

## Foster Children's Expressions of Ambiguous Loss

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*The theory of ambiguous loss is useful in understanding the experiences and challenges of the foster care system. Its indications are illustrated with foster children's perceptions and stories. These include semi-structured interviews with 23 foster children aged 7 to 12 years, and stories provided by 182 foster children, aged 2 years to 10, to the Blacky Pictures. The pervasive presence of ambiguous loss in the stories of these foster children illustrates that many behavioral indicators of cognitive and emotional discomfort in foster children are normative and that our interventions with them and their institutionalized caretakers could be effectively guided by this knowledge.*

The concept of ambiguous loss helps us recognize and understand the unique perceptions, emotions, and behaviors associated with losses that are, frankly, irresolvable. (See Boss, 2004.) Therefore, this concept should be extended to the experiences of all those involved in the foster care system, namely, the members of the birth family, foster family, service agencies, and family law courts. Foster care is rife with circumstances wherein the losses are not clear-cut and final (Lee & Whiting, 2007). There often may be a lack of information involving the circumstances of family members, disagreement regarding family membership, and lack of social validation of the losses. Ambiguous losses in foster care are typically of three types: Family members may be physically present but psychologically absent, physically absent but psychologically present, and in transition. All of these may complicate any one family's case.

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*Physically present but psychologically absent.* When children are removed from their homes it is often because their caregivers were physically present but did not consistently provide love, nurture, and protection. After placement in foster care, the parents and siblings may be physically present during family visitation sessions, but psychologically absent—in the sessions and between them—because of emotional distress and preoccupation with the challenges in their lives (Lee & Lynch, 1998).

*Physically absent but psychologically present.* Family members—parents and children—may no longer be living in the same household, but they remain members of the family, and are influential (Whiting & Lee, 2003). Loyalty conflicts are common.

*Relationships in transition.* Individuals currently may be perceived to be active members of the birth family, the foster family, or both. However, those positions are not permanent. Courts can ultimately reunite or disband birth families and, in the latter case, children may or may not be adopted by their foster families. In many situations the children do not know if they ever again will see the individuals—birth parents, siblings, relatives, and foster parents—who have been removed by order of the court. In addition, many foster placements are made within children's extended families. "Relative placements" or "kinship care" often muddy the boundaries about "who is in and who is out" (Crittenden & Farnfield, 2007).

Overall, ambiguous loss may be an unrecognized challenge for stakeholders in the foster care system. The attendant feelings of confusion, hopelessness, and ambivalence typically impede progress identifying and fulfilling case goals. Moreover, the various parties to a case may not appreciate their own complex reactions to the confusion and ambivalence of each other. Therefore, recognition and appreciation of the role of ambiguous loss may improve the stakeholders' emotional comfort, their decisions regarding which individuals need to be included in case planning, and their understanding of why cases do not proceed in expected ways.

## AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND FOSTER CHILDREN

Although the lens of ambiguous loss may clarify the experiences of all of the members of the foster care system, as a first step we would like the reader to consider the foster children themselves. Many components of ambiguous loss are exhibited by foster children of various ages and these symptoms have serious clinical implications for them and those involved with them.

Our examples of how ambiguous loss may be experienced and manifest in foster children come from transcripts and field notes of semi-structured interviews of 23 foster children, aged seven to 12 years old, wherein they

described their experiences of the foster care process (Whiting & Lee, 2003) and the responses of 182 foster children, aged 2 to 10, to the *Blacky Pictures* (Lee & Whiting, 2006). These pictures depict a puppy in relationship to its family.

According to clinical researchers (Boss, 2004), ambiguous loss leads people to think, feel, and act in very predictable ways:

- “Frozen” (unresolved) grief, including outrage and inability to “move on”
- Confusion, distress and ambivalence
- Uncertainly leading to immobilization
- Blocked coping processes
- Experience of helplessness, and therefore depression, anxiety, and relationship conflicts
- Response with absolutes, namely: denial of change or loss, denial of facts
- Rigidity of family roles (maintaining that the lost person will return as before) and outrage at the lost person being excluded
- Confusion in boundaries and roles (e.g., who the parent figures are)
- Guilt, if hope has been given up
- Refusal to talk about the individuals and the situation

We looked to see if such “symptoms” characterized our two samples of foster children and, of course, they did.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Through open coding we found that the stories of the foster children, from toddlerhood through adolescence, contained or centered on many of the symptoms said to be characteristic of ambiguous loss. We are separating the two samples because they had different tasks. All quotations have been taken from the children's transcripts but we changed everyone's name to preserve anonymity.

### Semistructured Interviews

Although we have placed examples under each of the expected signs, the reader will appreciate that many of them are illustrative of more than one indicator.

“FROZEN” (UNRESOLVED) GRIEF, INCLUDING OUTRAGE AND INABILITY TO “MOVE ON”

Many children described an ongoing sense of loss involving parents, siblings, extended family members, friends, pets, and possessions. For example, Bryan remarked that “I was about to cry when we were talking about my mom . . . I don't think I'm ever going to see her. They said I was going to be seeing her, but . . .” Junius's comments about missing his siblings were typical: “I

don't get to see my brothers and we're all split up . . . yeah, I . . . wish I knew where they were."

Many children expressed anger about being in foster care. Others directed their anger at other children or authority figures. Keith is a good example of both. "Yeah, foster care is just sick! I don't want to hear about it at all. You get taken away from your parents. It ruins your life! Your heart is totally destroyed, and the only thing that is left working in your body is your brain . . . That is why I want out of this foster care right now!" Then he added, "What I want to know is why doesn't the judge keep his promises. He promised me that he would talk to me in person and never did! I wanted to bust the judge!" Krystal also was angry with the judge, but also demonstrated conflicting emotions regarding her mother: "I get angry when I think she could have taken care of me better." In some interviews the anger was directed toward other children. Patrice said, "This girl in my class, she bugs me and I just want to rip her guts out." Chad said children made fun of his "haircut and shoes."

#### CONFUSION, DISTRESS, AND AMBIVALENCE

Nearly every child was confused about one or both of the following: the reasons for being in care ("They said 'hurry, hurry up, get out of the tub.' So we got our clothes on, and my mamma was crying and we was too, so they just rushed us out of the house . . . it was scary but I was just crying") and what would happen in the future. "It is tough for a little kid. You grow up with foster parents, thinking they are your real parents, and once you go back to your real parents, it's like 'what the heck, who are they?'"

#### UNCERTAINLY LEADING TO IMMOBILIZATION

The speculations about the future in these children's stories often were vague or uncertain. When asked whom they would be with or what would happen next in their lives, several just shrugged or said, "I don't know." Some children mentioned that they would see their mothers or fathers again after they were 18, and several mentioned the possibility of adoption. Brian described the painful ambiguity of having one's future left in the hands of others: "You have to keep moving, and moving, and moving, until finally someone keeps you. That kind of sucks." The younger children tended to have less clarity of their future than did the older children.

#### EXPERIENCE OF HELPLESSNESS AND THEREFORE DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS

Often the fears expressed were related to the negative experiences attendant upon being a foster child. David remembered a frightening incident of someone breaking into his house. "I hid in the bedroom, and this guy smashed the door in." Both Junius and Jessie remembered being scared when locked

in a closet. According to Junius, "... my momma didn't get me out." Devin reported being disturbed by "scary movies" and Krystal worried about how her mom was doing.

About half of the children mentioned getting in trouble at home or at school. For example, Brian described both: "Well, I like to read, and I am getting better at it ... I am in special ed because of my behavior ... I am really bad in everything." He further described challenges getting along in foster care placements: "Then I went to [a group home] and [a worker] ... threatened to tie me up with a rope ... and then I left because the people couldn't deal with me. I kept going into the hospital because of my behavior. If I was bad there they would give me a shot in the butt ... and I got one too."

#### RESPONSE WITH ABSOLUTES, NAMELY: DENIAL OF CHANGE OR LOSS, DENIAL OF FACTS

Although many children were explicit about why they were in foster care ("Because Mom's boyfriend beat us." "My momma, she had to go to jail") many denied maltreatment. Brian only described maltreatment in the foster home: "I was always getting yelled at, these people ... [did] drugs and everything ... She threatened to tie me up with a rope, she threw me outside, [and] it was wintertime, freezing cold." Cage resented replacement of his mother with a surrogate: "It wasn't my mama, my real mama." In contrast, other children implied that they no longer felt any sense of loss and were forming new attachments to their foster families: "We had some parents that we could trust [and] ... they care about me." "They're fine ... they are like a family."

#### GUILT, IF HOPE HAS BEEN GIVEN UP

Several children exonerated their parents and took the blame for the break up of their home. Miles thought he had to leave his family "Because I was bad ... we set fires." Although Morris's mother was in jail, he did not think he would see his mother again until he could "fix my behavior."

#### REFUSAL TO TALK ABOUT THE INDIVIDUALS AND THE SITUATION

One child chose not to be interviewed and three children chose not to answer specific questions.

#### Stories to the Blacky Pictures

The Blacky Pictures are very cute, but are meant to be provocative. You can review them at [www.psych.usyd.edu.au/museum](http://www.psych.usyd.edu.au/museum). Although there are 11 Blacky Pictures, we used only four because we expected them to be most sensitive to issues of ambiguous loss. The first shows Mama lying on her side, with pronounced mammary glands, and Blacky in a nursing posture.

The second picture shows Blacky in an angry posture, with teeth bared, clenching Mama's collar. A third picture depicts Mama and Papa in love, holding hands and touching noses, with hearts suspended between them, while Blacky looks on with an angry expression. The fourth picture we used depicts Blacky looking on while Mama and Papa are petting another puppy, ostensibly Blacky's sibling. Blacky is shown from the rear making it impossible to ascertain Blacky's expression. We found prominent indications of ambiguous loss.

"FROZEN" (UNRESOLVED) GRIEF, INCLUDING OUTRAGE AND INABILITY TO "MOVE ON"

None of the pictures explicitly depict sadness, sickness, or death. Nevertheless, the children often expressed themes related to loss or grieving in response to them. "He . . . can't find his mother." Sometimes Mama was said to be permanently gone. For example, one child said that Mama was dead from being "run over." There were other such stories: "She's flipping her over—because she thinks Mama is dead." "His mama run away, I think she killed." Sometimes sadness was ascribed to a lack of nurturing. "Sad, because Mama don't want to play. Just want to sleep." "Blacky's head under Mama and Mama sleeping on it." And, in one case, the sadness was tied to an absent father. "Sad! He wants to go to his house and play with the daddy. He don't want to sleep with the mama." Sometimes Blacky's sadness was associated with feeling abandoned by Mama. ". . . His mama don't want to live with him no more."

The best illustrations of the children's outrage were elicited by the first two pictures. Despite the first picture's pastoral scene—Mama sleeping peacefully and Blacky nursing—Blacky was often described as wanting to fight or bite his mother. "He knocked the mama down . . . because he didn't like the mommy!" "He hates her." The second picture, depicting an angry Blacky chewing up Mama's collar, often tied Blacky's rage to feelings of betrayal, unfairness, and frustration. "He hate mama . . . because she left." "Maybe he mad because mamma don't want to live with him no more." "He don't like his mom. He wants another mom." "Mama hates dogs." "She did something to embarrass him." "Mad . . . 'cause I think his mama gone. I think his mama run away." Several descriptions of the anger were associated with hunger. "He's mad and hungry." "Mad because she ain't milking him no more." "Didn't get enough." "They having a fight because Blacky wants some food. She sleeping."

Many children apparently felt uncomfortable if Blacky were to be angry at Mama. They therefore had the anger displaced upon an inanimate object thing or person. "Tear the collar up—because he can't have things his way." "Biting the collar. Because he found this and he can't find his mother." "Mad at other dog because he took Mama or killed her." "He's mad at another dog—or cat." "Another dog—his brother—hurt him."

## CONFUSION, DISTRESS, AND AMBIVALENCE

Several stories indicated confusion about the children's situation, namely, the family to which the child belonged, who the parents were, and what could be expected of them. "Blacky . . . wish he had a mommy that look like him and Daddy. Look like him to protect him. Then he can visit the other kids but have his mother and father." "His mom and dad trying to trick him about that dog. Thinks it's a real dog but it's a play—foster—dog." "They already have a kid. All of 'em. Made a joke on him."

## UNCERTAINLY LEADING TO IMMOBILIZATION

Some children told stories wherein Blacky was confused and didn't know what to do. For example, given a picture of Blacky looking at the other family members standing together, one child observed "It's like he can't do nothing. Like he's looking at it and he don't know what to do."

EXPERIENCE OF HELPLESSNESS AND THEREFORE DEPRESSION, ANXIETY,  
AND RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS

Like the last story in the paragraph above, many stories implied feelings of helplessness, for example, "Blacky getting mad because he can't beat up him. He's too big." Conversely, Blacky sometimes denies helplessness in a display of bravado, for example, "He just so mad he wanna do what he wanna do, hitting people, doing all the stuff he wants." "He's growling. So he can scare everybody," However, in many stories the grandiosity does not persevere: "His dad is liking another dog, he's getting angry. Cause that aint Mama. He gonna bite that dog in the legs and she will go howling home. And the owner will come and shoot *him* and his owner will shoot *her* and all be dead because there are killers around." "When Blacky saw them in love, Blacky tried to kill one of them, a Daddy drove him away. Daddy has scared him away."

As expected, the children described an impotent Blacky experiencing low self esteem. Some children reasoned that Mama's absence was because Blacky was unloveable, e.g., "Maybe he's got fleas." "All three laughing at Blacky." "Blacky is mad and Papa and Mama is happy because he couldn't find some food." Other children tied Blacky's unhappiness to Blacky's youth (e.g., "OK, he wishes he was a big dog and he was in a good mood") or loneliness ("He don't got nobody to play with" "His mother found a lover and he never with them." "He don't have no mama to play with").

There also was insecurity and jealousy in relationships. "The mother is meeting a friend and he saying 'grrrr' 'cause he don't like it when she meets people." "Blacky mad because the other dog is trying to take his girlfriend, his mom." "Blacky's mad 'cause the dad kissed the mom. 'Cause he hates the dad." "Mad because his mama is giving Papa love! Because he hates his Papa. I don't know! He must hate him! He must hate him!" "He angry . . . because

another dog took his girlfriend. No, it looks like his Mama and Papa. Yeah, he jealous because his mother and father are together and he feel they don't pay enough attention to him."

Many stories included relationship conflict, namely, hostility toward and fighting with parents, siblings, and peers. Sometimes Blacky was described as the perpetrator and sometimes the other parties were. Mama as perpetrator included: "She went outside and played with her mom. Her mother knocked her over and she was afraid." "He's going under there. Mama just trying to squish him up." However, often Blacky was said to be the perpetrator: "Blacky biting Mama. Right here." "Blacky is hurting Mama. Kicking and peeing." "He knocked the mama down. Because he didn't like his mommy!" Finally, several children described Mama and Blacky fighting with each other. "They fighting. He's biting her. I don't want to be bit by that dog!" "They having a fight. Yeah, and Mama dead." Sometimes the fighting was said to be over food. "Trying to fight. Trying to get the bone. He killed her." "They're having a fight because Blacky wants some food."

#### RESPONSE WITH ABSOLUTES, NAMELY: DENIAL OF CHANGE OR LOSS, DENIAL OF FACTS

In some cases a child seemed to be denying the negative tone of the external stimulus. Two pictures clearly showed Blacky in a foul mood and an outsider to his family. Nevertheless, some children described the opposite, e.g., "Blacky and his family are nice—all dogs are nice." Sometimes a clearly aggressive Blacky was described as being playful. Other stories had a compensatory tone. Blacky was described as precociously self sufficient and no longer vulnerable to the acts of others. "He's dreaming he's bigger and he can scare everyone now more." "Dreaming of his self as a big dog. He gonna start his own family soon." Another story reverses the roles so that Blacky is leaving as opposed to being left. "Blacky's sleeping and looks like he's thinking about self walking away from Mama and brother."

#### RIGIDITY OF FAMILY ROLES (MAINTAINING THAT THE LOST PERSON WILL RETURN AS BEFORE); OUTRAGE AT THE LOST PERSON BEING EXCLUDED

Both of these ideas appeared to be the dominant theme of some children's stories. For example, some children described Blacky and Mama as yearning for each other, and looking forward to being reunited. "Blacky's dreaming about his Mom. His Mom is thinking about Blacky and wants to go over because she hasn't seen him in a long time." Other children described Blacky as being outraged because, despite social support, Blacky is not being allowed to be with Mama. "... His friends are over. And Blacky's mad at 'em because he's not with his Mama and Papa." In such stories Blacky is not interested in substitutes. In both cases, the connotation of Mama is positive and Blacky is preoccupied with her loss.



## CONFUSION IN BOUNDARIES AND ROLES

Occasionally Blacky was described as confused about how to relate to the family in which Blacky finds him or herself. "Blacky . . . wish he had a mommy that look like him and Daddy. Look like him to protect him. Then he can visit the other kids but have his mother and father." Sometimes Blacky demonstrated role reversal with a parent. "Blacky is being mad and mean. Because somebody probably killed his mother and took her collar off . . . Blacky chased the person. And he probably bit him in the leg." "Mad. Mad. Mad. Mad. Mad. Mad. That's *his* son and his mom is loving *his* son." Finally, one child described Blacky reacting to the loss of his mother with gender confusion. "He dreaming he want to be a girl! A girl dog! He don't want to be a boy! He just want to be like his mama."

## GUILT, IF HOPE HAS BEEN GIVEN UP

Several children scolded Blacky for turning against his mother. "Blacky got mad at Mama and might get into trouble. Because he's getting a big temper." "He gonna be a devil. He's having a dream because he be mean." "Blacky having a nightmare – about what he did." "He had a dream about his self. Because he's mean, he don't deserve nothing." "He's dreaming about being good."

## REFUSAL TO TALK ABOUT THE INDIVIDUALS AND THE SITUATION

Two individuals, aged 5 and 6, made no verbal responses to the Blacky Pictures. They sat uncomfortably through the presentation and said nothing. Moreover, many children said "I don't know" in response to one or more pictures and despite encouragement. This did not seem to reflect lack of imagination. Often a child would give a negative content and then refuse to continue. For example, several children responded to the ostensibly nursing mother and child, as "Fighting." They then would pause and, eventually, say "I don't know."

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Our illustrations suggest that the model of ambiguous loss will be very helpful for understanding foster children and creating appropriate interventions. It will provide valuable insights to inform both individual psychological and contextual foci.

## Psychological

Intense anger may be normative for foster children of all ages. Often it may be focused on people other than the primary caretaking parents, including strangers. Ironically, this anger may be displaced upon those—foster care

workers, therapists, judges, and case managers—who perceive themselves to be rescuing the children. This anger may be tied to unresolved grief or it may be a protracted tantrum tied to the experience of impotency. Shattered self-esteem also may lead to characteristic coping strategies. On the externalizing side of things, a child may attempt mastery and competence by attacking institutionalized authorities, bullying peers, thinking grandiosely, and demonstrating precocious “self sufficiency” with regard to emotional and logistic need for others. On the internalizing side, children may decide that if they were more lovable, their parents would not have treated them as they had. This depressive posture allows children two important illusions: Their parents are capable of nurturing the children and this happenstance is in the hands of the children themselves.

Therapists, case managers, officers of the court, and foster family members need not see these externalizing and internalizing behaviors as pathology, but as active coping strategies appropriate to the children’s circumstances. Attempts to squelch these behaviors in the interest of tranquil foster placements are unrealistic and may exacerbate underlying psychosocial conditions. Initial interventions need to be psychoeducational and involve all stakeholders in a placement plan. The immediate goal is to make understandable those things that are disruptive to the foster placement. The diverse stakeholders, including the children, need to appreciate how unresolved grief leads to ambivalence about and fears of interdependency, relationship testing, and self-fulfilling prophecies of non-lovableness.

In short, all invested members must move from deficit detecting to appreciating that many of these otherwise disturbing behaviors are signs of ego strength. For example, the presence of loyalty conflict implies the continuing capacity to want to relate. Perhaps most importantly, while setting important limits on externalizing behaviors, we all need to move away from blame, shame, and punitive behavioral management strategies that exacerbate underlying outrage, insecurity, and depression. For example, when a child misbehaves the tendency is to scold the child and to set him or her apart from the other family members. (“Go to your room.”) Instead, one could remind the child that he or she has performed in more desirable ways in the past and the adult would like to see more of that. Instead of exile to a bedroom, the child could be required to spend more time in the company of the parents, perhaps helping them while they are doing some household chore.

According to ambiguous loss concepts, there are several overarching strategies that are helpful to keep in mind while working with these challenging situations (Boss, 2004). These include a need to:

- Attempt active listening while withholding judgment.
- Offer all the stakeholders psychoeducation about the confusion inherent in their situation.

- Give the children permission to be angry at parents who don't visit consistently, fulfill promises, or do what they need to do for the children to return home.

## Contextual

Besides these psychological considerations, there are systemic ones. The children's confusion about what losses have occurred and may occur, and what compensations there may be, can be mitigated by contextual improvements.

As observed above, professionals who are working with foster children and their birth and foster families need to assume the presence of ambiguous loss and its influence on all stakeholders. Using this lens, many individual and systemic features are less likely to be pathologized and treated with unhelpful responses and interventions.

Also, as observed above, we may need to better inform the foster children entrusted to us of the reason for their placement and what is currently happening with their families. Sometimes we mean well and withhold information from children because we ourselves do not know what will happen, or because we want to protect children from upsetting information. Unfortunately, withholding information may elicit, maintain, or exacerbate ambiguous loss. In such cases the foster children may have difficulty processing their grief and forming attachments to new caregivers. Sometimes foster children, especially very young ones, use fantasy to escape the confusion engendered by the unknown (Gil & Bogart, 1982). Furthermore, when we deny our foster children information we may exacerbate the feelings of disempowerment and helplessness so pervasive in these children (Hughes, 1997).

Shifting family memberships at three transition points—when children join foster families, visit their birth families, and leave their foster families—contribute to ambiguous loss on the part of all stakeholders (Sumner-Mayer, 2007). Establishing rituals related to comings and goings of family members may be a helpful practice for both the adoptive and foster families. Likewise, “shuttle diplomacy” may be an important tool in minimizing the stakeholders' experiences of ambiguous loss. It makes good sense to group and regroup the stakeholders with an eye to bridging the foster care subsystems—for example, birth family, foster family, agency – and effecting developmentally appropriate collaboration (See Sumner-Mayer, 2007).

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