two, the creation of support groups in which affected persons can meet, and that are a site for the creation of counter-discourse, empowerment and a collective counselling approach. A group structure offers the potential for a collective and democratic approach to the entire intervention, with the elements of community outreach designed by group members.

Support groups should be formed on the basis of vulnerability and power relations to ensure the most positive therapeutic space. In many cultures such spaces may be gender exclusive, to ensure that women can construct discourses free from patriarchal constraints; in others ethnicity or social class may be factors to consider. Where power relations in families are flatter, all family members could participate in the same group. The group work can begin with the naming of ambiguity as the problem, and an effort to externalize it. This requires facilitators with a degree of expertise and training: in the Nepal intervention, such accompaniers were selected from among the community, including those from affected families where possible, who can support families not just in the groups but in the community over the long term. Where necessary, accompaniers can also make referrals to other services, including psychiatric, and any government of civil society schemes that could aid families. Within support groups, ambiguous loss is discussed, in terms of the recursive guidelines and of social impacts that need addressing. While the accompanier guides and supports discussion, it should be noted that such groups are not opportunities for the accompanier to *do* therapy as much as to create discursive spaces for interaction between group members to create the meanings and identities that are positive (see also Boss, P. et al. 2003).

Discursive interventions in the community, such as memorialization and commemoration activities or community sensitization or discussion, can be driven and designed by the support groups. Since these will be highly contextually particular, it is inappropriate to prescribe their form. The support group will ideally be a structure that outlives whatever funding and other support exists for the intervention, providing a long-term coping mechanism that can drive change both discursively, and so support the resilience of affected persons.

# Conclusions

Efforts to address the impacts of disappearance on the families of the disappeared have largely failed to consider ambiguous loss as a lens that explicitly addresses how unresolved loss impinges emotionally, psychologically, and socially. Empirical work with families in a range of contexts suggests that addressing relational aspects is at the heart of such interventions, however, therapeutic approaches have begun both to use the ambiguous loss model and to acknowledge that, where professional services are limited, community-based methodologies can be relevant. My goals in this article were to theorize such an approach in terms of Foucauldian understandings of discourse and to discuss the implications for the design and understanding of a community-based therapeutic approach. This approach echoes the recursive therapeutic perspective of ambiguous loss, in which affected persons are embedded in discourses where their subjectivity is constantly being renegotiated in the light of discourse. The roots of an ambiguous loss perspective in narrative therapy were also explored, alongside the indivisible link between discourse and power. Since ambiguous loss puts the construction and reconstruction of meaning and identity at the center of addressing the trauma of unresolved loss, community-based approaches challenge discourses that impoverish families and create spaces where new discourses can emerge that construct meanings and identities to recast both power relations and perceptions of the families. This theoretical framework now demands additional empirical input to test its relevance and utility.

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1. It should be noted that such structures can also heighten negative impacts by creating additional stressors, as for example when families blame a wife of a disappeared man for bringing bad luck in to the home. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Patrilocal* refers to the fact that the majority of the world’s families reside with or close to patrilineal kinsmen (Georgas, 2006), i.e. on marriage a women will typically move into her husband’s family. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Taken from White and Epston’s description of people as ‘problem-saturated’: here the problem is ambiguity (White & Epston, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See however Boss, this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)