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Ambiguous Loss in a Non-Western Context: Families of the Disappeared in Postconflict Nepal

Ambiguous loss has become a standard theory for understanding the impact of situations where the presence of a family member is subject to ambiguity. A number of studies of ambiguous loss have been made in a range of situations of ambiguity, but almost all have been firmly located within a Western cultural context. Here, ambiguous loss is explored in a different cultural context through a study of the families of persons disappeared during Nepal's decade-long Maoist insurgency. Through the use of qualitative research methods, a sample of families (n = 160) of those disappeared during the conflict has been studied to understand the impact of disappearance. The results of this study are compared with the expectations of ambiguous loss theory to test its relevance in the Nepali context.

Disappearance is defined as “the 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, 2006, Article 2). In practice, it is most often a mechanism for states to kill opponents covertly. Disappearances were widespread in Nepal during the

decade-long Maoist insurgency that began in 1996; 3 years after the end of the conflict, more than 1,300 persons remain unaccounted for (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2008). Disappearance leaves families with uncertainty regarding the fate of loved ones, unsure if fathers, husbands, and sons are alive or dead. Interventions to support such families have few theoretical foundations; ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2006) is one of the few that may be relevant. Existing studies on ambiguous loss, however, are largely restricted to a single cultural context, namely, that of Western, and largely North American, families. Here, the impact of disappearance on families in Nepal is studied with a view to empirically testing theories of ambiguous loss, and understanding family boundaries, in a different cultural context and to steer interventions with families of the disappeared in Nepal.

The qualitative study reported here is the first explicit test of the extent to which the ambiguous loss model, largely developed from data taken in a single culture, has relevance for a very different one, with radically different family and social structures. Disappearance is a phenomenon that has become routine in war and political violence. The findings of this study permit culturally sensitive and relevant interventions to be proposed to assist such families. Beyond the context of Nepal, the extended and patriarchal families studied here are similar to those found elsewhere in Asia. This study can provide lessons for the application of ambiguous loss theory in other contexts

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where disappearance occurs and, indeed, in other situations of ambiguous loss.

This paper begins by discussing the existing literature on the impact of disappearance and introduces the ambiguous loss model as a potential descriptor of how disappearance affects families. The cultural context is then introduced, with a brief description of the economic, cultural, and social context of the Nepali families impacted by disappearance; a summary of typical family dynamics; and an overview of the conflict. The methodology of the study is described and themes identified, around which findings are presented. The data are then compared with the ambiguous loss framework as a test of its relevance to families of the disappeared in Nepal. Finally, the implications of these findings for intervention with affected families are discussed, as well as the limitations of this study and potential for further research.

The Impact of Disappearance and the Ambiguous Loss Model

Studies have been carried out on both the general impact of war on civilians and on families of the disappeared in particular, dominated by approaches that privilege investigations of the psychological sequelae of trauma and in particular posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Quirk and Casco (1994), for example, studied families of the disappeared in Central America and found that many of the indicators of PTSD (increased arousal, physiological reactions, and stress symptoms) were elevated in families of the disappeared. There has, however, been a sustained critique of the relevance of trauma-based approaches across cultures (e.g., Mezey & Robbins, 2001; Summerfield, 2004; von Peter, 2008), in favor of the privileging of context, indigenous understandings, and interventions rooted in the affected community. An additional reason to query a trauma-centered approach to disappearance is evidence that the impact of disappearance is very different from that of a single, traumatizing event, with disappearance being of a chronic nature that has emotional, psychological, economic, and social consequences (Blaauw & Lahteenmaki, 2002). The net impact on families and individuals of having a missing relative will be the sum of these effects, subject to the resources of individuals and communities to cope. The ability of individuals to withstand the impact of traumatic events

has been called *resilience*, defined as “good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001, p. 2), and there is a large literature discussing resilience in the face of both conflict and bereavement (e.g., Bonanno, 2004). Any intervention should aim to work to support and promote such resilience, and this is integral to the ambiguous loss approach (Boss, 2006). Other studies have looked at disappearance as an interrupted grieving process: Pérez-Sales, Durán-Pérez, and Herzfeld (2000) noted that a measurable fraction of the relatives of the disappeared had incomplete bereavement processes. Blaauw and Lahteenmaki have reviewed the impact of disappearance across cultures in terms of the inability to mourn and conduct rituals and the resulting psychological and emotional impacts.

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. Ambiguous loss occurs when a family member is psychologically present, but physically absent, as for families of the missing or disappeared in conflict or victims of natural disasters (or when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent, as in cases of Alzheimer’s disease or other chronic illness; e.g., Boss, 2006). Ambiguous loss is an explicitly relational perspective that characterizes the stress as external and ongoing and as such differs from individualized trauma approaches such as that of PTSD.

A range of studies (see Boss, 1977, 2004, 2006) have indicated that situations of ambiguous loss predict symptoms of depression, anxiety, and family conflict. This research base has been used to develop a clinical theory in which the stress of ambiguity is seen to impact mental health and well-being, subject to the resilience of individuals and families. Specifically, the literature reveals the need for closure for families of the disappeared to end the ambiguity of loss, but in many contexts, this is something denied by the families. The ambiguous loss model confronts this perceived need for closure:

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).

This directly contradicts conventional practice with families of the disappeared, where a demand for truth drives advocacy, notably that of the human rights community. An understanding of ambiguous loss can serve as a basis for interventions that offer a way forward for those families who may never receive an answer concerning the fate of their loved one, where the aim of intervention is to strengthen family resilience. The work of Boss, Wieling, Turner, and LaCruz (2003) with families of the victims of the 9/11 attacks in New York City represents an effort to apply ambiguous loss theory to families of the missing.

Culture and ethnicity play a major part in defining family composition and where family boundaries are placed. As a result, cultural factors are a determinant in when ambiguous loss occurs and how it manifests itself. Almost all studies to date on ambiguous loss (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007) have been carried out in a Western culture, largely in the United States, among families who reflect contemporary North American social and cultural norms. There is evidence from work with the diverse population impacted by the 9/11 attacks on New York that the ambiguity of loss is distressing across cultures (Boss, 2006; Boss et al., 2003), but commonalities concerning its impact have been little tested. A study of Sudanese refugee children separated from parents (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, & Rana, 2008) found evidence of the importance of peer support and of Boss’ concept of “tempering mastery” (Boss, 2006, pp. 100–102; see below).

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

- Finding meaning: The loss of a loved one deprives life of meaning, and finding meaning is difficult when the loss is ambiguous. Meaning is found relationally and constructed through social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).
- Tempering mastery: Mastery is the ability to control one’s life and agency (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) and is perceived in the West as something that moderates stress (Pearlin, 1995). Because families of the disappeared

have no control over the ambiguity of their loss, seeking mastery can increase helplessness (Boss, 2006). Thus, Boss posited 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.

- Reconstructing identity: Ambiguous loss threatens the identity of family members, for example:

[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)

- Normalizing ambivalence: Ambiguity is related to cognition, which 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 the belief that he or she will return.
- 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 loved ones, but not denying their loss, that is, living with “both/and” rather than feeling torn between “hope and doubt.”
- Discovering hope: The aim of the above therapeutic guidelines is to discover hope. 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.

This study aims to explore each of these guidelines in the context of the families of the disappeared in Nepal.

The Cultural Context

Nepal is the poorest country in Asia, with income per capita barely over \$400 per year, with most people working in subsistence agriculture and 30% of the population living on less than \$1 per day (UN Development Program, 2004). Nepal’s Maoist insurgency was driven by a legacy of centuries of feudalism in a Hindu kingdom built on a codified framework of social and economic

exclusion that marginalized indigenous people, lower castes, and women. Nepal is a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities, with the indigenous and lower castes subject to the hegemonic influence of high caste Hindu culture, leading in recent decades to the "Hinduization" of non-Hindu groups (e.g., Allen, 1997). A majority of the families in this study are from indigenous ethnic groups or lower castes and mix their traditional culture and high caste Hindu practices, including in approaches to family life. The joint or extended family is the building block of all cultures in Nepal, with several generations sharing a home.

Marriage largely remains within ethnicity and caste, with partners traditionally chosen by parents. "Love marriage," however, is becoming more common in urban areas and among those influenced by Maoist ideology. The position of women in Nepal is subservient in most ethnicities, with women marrying to gain access to property and social acceptance (Axinn, 1992) and wives living with their husband's family. A woman's status in the family is highly visible: In most cultures, married women wear bangles and they wear red powder (*sindhur*) in the hair. The joint family that is the building block of Nepali society can offer great support, economically and emotionally; however, the family can also become the greatest single stressor if individuals are alienated from it. Within traditional families, there are power relationships, dominated by older men and with the younger wives at the bottom of the hierarchy, expected to be subservient to their mother-in-law. Young women are dependent for their status within the family on their husband or on their children, notably boys. Women's position in Hindu society is highly codified, with a place for women as daughters and wives, but with widowhood traditionally seen as a "social death" (Chakravarti, 2006) among higher castes. A widow's status is made visible as a woman's bangles are destroyed and the *sindhur* removed. Although, when a husband dies in some indigenous groups, it is traditional for a woman to marry her husband's younger brother, in Hindu tradition, remarriage brings shame to the family and is thus highly stigmatized.

The families of the disappeared over-represent the indigenous, lower castes, and the poor as a result of victimization of the marginalized during the conflict. The overall level of education of families of the disappeared is

low, with the majority being illiterate. Data are reported here from both men and women, but as a result of the disempowerment of women in most Nepali cultures and the fact that most of the disappeared are men, a focus of the analysis is made on the experience of women following disappearance of men folk.

In Nepal, as in Asia generally, conceptions of the self are more collective and social than in the West (e.g., Kagitçibasi, 1980). This arises at least partly from the traditional obligations to follow well-defined roles within family and community that restrict the range of choices available in most Nepali communities. Nepali thinking distinguishes between the *man* (heart-mind), associated with emotional response, and *dimaag* (brain-mind), associated with thought (Kohrt & Harper, 2008). A dysfunction of the *man* is not stigmatized, whereas a problem with *dimaag* indicates that someone is irrational or crazy and brings shame and loss of status to both individual and family. A psychosocial intervention will address the *man* and a psychiatric one the *dimaag*. The majority of the population, however, has no access to any mental health facility. Kohrt and Harper reported just one clinical psychologist per 4.5 million population. Most Nepalis rely on traditional healers who are the most accessible of therapists (Kohrt & Harper) and work according to local spiritual traditions.

The Conflict

In 1996, a small party from among Nepal's fractious Marxist left, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), declared a "People's War" against the newly democratic regime, propounding a politics that explicitly encompassed an end to endemic exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, caste, and gender. As a result, a significant fraction of their cadres were drawn from marginalized groups, notably the indigenous (Hangen, 2008). The insurgency grew rapidly from its initial base in the hills of the impoverished mid-west with the Maoists ultimately controlling most rural areas, perhaps 85% of the state's territory. Disappearances occurred from the start of the conflict, and between 2000 and 2003, Nepal was responsible for a greater number of cases of disappearance reported to the UN's Working Group on Enforced Disappearances than any other state (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The conflict came to an end in April 2006, with a "People's Movement" uniting the Maoists and

the constitutional parties against a king who had seized absolute power. As part of an ongoing peace process, the monarchy has been abolished and, following elections, the Maoists are now the largest party in a constituent assembly. The conflict has left a legacy of some 15,000 dead (Informal Sector Service Centre, 2007) and more than 1,300 unaccounted for (ICRC, 2008). Although disappearances were also perpetrated by the Maoists, the vast majority were the responsibility of the forces of the state. In addition to the elimination of those perceived to be part of the Maoist threat, disappearance and presumed extrajudicial execution in rural areas were driven by efforts to maintain the traditional power structures of caste, class, and ethnicity that underlay the conflict.

METHOD

A qualitative study was carried out of families of the disappeared through the use of ethnographic research methods, namely, semistructured interviews and focus groups. The research was conducted in collaboration with associations of families of the disappeared, with whom the researcher had been working for 2 years prior to this study being carried out. The family associations are groups of families of the disappeared who have come together to support each other and advocate for the authorities to address needs arising from disappearance. Challenges to the research lay in establishing the trust of families, gaining not just physical access but “emotional access” (Bowd, 2008) and ensuring that consent was informed. The research design was developed in collaboration with family associations (“participatory research design”; Robins, 2010) and led to the study having the aim of advocating with the authorities to address needs of families. The long-term contact of the researcher with the family associations served to build trust and permit the associations to mediate the relationship with families being met for the study. The associations helped to address potential issues arising from the asymmetric power relation between a foreign researcher and highly disempowered people in a deferential society.

The semistructured questionnaire that was the dominant research instrument was prepared in collaboration with the family associations following a series of joint interviews with families. The engagement with family associations and, in particular, the advocacy aim of the research

helped build an ethical relationship between the researcher and the researched. Informed consent could be given because this approach was understood and supported by families. The end of the conflict and the emergence of the Maoists as the largest party in Parliament largely eliminated security risks faced by families linked to the insurgency. Care had to be taken, however, when approaching families of those disappeared by Maoists, and, in such cases, the support of local family associations in arranging interviews outside the community was invaluable.

Sampling

The sampling frame used for this study was a list drawn up by the ICRC of 1,227 persons missing as a result of the conflict (ICRC, 2008). A selection of 10 of Nepal’s 75 districts was made that enabled the worst affected districts to be included, which also ensured a spread by region, geography (plains, hills, and mountains), ethnicity (indigenous, high caste, etc.), and alleged perpetrator (state and Maoist). These 10 districts accounted for 43% of those on the ICRC list. Within these districts, a random selection was made from the ICRC list and selected families visited in their homes. The total number of families interviewed ($n = 86$) represented 7.0% of all victims on the ICRC list. Of these, 75% were from marginalized communities (i.e., the indigenous, lower castes, or otherwise excluded); 62% of the principal interviewees were women, whereas 92% of the disappeared were men. Disappearances had occurred between 2 and 12 years prior to the research, with the average time passed being slightly over 5 years, with 59% missing for more than 5 years. Thirty-three percent of principal interviewees were the wife of the disappeared, 20% the brother or sister, 16% the son or daughter, and 13% the mother. As reported by families, 83% of disappearances were state perpetrated, 15% Maoist perpetrated, and, in the remainder of cases, the perpetrator was unknown. In a majority of the interviews, a representative of the family association was present.

The concerned family associations selected focus group participants independently of those that were interviewed. Peer groups were constructed on the basis of shared ethnicity, relationship to the missing person, or perpetrator of disappearance (i.e., state or Maoist), as reported

by the family. A group of individuals ($n = 74$) representing 6.0% of those on the ICRC list was met in a total of 10 focus group discussions.

Implementation

Multiple research methods were used in the study to permit triangulation:

- **Semistructured interviews:** The interview followed a format prepared with the family associations and addressing the themes jointly identified. A typical interview lasted around 90 minutes, beginning with a general discussion of family circumstances and an open question about priorities in terms of needs arising from the disappearance. Topics included the attitude about the fate of the missing person, including any rituals made for them; attitudes about retrieving remains; views of identity of family members; emotional and psychosocial issues, including those in the family and community; and coping and support mechanisms, within and beyond the family.
- **Focus group discussions:** The questionnaire used for the semistructured interview formed a basis for discussion, but this was led by the priorities of the group, in terms of their perceived needs.

Data collection took place over a 4-month period some 2 years after the end of armed conflict. In most cases, the entire family was met as a group, with the result that all members of the family would have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, much as in a focus group. This not only offers support during what might be an upsetting discussion but also gives an insight into family dynamics. Traditional hierarchies would often mean that a certain member of the family (typically the father or the eldest son) would be presented as the principal interviewee, although in some cases, a woman had become the head of household since the disappearance. Because wives were most likely to be impacted by social stigma, when possible, they were spoken to in private or in peer groups with other wives. Focus groups, more than family interviews, most permitted family members, and women in particular, to be open about their feelings because they created an atmosphere of trust among participants.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted by the researcher with research assistants drawn

from the appropriate communities to interpret in Nepali as well as the regional Tharu and Maithili languages. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcriptions made by the research assistant present at each particular interview. Words that were difficult to translate (including *man* and *dimaag*, as well as many cultural concepts for which English terms are absent) were included in Nepali transliteration. Transcriptions were checked against field notes.

The resulting transcriptions, together with field notes, constitute the data to be analyzed. Analysis was inductive, driven by the themes identified during the development of the research design with the family associations and confirmed during data collection (Becker & Geer, 1960). Content analysis proceeded through an iterative process of identifying categories within those themes, teasing out commonalities between cases and coding them appropriately, until each category saturates. This was done independently of any theoretical assumption, and the results of this process were compared with the expectations of the ambiguous loss model. The coded data were analyzed statistically to quantify the population of identified categories, and these led to the quantitative statements made here. Representative quotations from the recorded data are provided to demonstrate the theme and category under discussion in an effort to confirm descriptive validity. Some 6 months after data collection was complete, the findings of the study were shared with the family associations that had been involved in defining the methodology and with focus groups of family members who had been met during the study ("member checking"; Cresswell & Miller, 2000). All those consulted confirmed that they believed the report accurately represented their needs and the problems faced by families of the disappeared, confirming interpretive validity. Family associations continue to use the published report of this study as a basis for advocacy with the authorities.

FINDINGS

Findings will be discussed in terms of the themes that emerged in the data collection process.

The Impact of Loss

Families are living not just with the ambiguity of their loss but with the concrete absence of loved

ones. Family priorities were the need for truth about their missing loved one and for economic support, the latter reflecting endemic poverty and the economic impact of the disappearance of a breadwinner. The leader of one family association reported the addressing of basic needs as a prerequisite for living with ambiguity as “financial support would reduce the stress of providing children’s food and schooling which could encourage living positively, even with the ambiguity of a missing husband.” The impact of loss was also expressed in a direct emotional way, with women in particular expressing their grief at the loss of husbands and sons:

We miss them all the time, wishing that if he was here today the day would be totally different. I would be playing with his babies and he would be working in the field and my daughter in law would be working in the house etc. The more you work the more you think about them. We will be missing our kids until we die (Mother of missing man, Bardiya).

Ambiguity and Closure

Twenty percent of families believed the disappeared to be dead, whereas 80% expressed ambiguity about the fate of the disappeared:

I am in a dual state of mind regarding whether she is dead or alive. If the door makes a noise at night, the children think that their mother might have come back. The children and I could not sleep properly till midnight because of the pain. The children are still hopeful that their mother will come back (Focus Group participant, Kathmandu).

Truth was seen as leading to closure and perceived as the principal way to address emotional and psychological needs and to satisfy cultural demands for the rituals of death:

We need detailed information on what really happened to him. We want to know when and where he was killed so that we can perform our rituals. . . . In any case, if he is no more, we want confirmation that he is dead. We should not be kept in doubt as to whether or not he will come back. They must show us where the corpse was buried (Brother of missing man, Gorkha).

Families compared the trauma of the ambiguity with which they have been living, often for many years, to a long and slow torture.

They found themselves torn between wanting to believe their loved ones are alive and facing the fact that after so long they are not coming back. The rituals of death, notably burning or burial of the body, hugely important to ensure the passing of the soul of the dead, had been denied to them. In some of the cultures of Nepal, a substitute for the body such as a grass effigy can be used, but this is only possible where death is confirmed. For the disappeared, the ambiguity of death prevented any ritual:

This [the body] serves as proof that he is dead. Therefore, we need the dead body, even a bone can convince us that he is no longer alive. We also have to perform our rituals on the basis of it. We need a sign of proof of his death (Brother of missing man, Gorkha).

Almost all families expressed the lack of closure as the most important impact of disappearance, using the absolute to describe their needs (truth and proof) in contrast to the ambiguity of their present situation (hope and doubt).

Symptoms and Trauma

The disappearance gave rise to intrusive and repeated thoughts and dreams about the missing person, disturbed sleep, and sudden feelings of anxiety: 55% of those met described such symptoms:

We remember our missing folk fifty to a hundred times per day. This is a very intense pain. . . . In my dreams I saw the army bringing my brother home and sometimes I saw him shot dead by the army (Brother of missing man, Kathmandu).

One woman described a “shock of fear,” a state of alert or hypervigilance that has also been reported as a general consequence of trauma (e.g., Schein, Spitz, Muskin, & Burlingame, 2006). Generalized anxiety disorder was the most common phenomenon encountered, together with expression of extreme pain. These impacts are perceived as being problems with the *man* (heart-mind). The phenomena of intrusion, repeated thoughts, and anxiety have been reported elsewhere as a result of ambiguous loss (Boss et al., 2003; Campbell & Demi, 2000).

Of those met, 36%, largely women, talked of how their mental capacity has been impaired as a result of the disappearance:

When I try to do something I forget what I have to do; I forget so many things I have to do on daily basis. If I am working and talking with people then I forget about the pain but the rest of the time it's the same (Wife of missing man, Dhading).

These subjects are discussing an impact on what they would call the *dimaag* (brain-mind), evidence that what is perceived as mental illness by Nepalis can be induced by disappearance; that is, functional impairment is ascribed to the disappearance itself. Such impacts are predicted by the ambiguous loss model (see below) and in these data appear to be chronic; 94% said that emotional and mental problems were not improving with time. In three cases, a family member was identified as suffering from a pathology that was wholly or largely incapacitating, perhaps consistent with clinical depression. Only one had been able to access any treatment owing to the lack of facilities. Although no others showed a significant degree of disability, many showed significant distress.

Twenty-seven percent of family members, more than three-quarters women, complained of chronic physical symptoms that they ascribed to the disappearance, most often as a result of the constant tension and anxiety. This was largely understood by those suffering as somatic:

This is the never-ending pain. We have undergone mental pain due to this problem and the mental pain has created other physical pains (Focus group participant, Kathmandu).

One can compare the dominant psychological phenomena mentioned by families with the standard definition of PTSD from *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2000):

- Reexperiencing the event, intrusion: Because loss is a situation and not an *event*, this is not directly relevant. Family members had repeated intrusive thoughts about the missing person (as discussed in Campbell & Demi, 2000).
- Emotional numbing and detachment, avoidance: The vast majority of families showed

determination to “tell the story” of the disappearance and its impact, in direct contradiction of expectations of amnesia. Detachment was actively resisted by the majority, who desperately sought contact with others in their position, demonstrating the need for relational intervention.

- Hypervigilance and increased arousal: This was seen in many family members, including sleep problems, anger, concentration issues, and exaggerated startle response.

In summary, the psychological impact of disappearance failed to coincide with a diagnosis of PTSD, presenting itself as a set of symptoms that overlapped, but were clearly distinct. Although PTSD is linked to a specific *event* of trauma, the anxiety expressed by families was about the missing person, rather than the event of his disappearance. Ambiguous loss appears to be a better framework to approach intervention, and this will be explored here.

Family and Community Issues

The joint family can offer great support, but it can also become the greatest single stressor if individuals are alienated from it. Younger women are dependent on their husband for their status within the family, and so the greatest problems are seen when younger women's husbands are disappeared. In many cases, where a woman has no children, she will indeed leave and remarry, despite the associated stigma of remarriage as a betrayal of both the family and her husband. As a result, the wife of a son who is missing will often be perceived as seeking an opportunity to elope with another man. This often leads to constraints on the wife's movements and stigmatization: “My in-laws call me very bad things such as prostitute, witch, widow, etc. in front of my children when they see me around” (Focus group participant, Bardiya). Thus, a wife may be trapped within a family that resents her presence, but does not want her to leave because of the social stigma that would result. Economically, a woman may be perceived as bringing nothing to the family, but being another mouth to feed, who must earn her living:

They treat me like the servant of the house. They give me food only if I work in their house from morning to evening. Everybody discriminates against the woman who doesn't have a husband.

... I am beaten by my in-laws whenever I fight for my rights (Focus group participant, Bardiya).

The result of this web of obligation and resentment can often be an environment of extreme difficulty for such women, where leaving the joint family would require leaving her children behind. Of wives of the disappeared, 32% reported that they had problems in the family, and 12.5% of these had extreme problems.

Within communities, the conflict period was extremely difficult for families perceived to be linked to the Maoists, who were often ostracized. Of those families that were involved politically with the Maoist party, 72% suffered problems with the community at some point, including receiving threats or being displaced from their homes. The ambiguity over a woman's marital status, her persistence in wearing the symbols of marriage, and the impression that the wives of the disappeared are somehow predatory in their search for a new husband also led to problems for wives of the disappeared in the community: "They ask me why I still wear the symbols of marriage when he is no longer alive, but I still have some hope because I haven't seen his body, and neither have they" (Wife of missing man, Bardiya). Eighteen percent of all women interviewed and 28% of all wives of the disappeared said that they had problems in their community. The inability to perform the last rites led to some families being stigmatized by communities because of their perceived failure to follow tradition; although neighbors assumed the disappeared to be dead, the family was unable to.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS IN FAMILIES OF THE DISAPPEARED IN NEPAL

Here, the data of the study are compared with the ambiguous loss model. The six recursive guidelines defined by Boss (2006, see above) will be examined in the light of the data to test their relevance for families of the disappeared in Nepal.

Finding Meaning

Much of the need for an answer concerning the disappeared appears to be an attempt to give meaning to the ambiguity of loss. Families sought not just an answer, but an *explanation* of what happened to their loved one:

We need detailed information. On what date, at what time and where he was killed. ... We want to know whether he was killed by being thrown into the river or pushed from a cliff or if he was denied food and left to die (Brother of missing man, Gorkha).

More than this, families wanted to know *why* their relative was taken: "We don't have any evidence to prove that he was killed even if he was. Even if he was killed, we have to be told who killed him and why" (Father of missing man, Dhanusa).

That meaning constructed relationally was visible in the coping mechanisms that families used to sustain resilience. Families live in close communities, but many neighbors had no understanding of the challenges created by disappearance and were often responsible for stigmatizing victims. This emphasizes the difference between disappearance, where families are often isolated in their communities, and natural disasters, such as a tsunami, where the large numbers missing led to a shared collective meaning given to the event that sustained the resilience of survivors. The most apparent support mechanism for families was through peers, that is, other families of the disappeared:

Sharing the pain with others is medicine for their heart and mind. ... They won't feel "I am the only one" (Son of missing man, Bardiya).

Others whose husbands are still with them will never understand our problems, but the families of the missing, they understand (Wife of missing man, Dhading).

Constructing meaning is best achieved through talking with others in the same position. Wives of the disappeared found most value in talking with other wives in the same position. Rather few valued talking *within* the family because many challenges faced are social problems within the family, with negative meanings having been constructed within the home that blame or stigmatize wives. This emphasizes that the type of social space in which meaning is constructed is crucial and reveals the value of associations 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 (Focus group participant, Kathmandu).

The positive impact of such contact is consistent with the understanding that through such interaction victims develop resilience, echoing reports of families of the 9/11 victims (Boss, 2006). One notable difference from the New York City experience is the meeting in peer groups, for example, wives with wives, rather than in family groups. This reflects the hierarchies that exist within the Nepali family, as opposed to the flatter Western nuclear family.

Another common and effective coping mechanism was political engagement. The healing impact of political activity for victims of state terror has been reported elsewhere (Hollander, 1997). Political activity brings family members into contact with others who share the beliefs of their loved one and who appreciate the family's sacrifice, allowing positive meaning to be constructed:

[The Maoist Party] helps us a lot, and to fulfill the dreams of our husbands we are more involved in the Party. We work together and we talk about each other, that definitely helps a lot (Wife of disappeared Maoist activist, Kathmandu).

This is an example of what has been called "active" coping (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003), where those affected use purposive coping strategies that directly challenge those responsible for their victimhood.

Some families consulted traditional healers who were able to tell families if someone was dead or alive, and in some cases, show images of their loved ones through supernatural means. In cases where families were told by healers that the disappeared were dead, however, they largely chose not to believe them but to dismiss this information and stop visiting the healer. Many interpreted repeated dreams of the disappeared as evidence that the missing person was still alive and that his spirit was communicating:

I dreamt him once. I felt him talking to me. He was telling me he stays wherever he works. I

haven't been troubled by his spirit. Our traditional god troubles us if something goes wrong with a family member but it hasn't done anything so far. That makes us believe he is still alive (Mother of missing Tharu boy, Bardiya).

The spirit world and dreams, such as the fantasies of contact with the disappeared reported in other contexts (Boss, 2006), can very powerfully influence the meaning given to disappearance. Such meanings confront ambiguity in a way welcomed by families, because they apparently prove that the disappeared are not dead, but such thinking is unlikely to be positive in the long term as long as the disappeared do not return.

Tempering Mastery

For the families of the disappeared in Nepal, the very concept of mastery is an alien one. Families are largely poor and disempowered and have little control over most aspects of their lives. Disappearance is another example of the unchecked power that the authorities and local elites have over ordinary people. Women, in particular, in the communities most affected, control few aspects of their lives. The fact that the wealthy and educated have greater mastery than the poor and disempowered does, however, offer an opportunity to use the data to test the hypothesis of tempering mastery as being conducive to well-being.

During this research, interviews were made with two women from very different social classes, living in very different circumstances. In one case, following her husband's disappearance while she was pregnant, a rural woman had spent 7 months in a Maoist labor camp and had seen a son die while detained. On her release, she had been forced to leave her village and her family lands, to live alone in the local town, where she was dependent upon precarious work as a casual laborer to feed her remaining children. Despite appearing to be highly vulnerable, she showed great resilience. A few days later, a middle class woman, the wife of a government servant whose son was missing, was interviewed in a nearby town. Throughout our conversation she wept and bemoaned her situation. Even though she had no economic challenges and remained with her family and community, she was clearly unable to cope. One interpretation of this is to understand the mastery each was accustomed to. The second woman had rarely been in a situation

where she had so little control and so suffered as a result, whereas the first had never had control over her life and so was able to cope with both the ambiguity of her loss and her extreme circumstances. This anecdote illustrates that some of the impacts of ambiguous loss may be lessened in highly disempowered communities, compared with those in the West; yet, such disempowerment is also typically associated with extreme economic and social problems that can also reduce resilience. Although too little mastery and being “passive or fatalistic” (Boss, 2006, p. 104) is negative, in many of the cases met in Nepal, the meeting of basic needs alone demands action. As a result, even the most disempowered are forced to act just to feed themselves and their families. In summary, tempering mastery is perhaps less of an issue among the families in Nepal than has been seen in Western contexts. The empowering of women is crucial to the addressing of issues arising from disappearance, notably in the family and community, and thus more of a priority than tempering the little mastery many have.

A number of women were met from poor and marginalized communities who had made the decision to believe that their disappeared husbands were dead and move on with their lives in what appears to be a conscious mastery of ambiguity. This represents an alternative strategy to tempering mastery, to make a decision to believe something, even in the absence of any evidence, that removes ambiguity.

Reconstructing Identity

Symptoms such as indecision and lack of concentration were widely reported (see above), with a greater incidence among women, who are the most affected by identity confusion. In any context, ambiguous loss provokes anxiety about the roles of those left behind (Carroll et al., 2007), but in the cultures of Nepal, the very strict understandings of an individual’s place in the family and community provoke greater challenges. The problems seen are not just psychological and emotional but deeply social in nature. Nepali societies define women’s roles narrowly, notably as dutiful daughter, faithful wife, or mourning widow, and the wives of the disappeared confound these categories by being without their husbands but continuing to wear the visible signs of marriage.

Identity becomes a problem psychologically because it is a relational concept, defined through social interaction. The greatest problems arise when a woman’s view of her identity conflicts with that of the family or community, which considers her a widow who must behave and dress as such, but where the wife is unable to admit the death of her husband as long as there is no evidence for it. Such women are often considered sexually available because they do not dress or behave as widows. In one case, a woman’s father-in-law made sexual advances, proposing she become his second wife, an extreme confusion of identity.

Because a wife’s connection to a family is defined through her husband, ambiguity about a disappeared man creates ambiguity about the wife’s relationship to the family. Such a woman will usually continue to live with the joint family, but her connection to it is poorly defined. The “intentional reconstruction” (Boss, 2006, p. 120) of roles and boundaries required to overcome such ambiguity within families cannot be done on the terms of the wives of the disappeared, because of power relations within families. The dependence of such issues on culture is made clear by the positive reaction of those families that have rejected tradition in favor of an approach derived from Maoist ideology where women have their own identity and status. As a result, remarriage is not stigmatized, and the position of women is less impacted by a husband’s disappearance. For most wives of the disappeared, the reconstruction of identity takes place largely outside the family, through contacts with other wives of the disappeared, using narrative methods, analogous to those of family therapy:

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).

Yes, we do share our problems with those with the same problems but we never share with those who have a husband. We never share our problems with our elders or relatives because we don’t want to give them pain and trouble, we only share with friends. The main thing is that the one who is suffering, only they can feel it (Wife of missing man, Kathmandu).

Talking builds on traditions of sharing and storytelling among women in many communities and aids in (re)constructing identity. This emphasizes the importance of spaces where family member's identities and roles are understood, such as family associations where wives can meet together. Such narrative approaches should ideally occur *within* the family, such that a shared understanding of identity can address the social problems of those most impacted. In Nepal, however, in many communities affected by disappearance, such discussions are not yet occurring. The greatest challenges to addressing identity issues arising from ambiguous loss come from the narrow definition of women's roles and assumptions made about the death of the disappeared. As such, any intervention must ideally go beyond the impacted family and also address the preconceptions of the community.

Many of those affected have seized on the identity of "victim" as one most relevant to them, not least because they see it as a potential route to redress and compensation. Such an identity, however, carries with it an implication of passivity and need that reinforces traditional disempowerment. An important component of any reconstruction of identity is to see such categories transcended in favor of empowerment and solidarity that can lead to active coping, as has begun through the family associations.

Normalizing Ambivalence

Because ambiguity exists over both the fate of the disappeared and the relationship of the wife to the family, ambivalence can arise both in attitudes toward the disappeared and in the conflicted feelings of family members toward the wife. Symptoms of the stress of ambivalence are depression and anxiety, and these are seen in the families of the disappeared, notably wives. A solution to the ambiguity (and the subsequent ambivalence) is invariably seen as being an "answer," something that would bring closure and confirm a woman's identity as wife or widow. During this study, asking families whether they could move on with their lives without an answer was angrily rejected, even though many were doing exactly this, revealing that ambiguity and heightened ambivalence need not be inherently problematic. Any attempt to explicitly broaden their focus from the search for an answer was perceived as dishonoring the

memory of their loved ones and yielding to perpetrators. Experience in Nepal (where some have been missing for 12 years) and elsewhere, however, indicates that rather few families will ever receive a satisfactory answer concerning the fate of their loved ones. For most families, it is a fact that "closure is a myth" (Boss, 2004, p. 560). This then raises the question, if closure will never come, what should families do? The approach of the ambiguous loss model is to seek meaning despite the absence of information and ongoing ambiguity and find ways to live well despite not knowing (Boss, 2007). Normalizing ambiguity and the resulting ambivalence primarily means acknowledging it (Boss, 2006). Resilience comes from recognizing ambivalent feelings and managing them. Boss described this as letting go of the idea that a loved one is either dead or alive and trying to live with "both/and," that is, with the paradox of both holding on to a sliver of the hope of return, although moving forward with life. For families, this implies accepting that their relationship to the wife of the disappeared, and indeed to the missing person, will remain ambiguous and understanding the conflicted emotions that this generates. In a significant number of families, ambivalence of a family toward the wife of the disappeared was seen, reinforced by the lack of flexibility in the roles traditionally filled in Nepal. Normalizing this ambivalence remains one of the greatest challenges that families face.

Revising Attachment

Revising attachment means learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment. One very clear way to revise attachment was to move "from despair to protest" (Boss, 2006, p. 168). Those families who became political in response to disappearance were forging a new relationship of political solidarity with their loved one, without either denying or accepting his or her loss. A number of families and communities have constructed tributes. Even though few families accepted the death of the disappeared, many were keen to see memorials of a type that typically honor the dead. In one district, a community was erecting a statue of seven young men disappeared by the army at the same time as families maintained they still sought to find them alive. Such tributes are a way both of revising attachment and normalizing the ambivalence that families felt. In a culture where convention

made formal death rituals impossible, such memorials are one of the few ways this can be done. Another example is the demand of families that their loved ones be recognized as “martyrs,” even as denying that death is proven, challenging attachment with a status that continues to value the disappeared highly. This normalizes ambiguity, both honoring the missing and allowing hope for their return to remain. Learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment has a significant social element. Given community perceptions of the death of the disappeared, in the highly relational world of the Nepali village, attachment will be impacted by community attitudes.

It has been suggested that the somatic symptoms many wives display, although involuntary, may represent a continued connection to the disappeared:

Sickness . . . related to political violence represents a refusal to break ties with the person who was killed or disappeared. . . . Such refusal circumvents the goals of disappearance or death, which is to wipe out a person’s existence. The women thus embody the acts perpetrated against their husbands (Green, 1993, p. 117, discussing widows of Guatemala’s *violencia*).

The body is seen as demonstration of a continued attachment to the disappeared and revising attachment as the solution to ill-health. Somaticism may also be a way for women, whose pain is poorly understood, to manifest the impact of disappearance in a way that renders their suffering socially meaningful. A phenomenon that emphasized this approach in Nepal was where women had acknowledged that their husband was likely dead, but persisted in wearing the symbols of marriage as a protest with two aims: one to establish their right in the community to wear such symbols as long as death was not proved and another to demonstrate to the authorities that they were still awaiting an answer. This appears to be a way for women to reclaim the symbols that most demonstrate their need for closure from being used against them: a move from despair to protest using symbols of attachment to the disappeared.

Discovering Hope

Hope, like almost all aspirations in Nepali society, is relational. Families of the disappeared expressed hopes beyond their missing loved

one. They talked of hopes for their children and their wider families and hopes for continued peace. Indeed, this could serve as a definition of resilience for the families, the ability to have and pursue realistic hopes for the future despite the ambiguity of their loss.

The families of the disappeared in Nepal used the word hope most often to refer to the return of the disappeared. Although most had little hope, 80% had some in that they did not believe their loved one was dead. Therapeutically, the goal would appear to be not to disabuse families of such hope, however unrealistic, but to ensure that they are also sustained by other hopes. Because of the extreme poverty and hardship many live in, families expressed hopes that their children would be well fed and would be able to study, often accompanied by demands for compensation or relief payments. The greatest barrier to realistic hopes was an obsession with closure, with searching for the disappeared above all else. A number of families or individuals had been unable to create goals that went beyond the disappearance, and for some, their lives revolved entirely around it, with no route to new hopes. A minority took a negative approach to their future, seeking revenge against perpetrators rather than pursuing their hopes. Positive hopes were expressed through a desire of most for justice, implying a process that can serve to sanction the suffering of families, help families deal with the loss, and potentially deliver at least a partial truth. Families in Nepal are attempting to create rituals and tributes where they are unable to perform those expected by tradition (see above). Boss (2006) talked of how helpful such rituals, derived from tradition but improvised in the unique circumstances, were for families of 9/11 victims. Such rituals, relying on symbols in the absence of a body, can be crucial in helping people find hope again.

DISCUSSION

The ambiguous loss model represents the most complete framework for understanding the impact of disappearance on families and formulating appropriate interventions. This study has used qualitative research methods to understand the relevance of ambiguous loss to families of the disappeared in Nepal, constituting one of the first studies of ambiguous loss outside the rich industrialized nations of the West. In addition to Nepalis having a different conception of the self

from that seen in Western cultures, all aspects of the impact of disappearance (even those apparently most personal) have a social component in the Nepali context of greater importance than in the West. Because the understanding of disappearance is constructed socially within family and community, its impact must be understood in the same terms and interventions initiated at the multiple levels of individual, family, and community.

Ambiguous loss appears to be generally applicable to Nepali families of the disappeared. As in other contexts, although an individualized PTSD approach has relevance for some of the impacts of disappearance, ambiguous loss appears to better explain its global consequences. The need to find meaning and reconstruct identity has been found to be directly relevant to the challenges faced by families of the disappeared in Nepal. In addition to symptoms of identity confusion, conflicts between social and individual understandings of meaning and identity were seen to be a dominant source of stress. This study suggests that meaning and identity can best be found through *peer* meetings where the meaning of peer is culturally dependent. In the West, peers may be family members, but in Nepal, they will usually not be, as a result of power relations within the family. Mastery, and the need to temper it, was seen to be less important in the Nepali context owing to the general disempowerment of affected families, suggesting that interventions should seek to empower victims, particularly women.

Almost all families saw closure, in terms of an answer and the return of human remains, as the principal need resulting from disappearance. Despite their rejection of normalizing the ambiguity with which they are living, many families were in practice doing exactly that. Living with the contradictory demands for a memorial to a missing family member, while maintaining hope for his or her return, shows that families have found ways to revise attachment to the disappeared and live well despite ambiguity. Problems arose where someone's relationship to the family was unclear, notably for wives of the disappeared. This ambiguity led not only to ambivalence but also to hostility and stigmatization.

The experience of ambiguous loss in Nepal differs from that described in studies carried out in the West, most notably because of the relational elements that are emphasized in the joint families and close village communities that

typify Nepali life and the fact that the family is a potentially hostile environment for the disempowered. As a result, those seeking reconstruction of meaning and identity seek support largely outside the family. This can be considered a result of both the structural features of the family (i.e., the extended patrilocal family) and cultural attitudes that define hierarchies within it. Indeed, the structural and the cultural aspects are inextricably linked. The most obvious examples of this are the problems faced by wives of the disappeared within families as a result of their disempowerment, which is a function of their membership in the family being defined through their husband.

Potential Interventions

The value of the ambiguous loss approach and the understanding gained through the analysis carried out here is that modes of intervention flow directly from that analysis. Issues of meaning and identity create the greatest problems, and because these are socially constructed, any intervention must emphasize the relational. The fact that family associations are a dominant coping mechanism both confirms this and serves as a model for building on existing capacities in the concerned communities. The first role of intervention is to respond to the isolation of families and family members through peer support to address issues of meaning and identity. Family associations can aid the creation of a space free of stigma for activities for affected family members, and women in particular, such that they can take time out with peers from the stresses of communities that do not understand their issues. Addressing issues within the family in a context like Nepal requires expert support but is likely to only be feasible when embedded in a strategy that engages the community, most obviously through the family associations that can be trained and mobilized to counsel families and family members over such issues. Stigmatizing behavior can be addressed through the targeting of traditional leaders in communities to address behaviors within both communities and families.

What also emerges from this study is that many individuals and families have been able to live well despite ambiguity by finding locally relevant ways to reconstruct meaning and identity. Those who have coped least well have become fixated with the ambiguity of their loss and with seeking closure. This strongly suggests

that human rights-led interventions with families of the disappeared, which emphasize truth over all other aspects, can be potentially damaging by reinforcing such negative coping.

Limitations and Future Directions

The greatest challenge to a study of this type is ensuring that families and family members can be open and frank about the issues they face, despite hierarchies within families and communities and the stigma many face. The collaborative approach with family associations eased many of these issues but does make the study overly reliant upon the cooperation of those leading the associations, largely men, who may have their own agendas. Perhaps the optimal methodology would be one where families, led by the most vulnerable (i.e., women), would conduct the research themselves. This would then constitute an emancipatory approach that would lead naturally to participatory interventions. The challenges of such a modality, however, are significant. Given this first understanding of ambiguous loss in a non-Western culture, it would now be interesting to attempt to ask a similar research question in other cultures, first, to attempt to confirm the universal relevance of the model and, second, to understand better its cultural dependence.

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