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An Essay for Practitioners

Dealing with Ambiguous Loss

Carolyn Y. Tubbs* and Pauline Boss

For all the disdain that postmodernist philosophy has generated in the family social science field, one of its redeeming qualities has been its work as a catalyst in pushing the field to re-examine the types of research conducted on and theoretical constructs formulated about families. Specifically, the field has begun to explore populations of families once invisible because they did not fit the theoretical norms of the 1950s suburban populations. In addition, the field has been less timid about reconsidering its descriptions and explanations, many times pejorative, of the families whose trajectories or life choices were incongruent with the prevailing theories and explanations of the time.

The study of adult children of MIAs (servicemen missing in action) is exemplary of the postmodern shift toward inquiring about the influences of nonnormative life events on the relational dynamics and life course trajectories of families and their constituent members. Recognizing that children of MIAs can inform research on family resiliency and grief reactions in general, and the grief reactions of children specifically, is an important outcome of this research. However, it is the clinical issues, especially those of ambiguous loss that would be of greatest interest to us as practitioners. Both the study on children of MIAs and sibling relationships in farm transfers provide opportunity for discussion of clinical interventions relevant to ambiguous loss.

Systemic Issues

From a family therapy perspective, while there are obvious differences, some commonalities can be drawn from the situations of loss and change in MIA and farm families. First, general systems theory provides the paradigm for assessing and intervening. Working with the family-of-origin is paramount for understanding the dynamics of a family dealing with loss and change. To prevent negative effects of unresolved loss passing to subsequent generations, it is best to have three generations present for family meetings. Family members who live far away can be involved through speaker telephone. Second, a systemic approach does not negate attending to individual differences in meaning and perception. What the loss or change means to each family member matters as much as their collective meaning. It is those differences in meaning that must be heard and hopefully mediated so that some level of consensus can be reached for all concerned. This includes the old and the young, males and females, brothers and sisters.

Third, those who work with families, as well as those who do research must take macro influences into account. While we may not be anthropologists or economists, we must have a rudimentary knowledge of the larger picture in order to understand what a particular family and its members are experiencing. With the MIA family, we must be aware that international politics are far beyond the family's control. With farm families, macro issues may result from market economics, but even more routinely, from the still widespread prescription for sons more than daughters to become successors in running family farms. In all of these macro-contexts, there is unfairness—the unresolved losses of

missing men due to political tensions between two countries; and unresolved losses for women who have fewer options to become farm managers. Such external influences often determine how a family will interpret and deal with both loss and change. That the meaning of the situation differs between the genders and generations is important in finding a resolution. Family researchers and therapists must take care when individual differences between the old and young, men and women, or brothers and sisters are merged into a common family score. For without these differences, and the conflict that ensues, families as systems are without impetus for change and moving on.

Impact of Time and Timing

Viewing families through the lens of time is implicit to the discussion on systemic influences on loss and change. Systems exist in time, and the family system also exists through time. Generations mark a family's movement through time and continuity over time (Daly, 1996). Assessing families' location in sociopolitical time, as well as the timing of events, are important to conceptualizations of families' concerns and potential interventions. Therefore, practitioners should consider how life course issues affect individuals' and families' understandings of ambiguity, loss, and potential adaptations and vice versa. For MIA families, the developmental issues of individual members and the family as a whole shape their understanding and power to deal with the trauma of their loss, but paradoxically the trauma of a missing father may also influence their development and life course trajectory. Their influences may be positive or negative as we can see in the Campbell and Demi article. From those children of MIAs who grew up well in spite of their loss, we can learn much. Their stories provide lessons and guidelines for all of us as therapists and clients, teachers and students.

Understandably, the resources (psychological and material) available to young children and newly formed families will differ from those of older children and families further along in their life cycle. In addition, the power that one's perception of the loss to influence the family's life course trajectory will differ from one member to another with the assumption that the view of the surviving parent will be most influential. Having a non-depressed mother appears to have been a positive factor in MIA children according to the Campbell and Demi article. In farm families, issues of loss around fairness may be shaped by different rules of fairness from one generation to another.

Just as cultures assume predominant orientations toward time, so do families. Families reference horizons in time (past, present, future) in establishing their attitudes toward conducting the affairs of life (Daly, 1996). Specifically, families oriented to the past emphasize history and tradition; families oriented to the present emphasize current experiences; and future-oriented fam-

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ilies focus on foresight and prediction. Ideally, families, regardless of their dominant orientation, function well when they are able to appropriate all three orientations when needed. However, as evident in both articles, over reliance on one time horizon in addressing loss and life's uncertainties (change) may sabotage the bereavement process. Attempting to keep the past alive is just as detrimental as putting the past completely behind. This dynamic would be true of MIA families, as well as farm families. Divided loyalties between the old and the new, past and future, may fracture relationships generationally, laterally, and between genders. Therefore, again, the practitioner should be attentive to how time defines and shapes loss, as well as adaptation to loss.

Perception of, and therefore adaptation and response to, loss are closely related to timing. Part of the adaptation process entails understanding of self, or identity, at the time of loss. Individuals, and families, develop a "sociological calendar" based on important events and incidents in their personal history, but not necessarily based on standardized temporal units (clock or calendar time). This sociological calendar marks anticipated, current, and completed tasks or phases in the life cycle. As such, it shapes the individual's, or the family's, identity because it bridges who one perceived one self to have been (past), with who one perceives oneself to be (present), and with who one hopes to be (future) (Daly, 1996).

Identity issues then become a critical consideration when working to adapt to ambiguous loss and change. Similar to adopted children, children of MIAs deal with identity issues as they ponder historical linkages to the past and how those linkages will manifest themselves in the future. The issue of reconstructed memories and their credence becomes much more salient without a contemporary reference point (the presence of the absent parent), as well as issues of bewilderment and curiosity about inherited characteristics. Therefore, preoccupation with the missing parent, especially in the adolescent years, is one way of trying to understand one's current behavior (intellectual and personality styles, and physical appearance) and life course trajectory. Practitioners should emphasize psychoeducation about developmental issues in addition to punctuating the latitude that families have in creating their own positive response to loss, even an ambiguous one. More importantly, for both MIA families and farm families, practitioners should not forget the mutual influence of the identity on loss and loss on identity.

Identity not only affects adaptation to loss but also the response. Ambiguous loss can be compounded by ongoing ambiguous responses to the loss. For children of MIAs, one parent may be physically absent but psychologically present, while the grieving parent may be physically present, but psychologically absent. In this form of complicated ambiguous loss, the child enters a forced or self-imposed denial by either joining in the instrumental (breadwinning and household maintenance) and expressive tasks (emotional and practical support to younger siblings) or moving into a functional, self-preservation mode. This would be especially true of eldest children or the oldest child at home at the time of the loss. Helping family members become more physically and psychologically present to one another would encourage the family interactions facilitative of the grief process.

Linking Research and Practice

Researchers who are constrained by small samples should recognize value in qualitative inquiry. Sophisticated theoretical frameworks and complex analyses are not always appropriate. Bigger is not always better. Less is sometimes more. From our perspective, the qualitative assessment of narratives in the last half of the MIA article yields more to guide the clinical practice than does the quantitative part of the study. First, the qualitative data humanized the research. The first author's autobiographical statement identified her sociopolitical location in reference to the research and contextualized the question(s) asked of the data. Second, the qualitative data provided rich detailed concerns and suggestions upon which clinical interventions can be grounded. After all, it was the emergent themes from qualitative research that heavily influenced development of the ambiguous loss framework underlying the interpretation of the article's results.

In the farm family article, the analysis based on justice and fairness is less valuable in guiding the clinician because the issue of gender bias in farm succession is not addressed. Without this discourse, the underlying tension between adult brothers and sisters who could at least hypothetically take over the family farm remains unresolved. Could it be that when a sister acquiesces as her brother takes over their family farm, her compliance is more because of social pressure for male succession than because she thinks the situation is fair? Discourse about individual perceptions and macro-realities are ultimately needed for families to work toward more unified meanings of loss that must precede transitions and change. Such family discussions are needed to precipitate change.

Conclusions

While there are commonalities in these two articles, the ambiguity is far greater and outside the family's control in the MIA situation. Family therapists and educators must keep in mind that it is the ambiguity that is the most difficult challenge for the family and for the individuals in it. From the catastrophic situation of men still missing in action, we can learn from the stories of family members who manage to live well in spite of ambiguous loss. From them, we can also learn how to deal with the more mundane situations of loss and change. Documenting the narratives of families who manage to change and move on in spite of ambiguous loss is needed to guide psychotherapists and educators. We encourage researchers to see value in qualitative inquiry, especially when sample size is small and unique, and when in the end, it will be each family's unique interaction that will determine whether and how change and resolution occur. In such cases, less is more.

Families and family members, (some now researchers themselves) especially those whose life course trajectories are less well known to family social scientists, can teach us about their strengths in dealing with the rhythms of life. Their responses to loss and ambiguity, as well as triumphs and gains, mark the diversity and richness of the human experience.

References

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