The Presence and Impact of Loss in Stepfamilies

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This thesis titled
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Abstract

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The Presence and Impact of Loss In Stepfamilies

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In the world of family research, studies on ambiguous loss in stepfamilies are rare. Ambiguous loss is found to be a type of loss experience that creates unclear family boundaries. This thesis examines the existence and impact of ambiguous loss and ambiguous gain within the stepfamily system. By utilizing retrospective, semistructured interviews, the experience of loss and its impact were assessed. With the use of systems theory and boundary ambiguity theory, six common themes were found across seven participant interviews. Themes, implications, and ways to further academic study on ambiguous loss and gain are discussed, contributing to the revisioning of the Seven Stages of Stepfamily Development and the Stepping Ahead Program.
Dedication

To my participants without whom this would not have been possible. For the courage to share your lives, thank you. Your stories will not be forgotten.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background Information

Divorce has long since escaped its stigmatized days. What was once something that uprooted a society, divorce, now is very common in our culture. Today it seems many people think divorce is harmless because of its status as “normal.” Nevertheless, the impact that divorce has on the family system is undeniable, as “. . . divorce is never a victimless experience” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 65). All members of the divorcing family can experience changes and a sense of loss. Life as it was once known has to be rewritten.

The literature on divorce is littered with controversial and varying results and it is important to note that “some family members suffer devastating losses as a result of divorce whereas others may reveal relatively few symptoms of loss” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 65). In fact, Ahrons (2007) points out that “the differences that emerge [in research] are embedded in the interpretations of the findings, such that findings are interpreted to reflect the underlying conceptualization of the researcher” (p. 55). In the world of divorce research, one must be cautious and discerning about what is to be believed:

One day we hear good news about children and divorce: children whose parents divorce grow up to be well-adjusted, emotionally healthy adults. The next day there’s bad news: children of divorce are doomed to have emotional problems that last well into adulthood. These polarized positions—of divorce as disaster and
divorce as inconsequential-oversimplify the realities of our complex lives.

(Ahrons, 2007, p. 54)

With these controversial findings and beliefs about divorce and its impact, it is easy to choose one side of the debate and ignore the other. The acceptance that divorce can be both good and bad is rare. For example, divorce can remove family members from a violent atmosphere, which may be healthier for the family than the parents remaining together. It is important to consider the family and its circumstances prior to the event of divorce before a “good” or “bad” verdict can be made. Unfortunately, “. . . the impact of the predivorce family is rarely included as the variable in divorce research . . . ” (Ahrons, 2011, p. 529). Regardless of family circumstance, postdivorce relationships have the potential to be positive. According to Ahrons (2007), there can be a “good divorce.” A good divorce is defined as one that allows “. . . the children [to] comfortably maintain relationships with both parents and their extended kin networks . . . and [to] maintain their sense of biological family” (p. 64).

No matter who loses what, within a divorced family system, there is the universal fact that with divorce follows transition. Indeed, “divorce is a major life transition that challenges the strength of interpersonal bonds” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 65). When a parent leaves a home, every relationship in the immediate family can be affected; a spouse loses his or her partner, a child loses his or her parent and the leaving adult loses both a spouse and a child. What was once a life shared with relative ease becomes something new and different, requiring new and different rules to negotiate it.
In addition to the repercussions of divorce, research shows that “following divorce . . . almost 75 percent of single parents remarry, most within three years” (DiVerniero, 2011, p. 26). Divorce and remarriage both bring major life changes that leave the old family and the new family in a transitional state. Families are now more complex than they have ever been and the results of divorce and remarriage are highly variable. Remarriage affects each member of the immediate family for both remarrying adults and as they come together, their children and extended family members as well. Indeed, research shows that “remarriage represents another dramatic change in the divorced family’s reorganization, and children vary in their responses to this change” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 60). For some, the state in which children are left after their parents’ remarriage is not unlike that of divorce. Research shows that “from the viewpoint of the child, the family boundaries are shaken or break down again when the [parent] begins to seek a new partner after divorce . . . [which] alters the boundaries of the family and the child’s position in the family” (Taanila, Laitinen, Moilanen, & Järvelin, 2002, p. 705).

During the transition between the “old” family and the “new” remarried family “. . . old [family] roles have disappeared and new ones have not yet developed . . . ”(Ahrons, 1980, p. 536). This understandably causes a situation that places the child in a highly ambiguous place that is rife with uncertainty. Not only has the child experienced the end or “death” to their family as they once knew it, but the “birth” of a new one. Much like divorce, a “. . . remarriage can create situations in which the status of relationships and emotional connections with family members become unclear” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 67). This lack of clarity and increased amount of confusion are all the
Ambiguous loss, coined by Boss (2010), is defined as an “. . . unclear loss, traumatic loss, [or] confusing loss, [that is] externally caused” by the physical absence of someone who is psychologically present, or the reverse (p. 138). In the case of divorce, we see the type of ambiguous loss that results from a physically absent, but psychologically present, parent. A child’s father, for example may no longer live with the family following divorce. However that does not mean the father is absent from the child’s life in any psychological way. The father still remains as the father, and the child still remains as the child. Scholars Afifi and Keith (2004) describe it this way:

Ambiguous loss is a unique kind of loss in that a loved one is technically present but functionally absent, creating a lack of closure and clarity. This uncertainty makes ambiguous loss one of the most distressful kinds of loss because it is difficult to understand and articulate to others. (p. 67)

Children experiencing ambiguous loss may not know how to describe their family after their parents’ divorce. He or she may have a father who no longer lives with his family, perhaps the father even lives with a new family . . . does this mean the father is still in the family? Does the child now feel that what was once one family is now two separate families? The central question is, who is defined as “in” and “out” of the family. In Boss’ book, *Ambiguous Loss*, she explains that “neither physical presence nor physical absence tells the whole story of who is in and who is out of people’s lives, because there is also a
psychological family” (1999, pp. 13-14). This is the type of confounding loss that the term “ambiguous loss” explains.

In addition to ambiguous loss, a child can also experience ambiguous gain, especially within the context of a parent getting remarried and belonging to a stepfamily. Indeed, “. . . the inclusion of new family members can cause blurred familial boundary lines . . . ” (DiVerniero, 2013, p. 305). Ambiguous gain, although an area that has not been studied as much as ambiguous loss, is a real experience in the lives of those in stepfamilies. Suddenly, the child who experienced his or her parents’ divorce, now experiences one or both parents remarrying. The new parent figure(s) in their lives may bring along other children as well. Not only has the child’s original family retired, but a whole new family, with its own new members, has been gained. The question of who is “in” and “out” of the family has never seemed so relevant. Research claims that some “examples of ambiguous gains may be a new baby from birth or adoption, gaining in-laws . . . ” and could easily extend to new stepfamily members (Boss, 2007, p. 109).

**Combining the Elements**

According to researchers Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, and Greenbaum (2009), “the nuclear family is viewed as the basic unit composing human society. It is flexible and changeable, whereby each change in every subsystem influences all parts of the system . . . .” (p. 31). This family systems theory outlook showcases the importance of family roles, not only within the family itself, but within a larger system, their environment. With divorce and remarriage being so common within our culture, one could be lead to believe that families are outfitted to handle all that divorce and remarriage bring with it.
However, the ambiguity that exists in post-divorce and newly remarried families would say otherwise.

Research shows that there are few institutionalized prescriptions for how children should grieve the loss of a noncustodial parent who is still alive but seemingly absent. Nor are there any typified coping mechanisms for noncustodial parents whose relationship with their children is “there” but “not there” like it used to be when they were living under the same household (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 66). Each member of the family is affected by the ambiguity that enters, like a family member itself, after divorce. This ambiguous loss that is experienced is compounded by the ambiguous gain that can accompany the inclusion of new family members. Just as there are no scripts on how to handle divorce, there are no scripts on how to reorganize the family, especially within the context of remarriage. Research shows that “… stepfamilies in particular are likely to be filled with greater uncertainty and avoidance than other family types because of their complex family structure, less shared relational history, and redefinition of family roles and boundaries” (DiVerniero, 2011, p. 26).

The lack of “know-how” that comes with a new stepfamily is guaranteed to impact the stepfamily system. When two adults remarry, they are bringing their past lives with them. This life can include children from a previous marriage, old traditions and rituals, and a set way of doing things; the way in which all of these components of stepfamily living come together is shrouded in ambiguity. Indeed, “stepfamily living requires traversing a geography quite different from biological family living, with a terrain which is often rocky and confusing” (Papernow, 1984, p. 355). How does a new
family navigate through an ambiguous past and an ambiguous future? According to stepfamily researchers, “one of the most difficult questions a newly remarried family faces is: how can we be a ‘normal’ family?” (Whiteside, 1989, p. 34).

With all of these elements combined, divorce and remarriage, with ambiguous loss and gain experienced as a result, the question that remains is how this impacts the family system. How does the family navigate through such ambiguous waters? More specifically, how does a child make sense of this new world of theirs? Do these ambiguous experiences impact a child of divorce and remarriage well into their young adult years?

The Gap in Family Research

Divorce research in academia is nothing new. According to Thomson Ross and Roberts Miller (2009), the “two correlates of divorce that have received more research attention are father absence and economic hardships” (p. 250). Although there is no lack of research on divorce and its repercussions, it is still unknown if any changes have occurred in this generation of divorced and remarried families compared to previous generations (Cartwright, 2006, p. 127). Additionally, most research on stepfamily reconstruction and living is centered on the process of becoming a family and communication theories. Indeed, it is difficult to find “. . . studies [that] adequately address structural complexity in stepfamilies, which involve numerous combinations of full, step-, and half-siblings living inside and outside the household” (Stewart, 2005, pp. 1007-1008). The meeting of such different backgrounds, in one family, is simply overwhelming.
One particular aspect of stepfamily living that can contribute to this complexity is the presence of ambiguous loss and gain. Even when stepfamily adjustment seems to be going well, “. . . the other household’s presence is felt as each person brings with him/her an allegiance to the traditions developed in their first marriages” and families (Whiteside, 1989, p. 35). These invisible ties to the past and to what is known, are indeed the manifestations of ambiguity, working its way into the family structure. The existence of ambiguous loss is not new, yet putting a label on it and explaining it is (Boss, 1999). However, ambiguous loss is a relatively new concept that has not been applied to all that it should be. Ambiguous loss has always been associated with the event of divorce yet not so much with remarriage. Researchers in the field of family studies have “. . . called for scholars to pay attention to the ambiguous loss experienced by children in post-divorce families” and have admitted that “. . . we do not know if this ambiguous loss persists in established stepfamilies” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 33).

In relation to ambiguous loss, we have the even less explored concept of ambiguous gain which is “. . . an area ripe for study,” according to Boss (2007) the founder of ambiguous loss research (p. 109). Ambiguous gain is structurally similar to ambiguous loss; however the channel of ambiguity is through a gain rather than a loss. For example, if a family has a child and adopts a second child, feelings of ambiguity could be experienced by the first child. All of a sudden there were no siblings, and now there is. This addition to the known family structure could very well be termed as ambiguous gain. Ambiguous gain is a change that works just as ambiguous loss, in that it
“. . . affect[s] perceptions of who is in and who is out [of the family]” (Boss, 2007, p. 109).

With the use of systems theory and boundary ambiguity theory the purpose of this study is to examine ambiguous loss and gain within the stepfamily system. Systems theory, which has “a fundamental assumption of holism . . . and [states that a] system must be understood as whole and cannot be comprehended by examining its individual parts in isolation from each other” (Jurich & Bowman-Myers, 1998, p. 74) will be essential in seeing the stepfamily system as a whole. Systems theory also acknowledges that “all parts of the system are interconnected” and “a system’s behavior affects its environment, and in turn the environment affects the system” (White & Klein, 2008, pp. 156-157). Using systems theory as a lens for family research allows for researchers to look at subsystems within the stepfamily system, while gaining information about the stepfamily system as a whole.

Boundary ambiguity theory, also developed by Boss, is closely related to the concept of ambiguous loss and gain. In fact, boundary ambiguity is increased when family members face confusion about who is “in” and “out” of their family (Buehler & Pasley, 2000, p. 281). In the research world:

Scholars have suggested that changes in marital status and family boundary ambiguity are intertwined. Divorce and remarriage represent potentially stress inducing transitions in the lives of children and their families. Those transitions change a family’s structure by altering family composition, boundaries, roles, and rules. When the composition of the family changes because of divorce or
remarriage, one of the most significant potential sources of stress is boundary ambiguity. (Buehler & Pasley, 2000, p. 283)

Using systems theory in conjunction with boundary ambiguity allows for the focus of this study to orbit around finding where ambiguous loss and gain exist in the stepfamily system, from the perspective of the child. To ascertain this information, this research will meet four objectives. The first three research objectives will involve looking at the participant’s perspective of his or her relationships within the stepfamily system with his or her biological parent, stepparent, and siblings (biological, half, and step). The participant’s perception of his or her stepfamily as a whole and his or her role in it will be the fourth and final research objective. These objectives are foundational in understanding the bigger research question at play, where does ambiguous loss and gain exist in the stepfamily system in the eyes of the child?

Results from this study could lead to potential benefits in the research community and clinical field. Power in healing lies much in the ability to name what one is going through. Putting the name of “ambiguous loss or gain” to these participants’ experiences may be able to, in some way, shape the direction of therapy and counseling used to help families going through similar experiences. Naming the struggle that these families are facing, allows them to respond to it. This could lend further research into the field of ambiguous gain and a whole new outlook on family reorganization.

This study also meets a few criteria that have been called for in divorce and family research. First, although retrospective studies, which asks participants to look back into their past experiences, are not new in the world of divorce research (Braithwaite, &
Baxter, 2006; Cartwright, 2006; DiVerniero, 2013; Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, &
Greenbaum, 2009; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004;
Thomson Ross & Roberts Miller, 2009; Young & Ehrenberg, 2007), they are only now
becoming used as an effective qualitative tool in stepfamily research. Second, this study
examines the influence of ambiguous gain “. . . an area ripe for study . . .” (Boss, 2007, p.
109), which has not received much scholarly attention. Lastly, this study hinges on the
importance of the perception of the individual family member and how it impacts the
other subsystems within the family, and the family itself. In both boundary ambiguity
theory and the concept of ambiguous loss and gain, perception of who is “in” and “out”
of the family is foundational. The qualitative nature of this study allows for the
participants’ perception to take the proper place, main stage in family research.

The delimitations set in place for this study include age and family structure.
Based on the research that states “young adults’ current psychological adjustment was
influenced by their perceptions of past family experiences” (Young & Ehrenberg, 2007,
p. 79), this study will be based on semistructured interviews with participants ages 18-34.
This is done purposefully to see if the past experiences of ambiguous loss and gain carry
into young adulthood. Participants also must have once belonged to or currently still
belong to a stepfamily, which includes stepsibling(s).

Limitations included in this study are the small sample size, population, and
geographic location. The sample size was small, with only 7 participants. Participants
were either students or community members from a Midwestern university. Due to this, a
diverse sample was not acquired and therefore this study’s results do not generalize well
to the wider population. In addition, 3 participants were considered a “focal child.” A focal child limits the ability to generalize this study’s results to the wider population because research shows that siblings within one family system “. . . may respond very differently” to family circumstances, such as divorce and remarriage (Ahrons, 2011, p. 531). Therefore, examining one child from one family, without the participation of their sibling, may not reveal as much relevant data.

The term “stepfamily,” in this study, was applied more broadly. It encompassed and labeled cohabitating couples, remarried couples, and any same-sex couples. The purpose of applying “stepfamily” more broadly was simply to show that families take multiple forms, and was used as way to generalize information and make it easier to understand for the researcher and the reader. It was the same with the terms “stepparent,” “stepchild,” and “stepsibling.” The researcher only distinguished between “half-sibling” and “stepsibling” if the participant did, which gave the researcher insight into how the participant defines and relates to his or her perception of family.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Research on Divorce

To find where ambiguous loss and gain exist in the stepfamily system, first, the impact of divorce must be understood. As stated previously, two of the most studied aspects in divorce research are based on socioeconomic status and the removal of the father (Thomson Ross & Roberts Miller, 2009). Another aspect of divorce that has been studied in depth is the impact it has on children. Some research shows that “parental divorce is associated with poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, psychological distress, delinquency, recidivism, substance abuse, sexual precocity, depression, and suicidal behavior, as well as changes in frequency and effectiveness of coping strategies as a function of time from divorce” (Dreman, 2000, p. 41). In contrast, other research, based on three major longitudinal studies, shows that “. . . the immediate distress surrounding parental separation fades with time and that the great majority of adult children are functioning as healthy adults” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 55).

The myriad effects of divorce, according to the literature, place children at risk for experiencing detrimental effects, but these risks to wellbeing are not uniformly experienced by all children. Research has found that children with parents who divorce have a higher risk of experiencing adjustment issues, especially if they feel they are in the middle of their parents’ arguments (Young & Ehrenberg, 2007). Despite the extensive research on the impact of divorce in children, a common misconception exists in today’s society. It has been assumed that with divorce being so common, it does not have the negative affects once associated with it. However, it is known that “the divorce
experience is generally accompanied by stress for children since they have to cope with situational circumstances such as changes in residence and school, loss of friends and relatives, diminished economic resources and parental conflicts regarding visitation and custody” (Dreman, 2000, p. 44). The child’s whole world has the potential to change because of the disruption of the spousal relationship in the family.

In addition to the research that illuminates some of the negative experiences related to divorce, other studies show more positive results. Historically, research shows that parents who were able to share responsibility for their children and have a healthy relationship had more positive experiences, with happier, healthier children (Ahrons, 2006). Among the mixed results found in the research about the impact of divorce, Ahrons (2011) found that “. . . the children whose parents were cooperative post-divorce had the smallest number of behavior problems” (p. 528) and they had healthier relationships with immediate family members (Ahrons, 2007). However, those children who did not have cooperative parents after divorce did not have such positive experiences. Research shows that “. . . adult children who continued to relate to both parents in spite of their ongoing hostilities were still plagued with loyalty conflicts” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 59). What is most important to note when considering the implications of divorce, and looking at the mixed results, is that it will impact those who experience it in vastly different ways.

Other research also shows that “divorced parents may be temporarily less capable of providing high-quality parenting owing to their own psychological distress following divorce” (Young & Ehrenberg, 2007, p. 80) which could lead to a child becoming more
like a friend to their parent than a child (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). While the parent’s focus shifts from being child or family centered, it is now centered on other things like finances, relocation, and possibly romance with a new partner. Due to the chaotic way of life for most newly divorced parents, the majority of children do not have the information to understand their current family state (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). The lack of information provided for children’s understanding is potentially harmful because coping with divorce is aided by family restructuring, which does not happen without information or family collaboration (Dreman, 2000).

**Providing a Background on Stepfamily Research**

As stated previously, research shows that “following divorce . . . almost 75 percent of single parents remarry, most within three years” (DiVerniero, 2011, p. 26). With the high divorce rate and subsequent remarriage rate, knowing how to navigate through these life events is important. Although remarriage is common, this life transition is rife with difficulty. In fact, research indicates that “. . . most stepfamilies need education to help them address the complexities of [the] stepfamily relationship both inside and outside the single stepfamily household” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 31). The lack of education and knowledge, outside of the academic world, for the stepfamily’s use only adds to their hardship in forming their own “normal” family. Our culture continues to operate as if remarriage is as easy as a first marriage, but “even in the most amicable circumstances, the renegotiation of relationships that accompanies the shift from one family form to another results in a radical redefinition of previous family roles” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 67).
Facing challenges on almost every level, stepfamilies have to work together to achieve the family they want. Without the shared experiences, history, and beliefs that the original family afforded its members, stepfamilies are at a disadvantage from the start. Research shows that “...the lack of a biological bond made becoming a family more difficult. Whether the new family functioned effectively was often overshadowed by the loss of the family to which they had been accustomed” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, pp. 75-76). While it may seem odd for families to purposefully decide who is “in” and who is “out” of their family system, it decreases the ambiguity and confusion that is experienced by those in remarried families. According to Pill (1990), “the creation of a stepfamily means that family members must negotiate many new circumstances. They must determine who are psychological members of the stepfamily, regardless of physical absence or presence, and confront expectations concerning love and emotional bonding” (p. 187).

Without proper guidance and communication to navigate the many transitions involved in a remarriage, it is easy to see that ambiguity would be present, possibly in high amounts. Research shows that a high divorce rate exists in remarried families, which indicates the potential challenges and hardships in the beginning of the stepfamily’s life (Pill, 1990). Although the early years in a remarriage are indeed riddled with challenges, Papernow (1984) studied the development of the stepfamily over time. According to her research, there are seven developmental milestones that stepfamilies must go through to reach resolution, where “...step-relationships not only provide occasional satisfaction, they begin to feel solid and reliable” (p. 361). The figure below demonstrates Papernow’s seven stages of stepfamily reconstruction.
Along the inner circle in the figure above are the seven stages toward resolution that stepfamilies go through. All stages are divided into three groups, beginning, middle and end. The beginning phase includes fantasy, assimilation, and awareness. First, fantasy occurs. In this phase, every member in the family clings to some sort of unrealistic expectation, either about their own role in the stepfamily or about the stepfamily as a whole. Second, the assimilation phase occurs, where all the new family members are trying to get used to one another and adjust to life in their new family. Third, the awareness stage dovetails with the previous stage, bringing more solidity to assimilation. For example, the awareness stage allows family members to be aware of the issues they are experiencing. They can identify their struggles and seek to resolve them.

The middle phase of reconstruction includes mobilization and action. Mobilization, the fourth step of reconstruction, begins when family members speak up
about their concerns and issues they have identified that exist in the family. During this stage, family boundaries are often stretched or redefined. After mobilization occurs, it is followed by the fifth step, action. Action involves the family members engaging in more awareness-like behaviors to express themselves, and share common goals of resolution. This stage is where the stepfamily make its own new rules and rituals instead of continuing with what was previously prescribed in their previous family.

Following these five steps, the final phase can begin, with contact and resolution. The sixth stage, contact, happens when relationships in the stepfamily become more genuine. The seventh and final stage of resolution happens primarily with these now genuine relationships becoming stronger, more trusting, and reliable. This is where a stepfamily feels like family (Papernow, 1984). Although the time it took to complete the stepfamily cycle varied for different families, research indicates that the “average” family takes about 7 years. However, it is important to note that other families reached resolution within a few years while others never made it through the seven steps to reach resolution (p. 357).

Noncustodial Parent-Child and Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

Although the relationship between the noncustodial parent and his or her child is a prominent one in divorce and remarriage research, when it comes to that specific relationship being examined within the stepfamily system, there is a lack in research. In fact, “several scholars have argued for more research from the perspective of children” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 32) on this particular relationship. Researchers found that little is known on how children negotiate having a relationship with their nonresidential
parent and being part of a stepfamily simultaneously. One study indicated that “[children] wanted nonresidential parent involvement and parenting, and at the same time they resisted it, often finding communication to be awkward and challenging. In addition, [children] wanted open and intimate communication with their nonresidential parents, yet they found openness to be problematic” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 30). Other research has shown that even though children knew their nonresidential parent was still a part of their lives, they did not know how to interact with them or feel toward them now that they did not live together (Afifi & Keith, 2004).

In addition to the uncertainty that some experience in the noncustodial parent relationship, research shows that there may be a correlation between that specific relationship and the child’s perceptions and feelings about the stepfamily as a whole. Results from a longitudinal study on binuclear families showed that “. . . adult children’s reports of the impact of their father’s remarriage were associated with their reports of changes in father-child relationship quality” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 60). In fact:

When relationships with their fathers got worse over time, they reported poorer current relationship with their stepmother, her children (their stepsiblings), and their paternal grandparents. This was most salient when the father remarried after divorce. Adult children who reported that their father’s remarriage had a positive effect on their lives also said that they had better relationships with their stepmothers, stepsiblings, and paternal grandparents. (Ahrons, 2007, p. 61)

These results show how significant the role of the noncustodial parent can be and how deeply it permeates the child’s acceptance of new stepfamily members. The child’s
perception of this relationship has the potential for significantly impacting the family. Indeed, behavior stems from individual perceptions (Ahrons, 2007).

In addition to the noncustodial parent relationship, one of the most researched components of stepfamily life is the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In fact, “... the stepparent-stepchild relationship is the most frequently studied and arguably the most challenging relationship within the stepfamily, which may lead to uncertainty for the stepchild” (DiVerniero, 2011, p. 26). Our culture has subscribed to a phenomenon that encourages dislike toward those in stepparent roles, especially the stepmother. Children’s literature and media have long since portrayed stepmothers in an evil role, as illustrated by classic animated movies like Snow White and Cinderella. Although the stepparent-stepchild relationship has been frequently examined, the relationship itself is highly variable and its success or failure dependent on many factors.

As in the world of divorce research, when the stepfamily and its subsequent relationships are examined, the results are often times at opposite ends of the spectrum, either good or bad. Based on results from the Binuclear Family Study, headed by Ahrons, participant reactions to remarriage in general were varied. Ahrons (2007) reported that:

when asked whether the divorce or a parent’s remarriage was more difficult to cope with, more than half of the adult children reported that the divorce was most difficult, and approximately one third remembered the remarriage of one or more parents as creating more distress than the divorce. Of those who experienced the remarriage of both parents, two thirds reported that their father’s remarriage was more stressful than their mother’s. (p. 60)
Having this knowledge as a background, it would be easy to connect a stressful remarriage with a difficult stepparent-stepchild relationship, as well as a positive remarriage with a positive relationship. It is important for researchers and the public alike to realize that a relationship grows over time. How it begins is not always indicative of how it will stay. Many child participants in the Binuclear Family Study reported a good relationship with their stepparents and that it may not have been that way in the beginning, but improved as they spent more time with their stepparents (Ahrons, 2007).

On the other hand, negative stepparent-stepchild relationships show up mostly in studies that examine stepparent and stepchild relationships in accordance with parenting. Research shows that some stepparents would respond to stepchildren in a selective way, “...typically preferring or rejecting one child among...” the others (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007, p. 229). Wallerstein and Lewis (2007) found that “...stepmothers with their own children preferred the stepchild who got along well with their own children or the older child who helped with the younger child’s care” (p. 230). In addition to the impact of the stepparent on the stepchild, research indicated that stepparents also have an impact on their partner in regards to their stepchild. One study in particular showed results where “...the stepparent has the power to influence or even to reshape the relationship between the biological parent and his or her children” (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007, p. 234). Indeed, time spent with the children of the previous marriage and resources given to them, was among the few ways a stepparent could influence or control their partner’s relationship with their own children (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007).
**Siblings within the Stepfamily System**

When it comes to immediate relationships within the stepfamily, the bulk of research is focused on relationships between parent and child. Finding research on sibling relationships, in any form, within the stepfamily context rather than the biological context, is difficult. Indeed, “. . . little attention has been given in the literature as to the effect . . . of relationships between children and their half siblings and stepsiblings” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 56). However, according to DiVerniero (2011), “while the stepsibling relationship receives less attention, research has shown that children often exclude their stepsiblings from lists of whom they consider “immediate” family, regardless of the length of time spent living in the stepfamily” (p. 26). DiVerniero’s (2011) study sought to delve deeper into the stepsibling relationship and found that stepsiblings were viewed as strangers. Research based on the *Binuclear Family Study* showed that “fewer than one third of the children in the study think of their stepsiblings as brothers or sisters . . . in contrast to how they think of stepsiblings, almost all of the children think of their half-siblings as brothers or sisters” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 61). This could be due to the fact that, “whereas stepsiblings become instant siblings, with no shared history, when children gain a half-sibling they know this child from the time he or she is born” (Ahrons, 2007, p. 61).

Additionally, a longitudinal study by Wallerstein and Lewis (2007) showed that siblings “. . . are at risk of disparate parenting” in families under stressful circumstances, such as divorce or remarriage transitions (p. 225). Their research showed that “children or adolescents who are treated with negativity or marginalized by parents fall significantly behind their better treated siblings in their psychological adjustment” (2007,
Although the cause of this rift in the sibling relationship is primarily linked to the parents in this study, it was an important factor influencing the sibling relationship within the stepfamily. As previous research shows how tumultuous forming the new stepfamily can be, within a systems perspective, differential treatment from parents would also influence the sibling relationship. The lack of research in this area leaves many questions unanswered.

The Stepchild’s Role

Previous research on the stepchild’s role within the stepfamily system itself has been highly focused on communication theories or to the noncustodial parent-child relationship. In a study of stepchildren’s communication within the actual stepfamily system, DiVerniero (2011) found that “. . . recent research suggests [a] lack of support for the stepfamily may lead stepchildren to feel uncertain about their place in the overall family” (p. 26) and explained that “this does not mean that all, or even most, stepchildren’s experiences are negative, but rather it is a recognition that they do come with their own set of challenges, many of which they have not experienced in the past” (p. 26). Such challenges, according to DiVerniero (2011), included relationships within and outside of the stepfamily and the added stress that came from the changes they were experiencing as well as juggling family rituals (p. 30).

Ambiguous Loss

In the early 1970s, the concept of ambiguous loss was born. Ambiguous loss is known as “. . . a loss that remains unclear” (Boss, 2007, p. 105) and can manifest itself in situations that cause confusion, change, uncertainty, and heartache. Primarily, ambiguous
loss is found in two specific types of loss: physical absence with psychological presence, and the reverse, physical presence with psychological absence. These circumstances of loss can be met by a variety of life events such as divorce, kidnapping, dementia, or any loss that can cause unclear boundaries in the family system. The crux of ambiguous loss lies in the ambiguity of the loss, rather than the loss itself. The ambiguity surrounding the loss “. . . freezes the grief process and prevents cognition, thus blocking coping and decision-making processes . . . [meaning] closure is impossible” (Boss, 2007, p. 105).

According to Boss (2007), those who experience ambiguous loss:

. . . have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body. Without information to clarify their loss, family members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence. (p. 105)

Without the ability to reach closure on a loss, one must live with it. When this loss is ambiguous, a level of complexity is added and healing is delayed. Being able to identify a loss as “ambiguous” is increasingly becoming important for the wellbeing of those who experience it and has many practical implications for research or in clinical practice. Indeed, the power that comes with naming ambiguous loss to those experiencing it “. . . provides [them] with a way to comprehend their situation and learn to live more functionally with [it]” (Boss, 1999, p. 30).

Ambiguous loss has been applied to many situations in past research, divorce being a prominent one. Divorce meets the “physical absence with psychological presence” criteria all too well; “. . . something was lost but something is still there; the
marriage is lost but the parenting still continues” (Boss, 1999, p. 30). A child now has a parent they live with and a parent they do not. A parent-child bond that was once maintained, in part by physical proximity, is now subject to a whole new set of rules and regulations yet to become standard routine. Scholars Afifi and Keith (2004) state that “because the loss of a noncustodial parent is confusing . . . some children and young adults may be unable to make sense of their situation, possibly leading to immobilization” (p. 66), or the “freezing” in the grief process that Boss (2007) refers to in her own work.

Additionally, research shows that the loss of a noncustodial parent is not the only form of loss experienced due to divorce. Ambiguous loss also occurs in the “. . . loss of previous family roles” (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 66) and “. . . loss of a sense of family” (Cartwright, 2006, p. 139). What once was an organized life, with set boundaries and personal roles, the family is now engulfed in a chaotic transitional state. Divorce causes reorganization in “. . . the nuclear family . . . to establish two households, maternal and paternal. [Consequently] each parent then needs to establish an independent relationship with dependent children. [Indeed] in divorced families . . . closeness to one parent might limit closeness to the other” (Frank, 2008, p. 29). Loss of the function and feel of the family is highly ambiguous; the family still exists only now it is very different. Research shows that “with divorce . . . chaos spread so that often there were no family routines, no order in the household, no family dinners, [and] no one in charge . . . ”(Thomson Ross & Roberts Miller, 2009, p. 251). In the midst of all of the ambiguity and chaos that is
experienced in the family resulting from divorce, in some cases the family must also go through ambiguous gain.

**Ambiguous Gain**

Ambiguous gain is an idea that Boss raised in her early research, yet has not been studied. Boss claims that “. . . because the vulnerable times for couples and families are not only losses but also any time of change and transition”, ambiguous gain turns out to be “an area ripe for research” (Boss, 2007, p. 109). Ambiguous gain operates under the same assumption as ambiguous loss in that “. . . the more ambiguous the changes in family boundary (losses or gain that affect perceptions of who is in and who is out), the higher the stress levels” in the family (Boss, 2007, p. 109). In highly ambiguous states, “stress continues in any family until membership can be clarified and the system reorganized regarding (a) who performs what roles and tasks, and (b) how family members perceive the absent [or new] member” (Boss, 1980, p. 449). Some examples of ambiguous gain, given by Boss herself, include “. . . a new baby from birth or adoption, gaining in-laws, in-home professional help such as nannies, or professional caregivers living in the home to tend to a chronically ill family member” (2007, p. 109). A new family member, by remarriage, would fit into this wide category of addition into family boundaries and roles. With the known research on ambiguous loss and divorce, and this new area of ambiguous gain at the inclusion of new family members, postdivorce families are at a crossroads in their family function and organization. These families understandably have much to learn, and much to teach to those in the research or clinical practice communities.
Theoretical Lens: Systems Theory, Boundary Ambiguity Theory

Systems theory. According to White and Klein (2008) “systems theory has proven to be the major conceptual framework used in the study of marital interaction and family communications” (p. 170). Indeed, systems theory has been used to “. . . study systems in a variety of fields” such as “. . . families, biology, [and] communication” to name a few (Jurich & Myers-Bowman, 1998, p. 72). The systems theory perspective allows for the family to be viewed in a holistic way, which accepts that “a system must be understood as whole and cannot be comprehended by examining its individual parts in isolation from each other” (Jurich & Myers-Bowman, 1998, p. 74). The structure and context that surrounds a child or young adult in a stepfamily situation is highly important. There is not only one family, but two. To examine the stepfamily system, the ambiguity that lives in it, and one’s role within the family itself, would require a holistic view—to view the family as a working system with various parts, roles, and functions. At the heart of systems theory is the basic truth that “a set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment” (Jurich & Myers-Bowman, 1998, p. 72) are the makings of a system. This means that family members inside and outside the stepfamily system all have an impact on the family and the environment has an impact on the family as well.

It is important to note that not only is the stepfamily a system, but within that singular system exists other subsystems.

Not only do systems have various levels but they may also contain subsystems.

For example, one way of viewing the family system is that it contains sibling
subsystems, marital subsystems, and parent-child subsystems . . . in general, a subsystem is a part of a system that is analyzed separately as to its exchanges with the system and other subsystems. (White & Klein, 2008, p. 160)

This means that the way one subsystem works inside a family, will impact the family system as a whole and vice versa. Accepting that these subsystems exist and are important is one benefit of systems theory, especially in regards to family research. The family subsystems are even more important in the context of a stepfamily because a stepchild belongs to more than one family system and subsequently more than one subsystem. In research, the term “binuclear family” is often used to describe the unique position of the stepchild: belonging to two households at once (Whiteside, 1989, p. 34).

With the application of systems theory, it is noted that these binuclear families interact and impact the child simultaneously. Research shows that all these new interactions of two families can cause difficulties for the stepchild when navigating through them. Family researcher Ahrons (2007) points out:

> binuclear families are not tidy families; they are made up of a combination of blood and nonblood relationships that defy clear role definitions and often lack appropriate kinship terms . . . even among biological siblings in the same family, half-and stepsibling relationships and stepmother and stepfather relationships will be experienced differently. (p. 63)

This high variability is just another reason why using systems theory is useful when studying families.
Relationships within the system and subsystems will also have boundaries. According to White and Klein (2008) “all systems have some form of boundaries. A boundary is a border between the system and its environment that affects the flow of information and energy between the environment and the system” (p. 158). These boundaries can range from being open, which allows ease of communication between the system and environment, or closed, with no communication between the system and environment. Boundaries are important to note in any family system; however, their importance increases when it comes to stepfamily systems because defining who is in and who is out of the family become an important task. This is one way in which a boundary is born within the system; “boundaries define what included in the system and what is excluded from the system. They mark the interface between the system and its subsystems and suprasystem” (Jurich & Myers-Bowman, 1998, p. 76). The figure below is a visual model of systems theory on how multiple systems function and interact with one another, adapted by the researcher.
Because of the structure and function of the stepfamily, there are levels of environments that the stepfamily is subject to, including boundaries that may be open or closed between each environmental system. First, there is the culture as a whole (including schools, workplaces, communities, etc.) which can be divided into different levels based on the direct contact with the individual. Second, there are the extended family members, friends, and environments that directly impact the individual. In the case of a stepfamily system, more family members exist; for example, a stepchild has their biological family members and in addition new stepfamily members, who bring their own extended family with
them. Third, the most immediate and personal system is comprised only of the individual him or herself. Found here could be the individual’s health, perceptions, and self-identity.

**Boundary ambiguity theory.** Boundary Ambiguity (BA) theory, much like systems theory, has been applied as a theoretical lens in many disciplines. Indeed, since the beginning of BA theory “. . . the concept of family BA has been widely used by scholars, clinicians, and educators to study and intervene with families experiencing a wide range of stressor situations” (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007, p. 210). In addition to being used across multiple disciplines, BA theory and systems theory are also alike in their structure. In fact:

. . . the concept of family boundaries derives from family systems theory and refers to system and subsystem processes (e.g., rules, rituals, and roles) regarding participating members— in other words—who, when, and how, members participate in family life. From this perspective families are viewed as an open system, made up of subsystems, each of which is surrounded by a semipermeable boundary, which is actually a set of processes influencing who is included within that subsystem and how they interact with those outside of it. Accordingly, unclear boundaries can create dysfunction in family processes and interactions. (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 210)

With a nod to the fact that families often work as a system, BA theory looks specifically at how this system manages its boundaries. If unclear or confusing boundaries exist in the family, they will then be in and under stress, with the levels of stress being proportional to the level of ambiguity present.
Boundary ambiguity “... is ‘a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system’” (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 211). As with ambiguous loss and gain, these boundaries can be either physical or psychological. Historically, divorce and the experiences of ambiguity it brings, is one of the most studied topics in BA research (Carroll et al., 2007). The situation of divorce and its relation to ambiguity provides a strong breeding ground for boundary ambiguity to become a problem within family reorganization and healing. Recently:

... studies [that] have investigated boundary changes associated with remarriage and stepfamily situations... [whose] results indicated that a significant number of remarried couples had ambiguous boundaries in that they had differing perceptions of family membership and the [they] children regarded as residing inside or outside the home. (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 219)

Even though the amount of scholarly attention on stepfamilies and boundary ambiguity is on the rise, there still remains a lack of research in this area. Not many studies, according to Stewart (2005), “... have examined boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies” (p. 1002).

One important aspect of BA theory to note is its relation to ambiguous loss and gain. Many scholars have mistakenly used boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss/gain as interchangeable terms that mean the same thing. Indeed, in a thirty year review of BA theory, researchers point out that “... the frequent interchanging of these terms has contributed to divergent use of these constructs from their original articulation” (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 224). To explain these constructs correctly, it is best to think about
ambiguous loss/gain as a specific type of situation, an unclear loss or an unclear gain (i.e., divorce, remarriage, inclusion of new family members, etc.). BA, on the other hand, is the amount of perceived ambiguity that is experienced along a range of many different types of stressful situations.

Although these constructs have been confused, once the distinction between them is made, it is easy to see how they work together to explain what a family may be experiencing. This “distinction is critical because it allows scholars to study not only congruent or expected associations between family loss and boundaries,” like an unclear loss leading to higher boundary ambiguity, “but also incongruent or unexpected patterns as well,” like a clear cut loss with higher amounts of boundary ambiguity (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 224). The figure below explains the meaning of boundary ambiguity and how it works in relationship with the occurrence of ambiguous loss.

A loss, as explained in this figure, can either be ambiguous, with situational ambiguity, or clear-cut, with no situational ambiguity. The results of these losses can either increase boundary ambiguity or, due to clearer boundaries surrounding the loss, see no increase. Boundary ambiguity is how ambiguous or uncertain the loss is perceived by the family members. For example, a clear-cut loss with high boundary ambiguity could be the death of a loved one. It is clear that the loved one is no longer alive, yet it may create ambiguous family boundaries for those still remaining in the family system. There are various ways any loss experience can result in boundary ambiguity, due to the fact that boundary ambiguity, whether high or low, is based on how the individual suffering the loss perceives it.

It is important to note that for the purpose of this study, systems theory and boundary ambiguity theory were used as lenses through which researchers could view participants’ experiences. Systems theory is useful in its structure, assumption of holism, and the existence of boundaries within that system. BA theory is useful in its ability to speak for the power of individual and familial perception of family roles, rituals, and tasks— and its potential correlation with the situation of ambiguous loss/gain. Boundary ambiguity is not the variable being measured; rather it is the presence, or specific situation, of ambiguous loss/gain within the stepfamily system and its impact on the stepchild’s role and wellbeing.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This thesis was a qualitative study that used semistructured interviews to provide a retrospective view of participants’ experiences with ambiguous loss in the stepfamily system. Systems theory and boundary ambiguity theory were used to determine if ambiguous loss existed within the stepfamily system and if so, how it impacted the participants. The first three research objectives of this study were to learn the participants’ perspectives about their individual relationships within the family system: their biological parent, stepparent, and siblings. The fourth research objective was to discover the participants’ perception of their stepfamily as a whole and their own personal role within it.

Individual interviews were conducted using a semistructured interview script. When applicable, probing questions were asked for clarification or further explanation as the participants’ family circumstances allowed. The interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder, then transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. After interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed by the primary researcher to assess for common themes.

Participants and Participant Recruitment

Inclusion criteria. To participate in this study, there were delimitations set in place as inclusion criteria. The participants had to meet the following criteria: parents must be divorced or separated; parents must be repartnered or remarried; must have siblings; must be between 18-34 years of age.
Participants. This study had 7 participants, 4 females and 3 males. Participants ranged from 24-34 years of age and 3 were current college students. Two sets of siblings were interviewed during the course of this study: two twin brothers, and two sisters. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants and their family members. The complete list of participants and identifying demographic data are seen in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Demographic Data</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
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<td>Cliff</td>
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<td>Tracy</td>
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<td>Lauren</td>
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<td>Carol</td>
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<td>Karrie</td>
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Participant recruitment. Participants were recruited through a variety of ways. First, announcements about the study were made in undergraduate courses during the semester. The announcement included the researcher’s contact information for any interested parties. Second, a message was posted on a student Facebook page, with information regarding the study and the researcher’s contact information (see Appendix
B). Third, this message was also sent via email to undergraduate students of a variety of majors and backgrounds, by agreeing and supporting faculty members. Fourth, the snowball effect proved to be a recruiting tool, as participants shared information about the study with others.

**Informed consent process.** Once a participant volunteered to participate in the study, the study was explained, informing the participant that he/she may back out at any time, without consequence. A consent form was then presented and explained, and all participant questions were answered (see Appendix D, E). At this point, if the participant was still interested in this study, the consent form was signed, a copy was given to the participant for his or her records, and the primary researcher also kept a copy. Four interviews were conducted in person and three were conducted over the telephone. If the interview was being conducted over the phone, the participant was emailed a copy of the consent form to read over, and prior to the interview it was read over together with the primary researcher, allowing time for questions from the participant before proceeding. These consent forms did not require a signature, yet each participant was asked to email the primary research confirming that they understood the consent form and the study and agreed to participate. Verbal consent was asked for while on the phone, as most participants did not send an email. All consent information and data were stored in a locked, secure, filing cabinet. The data and consent information were kept in separate compartments.

Participants were made aware that the interview would be audio recorded and transcribed. They were assured that once the interview was transcribed, the audio
recording would be deleted. It was explained that the data from the recording and the transcription would be stored in a locked cabinet to help maintain confidentiality. In addition, the participants were informed that the use of pseudonyms would serve as another way to protect their identity, and the list connecting their names to their assigned pseudonyms would be destroyed after all transcription was completed.

Procedure and Approach to Analysis

Interview procedure. Before engaging in the interview, the participants were asked to complete a demographic form including, asking: age, gender, and ethnicity (see Appendix A). The demographic questionnaire also asked for information about age of the participant when the life events of divorce occurred, the length of time that passed between the divorce and later remarriage, if they have any siblings (biological, half, or step) who they lived with after the divorce, and lastly how geographically close the participant was to the noncustodial parent.

Semistructured interviews were then conducted with each participant, examining the presence and role of ambiguous loss and gain in their stepfamily system (see Appendix C). The interview script was used for each interview; however, depending on the individual participant’s family structure, the primary researcher would slightly change the phrasing of the question, ask probing questions, or omit a certain question that did not pertain to the participant’s circumstances. The interviews were conducted in the place of the participant’s choosing, oftentimes in their own home, or over the phone in the privacy of the researcher’s home, as a guarantee of privacy for the participant. It was encouraged
to select a place and time that would offer limited to no distractions and plenty of privacy to keep their interview as confidential and safe as possible.

After the interviews were finished, a debriefing form was given and explained to the participant (see Appendix E). The debriefing form simply restated the purpose of the study, thanked him/her for participating, and gave information for additional resources should he/she want to pursue professional help regarding his or her past experiences.

**Approach to analysis.** This thesis used systems theory and boundary ambiguity theory as a combined lens to examine whether ambiguous loss existed in the stepfamily system, and if so what type of impact it had on the participant. Ambiguous loss is shown to be related to the experience divorce, yet there is little research on ambiguous loss or gain in stepfamily settings (Boss, 1999).

For the purposes of this study, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. All names of the participants and any family members they named were changed to maintain confidentiality. The transcriptions were then studied for common themes and experiences of the participants. Each interview was studied within the context of the entire interview set. For instance, although the interviews were read individually, themes were collected when it was clear a theme emerged across more than one individual interview. Once the first set of themes were discovered, which appeared across all interviews, the transcriptions were then examined twice more, to ensure the validity and accuracy of the themes collected. Through research and analysis of the raw data from participants, six major common experiences or feelings emerged that linked ambiguous loss and gain to the stepfamily system.
Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis Findings

This study’s purpose was to determine if ambiguous loss and gain exist in the stepfamily system by examining relationships within the stepfamily and how the participant viewed their stepfamily as a whole, with their own role in it being evaluated. Upon completion of the participant interviews, several common themes emerged that connected the existence of ambiguous loss and gain to the stepfamily experience. Although many issues were brought to life during the participant interviews, there are six main themes that were consistent across many of the interviews: (a) the media’s role in forming familial expectations, (b) the influence of the custodial parent on the child’s outside relationships and perceptions of those relationships, (c) the closest reported relationship was with the sibling closest in age, (d) the influence of geographical distance on relationships, (e) the reported protective feelings and sense of relief for males when their mothers remarried, and (f) the presence of a psychological “real” family.

The Media’s Role in Forming Familial Expectations

One of the most prominent themes that populated the research findings was the role that media plays in our lives, specifically in shaping expectations for relationships and family interactions. In six of seven interviews, media came up in the conversation as being an important way for the participant to understand family relationships and roles. With the media holding such influence on the perceptions and expectations of what family is, the loss of normalcy experienced with divorce and remarriage can oftentimes be magnified when real life families do not look like those on television shows or movies. When placed in a situation with no societal script on how to navigate it, like stepfamily
reorganization, we grow to depend on what we can see. This for many of the participants was in the media.

Although the individual references to media varied, it was very clear that it played an important, yet perhaps brief, part in how the participant expected their new stepfamily to work. It was observed that media played a role in the beginning of the stepfamily formation or during the participant’s childhood, whichever occurred first. Once the participants and their families were able to establish a routine, media’s impact was not as strong. When asked if there were any expectations of what a stepfamily would be like, many participants referenced shows they watched when they were younger. Reportedly these shows showcased familial values and interactions as the way that they desired their family to be. Lauren, age 30, stated that “I think I was too young to have a real idea of what to expect, except that I watched Little House on the Prairie and that is what I thought family should be.”

Indeed, when asked if being in a stepfamily was different than what he expected, Phillip, age 24, answered, “You grow up in our era and watch things like old Brady Bunch re-runs and Step by Step and expect some big giant happy family and you guys all sing songs and all that happy shit . . . it is what I expected it to be, everybody gets along for the most part.” Phillip admits that media had some influence as to what he expected a stepfamily to be like as a younger child. Now gaining a new stepfamily as a young adult, and immersed in the reality of his own situation, he sees that his expectations when he was younger were skewed.
Another way the media gained influence on family expectations was if the participant did not have friends or family members in a similar family structure. Karrie, age 27, shared “. . . I would see shows but I didn’t have any friends at that point with stepsiblings so I had expectations because of the show *Step by Step.*” With little in her immediate environment to help her process through the changes her family was experiencing, she did not have any resources to turn to other than the media. Karrie continued by saying, “I guess I thought that we would have a similar relationship [as in the show] because of the fact our parents were together. If I had any thoughts about what [having a stepfamily] was like before, it was different than how it actually turned out.”

With cases like Phillip’s and Karrie’s, boundary ambiguity existed in the stepfamily system because of the ambiguous loss experienced from parental divorce and remarriage—the loss of their sense of family and normalcy. The media served as a channel for ambiguous loss to impact the participants’ perception of what a stepfamily should be. When Karrie and Phillip experienced it to be different, the experience of ambiguous loss was magnified for them.

The media also impacts the family as a whole, not necessarily through the channel of the child. In this instance, the media played into the family through an adult. Carol, age 27, stated that the movie *Stepmom*, when it first came out impacted her family through her mother:

I remember when the movie came out and it was around the time my mom became a stepmom. She grabbed onto that movie and identified with the stepmom in it, my stepsiblings didn’t really like her and were against her. So I think she felt
different from that movie and it affected our family. It was a competition too
between my mom and their mom . . . and I remember seeing such animosity all
the time.

Even though Carol’s expectations in this situation were not directly impacted by her own
experience with the media, her mother’s experience trickled down into the whole family,
allowing the media to influence expectation of what a stepfamily should be and how their
family interacted.

These examples provided by the participant show that the family is a system. In
this system are intricate and functional relationships and boundaries that change and
adapt over time. The media and larger culture itself plays a role in the family unit, no
matter the structure, as systems theory states. Media clearly played a role in the
participants’ lives specifically related to their family relationships and expectations. From
the results, seeing how the media portrays family life and the participants comparing it to
their own is an important connection. If a television show, movie, or magazine shows a
child what a family should look like, and theirs is different, that causes an ambiguous
puzzle to navigate. Does this mean that one family-type is better than the other? This
could be a way for any ambiguous loss experienced in the stepfamily to show itself,
perhaps causing higher boundary ambiguity in participants’ perceptions of their family
and its members.

Although the media clearly plays a role in ambiguous loss existing in the
stepfamily system, it is important to note that it may not have a lasting effect on the
participant and stepfamily itself. It was observed that the impact of media on the
The stepfamily was brief and occurred in the very beginning of the family formation. With family relationships developing over time, boundaries within the family structure changing, and the participants getting use to their “new” family rules and rituals, the impact that the media once had could slowly give way to their expectations being based on their real relationships and individual experiences rather than the larger culture and media itself. The ambiguous loss experience could possibly be resolved as the stressful situations that a changing family structure causes are resolved and as boundary ambiguity decreases.

The Custodial Parent’s Influence

Another strong theme that emerged from the results was that of the custodial parent’s influence. The biological mother, in the majority of cases, had the strongest influence on participants’ relationships and perceptions of relationships with other family members. Importantly, most participants lived with their biological mother after their parents’ divorce; however, even if they did not live with their mother she was still named as the person with the most influence over their relationships. In every interview, there was mention of the mother’s influence on participants’ relationships outside of that subsystem, whether positive or negative, intentional or unintentional. The biological mother had a direct influence and served as a channel for boundary ambiguity to enter into the stepfamily, and to show that ambiguous loss did exist in the family system. When asked if his mom impacted any of his other relationships, Phillip remarked, “I think she tried. I think she kinda pushed so hard it turned me away from him [my stepdad]. She pushed him on us so hard that it kinda made me not care for a while.” Whether or not it
was Phillip’s mother’s intent to push her significant other on her children, it was perceived that way by the participant. This had a direct result on the participant’s relationship with his stepdad. Ambiguous gain was present in the stepfamily system when Phillip’s stepdad first came into the family. A new person was in the family, there was pressure to bond and become close, yet Phillip didn’t have the desire to, his stepdad was a stranger and wanted to treat him as such.

According to the majority of the results, it was more of what the mothers said that influenced relationships rather than the practicality of arranging visitations or allowing access to other family members. Ben, age 27, shared that he:

. . . had some loyalty issues and resentment. I think a lot of that was from conversations with my mom. She was very vocal . . . she told me a lot of things I wish she didn’t tell me. But she was in charge of the visitation and she never made me or restricted me from going to visit my father. I think she went over and beyond to make it work.

The mother’s impact, when negative, served as a channel for boundary ambiguity to enter into the family, causing confusion and stress about relationships and their meaning to the participant. For example, Carol, when speaking about her mother’s influence on her other relationships stated, “I felt torn, like I was caught in the middle. I didn’t know if I was allowed to be nice to him [stepdad after a split] or what my mom wanted. It was muddied . . . I sort of had disdain for him because my mom did but I had a fondness for him because he was kind and played with me.”
Likewise, Tracy recalls that when her parents got divorced “. . . we were mad at our dad. We didn’t realize why, we just knew he was the parent we weren’t supposed to like. And we sided with our mom and looking back now, the choices would be reversed.” Lauren, Tracy’s younger sister, during her own interview agreed, stating that her mom “would influence me to like them [boyfriends, stepdads] when she wanted me to and not like them when she didn’t want me to like them.” In cases like Ben’s, Tracy’s, and Lauren’s, their mother’s words and attitude affected their perceptions of their outside relationships, mostly with their father or stepfather. Their perceptions of these relationships being touched, causing boundary ambiguity of who is in and out of the family, is a clear symptom of the existence of ambiguous loss and gain.

However, there were also positive encounters of participants’ moms influencing relationships. Encouragement to visit, to develop good relationships and to make new memories were some of the ways that mothers positively influenced their children’s outside relationships. Karrie reported, “she [mother] was always supportive of the idea that my dad was in a different family. I would come home with stories about my visits and she never said anything negative or that would change my view . . . she would mostly just listen.” This type of experience for Karrie allowed her to feel closer to both parents, able to share stories from one family to another, and decreased feelings of boundary ambiguity.

In addition to impacting participants’ relationships, or perceptions of those relationships, parental influence also showed up in the results as some of the participants remembered a lack of attention from their mothers. With new members entering the
family on top of the life change that divorce and remarriage bring, a few participants brought up instances where they felt their mother didn’t pay attention to them like she should have. When asked if he was worried when new people started to enter his family, Cliff replied:

    . . . maybe a little bit. I remember my mom bringing guys home . . . I would always feel like she would stop paying attention to me and Phillip. I don’t know if that is actually true or if that is just how we saw it because we were so used to things being a certain way. I kinda felt like I was losing that.

It is important here that Cliff noted he was not sure if what he felt was actually what happened or his perception of what happened because it was not his normal experience, which he felt like he “lost” during his experiences of his mom dating new people. For Tracy, she admitted that when she noticed her mom’s attention shifting she “. . . kinda felt hurt. I have to deal with all the responsibility and she was paying attention to my stepfather. I was put aside and there was less attention for me . . . it created resentment.”

In both of these instances, the importance does not lie with the true experience of losing their mother’s attention, but in the perception of it. Even the feeling they lost time with their mother welcomed boundary ambiguity into the family system and expounded on the ambiguous loss and gain experience.

**Sibling: Reported Closest Family Member Relationship**

When asked to define family, most participants of this study brought up that family did not necessarily have to be people related to you by blood or marriage. Many referenced a strong bond being the most important thing to qualify someone as a family
member. A theme unique to five participants emerged when they were asked if they were closest to any particular family members. The family member they all named they were closest to was their sibling that was closest in age, which they had experienced everything with. For these participants, four of them were part of sibling sets; two twin brothers and two sisters, and one was raised with a cousin whom she felt like was her brother.

What stood out about all the reasons the participants offered for why they felt so close to their sibling, was that they all referenced being there with each other. There was not a large age difference between any of them and they were able to grow up together, rather than siblings that were “split” up between parents or families or siblings that were in and out of the house at different times. Cliff shared that he and his brother Phillip “... went through a lot together. Starting with the divorce ... it was always me and him. We would always do stuff together. It was just us. I’m not that close with my sister because she is so much older than us.” Phillip agreed, “my twin brother is my best friend and I don’t know where I would be in life if I were a single child or didn’t have him. There was always just Cliff. With my sister there is just such an age gap. We aren’t as close as I would like.”

Tracy stated, “... the closest I feel is with my younger sister. She went through everything I went through. I think growing up together brings you close.” Lauren supplemented Tracy’s thoughts by saying “I feel closer to Tracy than probably any of my other family because we have been together for everything.” Having a consistent sibling interaction, having someone to go through these family changes with, seems to be for
these participants something that was extremely helpful. It is interesting to note that no participants listed a step or half-sibling as someone they were closest to. This could be because of the practical issues of not living together full time, meeting one another after they were older, another parental divorce, and the time it takes to develop a close relationship. Within all of these practical issues lies the existence of ambiguous gain. New people enter into the family system, all at once. Within the practicalities of daily life, for example, stepsiblings not living together full-time, ambiguous family boundaries are created. Without the shared experience of growing up together, which is so powerful for most participants, the relationship may not be comparable to having biological siblings or siblings close to the participants’ own age.

One of the reasons family research is so interesting is that no two families are the same. Carol, with no biological siblings, felt closest to her cousin with whom she was raised while she was younger. She shared, “Thomas is like my brother. Because I have a relationship with him that feels like a biological, normal, blood-brother relationship, and I always have, I don’t think I ever really had a normal feeling of a sibling relationship with any of my stepsiblings.” In Carol’s situation, her knowing what it felt like to have a relationship that felt like a closer sibling relationship, all of her other sibling relationships paled in comparison. In Carol’s family, her experience with her stepsiblings did not last long. Her mother and stepdad got a divorce, separating the parents and the siblings. The fact that she only had a number of years with her stepsiblings most likely played a role in a lack of connection forming. Carol shared that she felt:
with stepsiblings it’s different because when your parents get married there are these new people and we moved into my stepdad’s house that that was their house and their school and their family. We were in their territory. It was like we were intruders so there was this pressure of ‘I hope they like me,’ ‘I have to make sure they like me’ . . . I just wanted it to be normal . . . I wanted it to feel like a sisterly relationship which I never had.

The desire to connect was present for Carol, but it originated out of a necessity to feel like she belonged to the family, from feelings of pressure and worry. This is a clear experience of ambiguous gain in the stepfamily system. Being in “their” house, “their” school, etc., caused Carol to lack ownership thereby preventing her new family and lifestyle from becoming her new normal. Her adjustment to this remarriage and stepfamily was not resolved.

**Geographical Distance**

Another powerful theme that emerged during the interviews was the part geographical distance from parents played in the lives of the participants. Although geographical distance is not unique to this study, as it shows up often in divorce research, it was still an important part of many participants’ experience of ambiguous loss and gain. Of the interviews that proximity showed up in, it was a major theme and shaped the whole interview by returning to the conversation multiple times, even without prompting. Because it obviously had such a large impact on those who experienced it, the researcher felt it necessary to report on it. It did not take long for the topic of distance to come up in
the interview with Tracy. When describing her family experience she shared that she and her sister:

. . . moved away and weren’t with him [dad]. The fact that he missed out on seeing us grow up, even though we got to talk to him . . . he missed out on milestones . . . we didn’t see each other or know each other except through occasional phone calls and letters. It still isn’t like having him there to hug you. Being a daily part of each other’s lives, being physically together is an important part of relationship growth and longevity. Although Tracy and her father still reportedly maintained a good relationship, it was not the kind of relationship Tracy wanted. She wanted more. This is a clear example of ambiguous loss existing in the family system, which is nothing new to family research on divorce. A parent being physically absent yet psychologically present fits the mold for ambiguous loss and higher boundary ambiguity experienced in the family. What research on this area may not show, as Tracy’s testimony does, is the length of time these feelings of boundary ambiguity and the existence of ambiguous loss last in the family system. Although her father passed away in her late teenage years, it could still be seen that the distance apart from him while he was alive impacted her today.

In Karrie’s situation, ambiguous loss was coupled with ambiguous gain because of the distance from her father. She shared how difficult it was for her to be away from her dad: “[Y]ou can only do so much through the phone and letters and pictures. It isn’t actually physically being with each other. I feel that my experience was harder [than other friends with divorced parents] because I couldn’t just go down the street and see my
dad whenever I wanted.” When asked if being away from her dad so much still had an impact on her she stated, “I’ve come to terms with the fact he is so far away because it just turned into how my life is I guess.” Although Karrie stated she has come to terms with it, boundary ambiguity because of the experience of ambiguous loss was obviously still present in her life. Her relationship with her dad is not what she wants it be and that has not yet been resolved as she may suggest, rather I think it has just been passively accepted as “the way things are.” No feelings of power to change that relationship in a positive direction seem to exist for her.

In addition to experiencing ambiguous loss, she also experienced ambiguous gain through the geographical distance she and her father experienced. Karrie felt, ... dad knew more about my stepsiblings’ lives. He knew more about their lives because he was there with them. They lived together. He was around them. So he would help with their problems and you know dumb stuff like pick them up from the movies or know who the stepsister was dating or was around for the first time when they drove for the first time. You know the dumb stuff that builds a relationship. I wanted that but it couldn’t happen. We weren’t around for each other’s daily lives. I felt a little left out. I was resentful it couldn’t be us.

Her feelings here show that ambiguous gain played a large role in her stepfamily system because of the distance. She was not able to have the relationship she wanted with her dad and saw what kind of relationship he was able to have with her new stepsiblings. Jealousy and resentment grew from seeing what she felt she could never have. Her actual relationship with her dad did not change, but her perceived one did. She felt that to have a
meaningful relationship you had to be there for “daily” life, yet her relationship with her dad looked different than what she thought, resulting in a high amount of boundary ambiguity.

Ambiguous gain even came in to play when she would be able to go and visit her dad and stepfamily. Karrie said that “I felt like a visitor. I tried to fall into how their family worked . . . I felt like their lives would be the same . . . would continue to be all the same and then I would just add into the picture.” She shared that the distance away from her dad and her new family did not foster great relationship growth, “It never escalated to anything relationship-wise. A lot of times when I visited we [stepsiblings] didn’t even associate.” Karrie did not feel like she had a stepfamily, no ownership or role in how the family worked. Ambiguous gain is coupled here with ambiguous loss. She “lost” her father and hardly saw him, and “gained” a new family who got to enjoy her father the way she wanted to. Although Karrie states she has come to terms with how things are, it was clear that feelings of loss are still present.

The Protective Nature of Males

In two out of three interviews of male participants the common theme emerged of them experiencing protective feelings towards their mothers, pressure to be a “man,” and feelings of relief when a stepfather entered the picture. It seemed for each participant as he aged, feeling protective of their single mom was a normal experience. Cliff shared, “as I got older I got more like ‘Who is this and why is he here’ toward guys my mom brought home . . . I got more judging, more protective.” Seeing a new man enter into the previous role in the family held by his father, Cliff admits to being skeptical about those entering
his family. Because of the ambiguity of his own role in the family after the structure changed with divorce, Cliff felt the responsibility to protect his mom. This was only made stronger when other men came into the picture.

When participants experienced their mothers remarrying, settling into a permanent relationship with someone, the protective feelings dissipated into relief. In Ben’s reflections, he stated, “I mean I wanted to protect my mom as a young man [and] when Owen moved in I felt like a lot of the responsibility I had was relieved . . . so I was relieved. I was fourteen. I didn’t really know what I was supposed to do.” These feelings of protection and increased responsibility could stem from many factors, like our culture’s way of socializing the male gender. However, it could come from the experience of ambiguous loss with their father’s once-occupied role being open, needing someone to fill it. Cliff shared that “as far as a man being in my mom’s life I always felt like it was me. And when she got remarried I felt like I didn’t have to be that anymore.” This role relief is a positive experience because gaining new family members takes what was once a burden or stressor off of the child. The role that was empty, and then assumed by the child, is now filled again by an appropriate adult.

**The Psychological Presence of the “Real” Family**

An important theme that appeared in five of the seven interviews was that of a psychologically present “real” family. What participants considered their “real” family was distinct and set apart from their stepfamily members. To gauge this, the participants were asked if they had experienced any internal disputes about who made up their family. Carol had a difficult time responding: “I feel like there are different families . . . I felt like
internally I thought my aunt, my cousin, and my mom were my family. I felt like that was my family and all these extras that come in and out, like the steps, will just be here for a little while . . . like they aren’t lasting.” Due to the lack of permanency, Carol felt like her real family was the one she was raised in . . . that all the other members were “extras” that came and went as they pleased, not forming close relationships with them. Karrie had a similar view. She stated “I guess I consider my stepmom and step siblings family but in a different way than I consider my mom and dad and closest friends even.” The additional members were acknowledged but viewed differently from who those participants felt made up their “real” family.

In Tracy’s experience, the members who remained constant in her life were the ones who made up what she felt were her real family; her sibling whom she grew up with, her mother and grandmother whom she lived with, and her dad whom she had to move away from and missed.

As a kid you say to yourself “I know who my mom is and who my dad is but there is a whole other set of family too” . . . my half-sisters and brother and stepfather. My grandma lived with us too so she was always in the mix and my for real sister was there. I felt like my mom was my mom, my dad was my dad, my grandma was my grandma, and my sister was my sister. The other ones were there too but they were not the same as my for real family.

Interestingly Tracy distinguished her biological sister from her other siblings here, although she still called her half-siblings family, her “for real sister” was her biological sibling. This is a good example of ambiguous gain, where she was raised to treat her half-
siblings like family, to accept them as such, yet when it came down to her psychologically present “real” family, only her biological family members made it in.

In addition to participants feeling that their real family was made up of those with whom they were raised, the presence of the psychological family seemed important to distinguish so no one was replaced. Phillip shared, “I love Bill, but I don’t consider him my stepdad. He is just my mom’s husband. I have one dad. I am only ever going to have one dad. Just the same if my dad got remarried it would be his wife, not my stepmom. I don’t buy into that. I have a mom and a dad and I don’t need another one.” The function of the psychological family here seems to preserve the roles of his biological members. This does not mean Phillip does not love his additional family members; however, the roles they play in his life are different from those played by his “real” family members like his mom or his dad. This may be the response to experiencing ambiguous gain in the stepfamily, allowing Phillip some semblance of control in an ambiguous situation with his family. His “real” family is comprised of those he allows to play a more functional role, while the new, additional family members are viewed in the context of their relationship and not given the ability to impact Phillip as strongly.

When asked if she experienced any internal disputes about who made up her family, Lauren had a unique response. Instead of limiting the members in her “real” family, she had a different experience. “I accepted that that was my family even though I felt like people we missing. Like my dad and my older siblings were missing but I was with my mom so I was with family.” This response shows more of an experience of ambiguous loss rather than ambiguous gain. The loss she experienced from the divorce
and moving away from her father and his previous children permeated into her family with her mom, sister and stepdad. She felt that everyone was her real family, yet it was not complete as it should be. Boss (1999) points out that a psychological family exists, with everyone. For the participants it is very clear that it does. For some, the psychological “real” family was limited to those to whom they are closest, spent the most time with, or were raised with. For others, the “real” family members were those who had a role that could not be replaced by new members entering the family system. No matter the answer to the question, in some way these participants experience a “real” psychological family, and when it differs from what is experienced externally, due to ambiguous loss and gain, boundary ambiguity can result.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the existence of ambiguous loss and gain in the stepfamily system and how it impacted the child’s role in the family. By engaging in semistructured interviews with participants, many topics were explored and many issues were brought out in the open. There were six common themes that emerged from the data that gave insight into the role ambiguous loss and gain played in the family system. The results showed that for each participant some form of ambiguous loss and gain was experienced at some point in time; for some it was a brief moment that dissolved after any boundary ambiguity was resolved, yet for others it is still experienced in their young adult lives, perhaps only in a more subtle way than before.

Limitations

The main limitations to this study exist in the population used. The sample size acquired was small, with only 7 participants. The geographical location was limited to university students or community members in the Midwest. These limitations do not allow for the findings of this study to be generalized to the general population, due to the lack of diversity. An additional limitation was the “focal child” phenomena, where one child from one family was interviewed without their siblings. This does not allow for all results to be easily generalized to the wider population, as each sibling in one family may report different experiences (Ahrons, 2011).

Considerations and Next Steps

The world of research is always growing, with one research study contributing to furthering the purpose of another. Based on the findings in this study, it is important to note areas in which more research, or next steps, could be taken. One further area of
study could employ family case studies. Instead of interviewing just one member of the family, it would be helpful to study the family as a whole system and as individual units simultaneously. The perceptions of the parents and the children could be gained through this method of study, which is lacking in this kind of family research. This holistic and systems-based approach could enable more in-depth findings on relationships, ambiguous loss and gain, role changes within the family, and possibly contribute to the development of healthy psychological counseling for the benefits of families dealing with any kind of ambiguous loss. It was noted in this study previously that studying one member of the family or “a focal child” was considered a limitation. Although there were two sets of sibling participants in this research, further research should focus on siblings of the same family.

Another further area of study could focus solely on the sibling relationships and how they feel about being “separated.” Findings in this study showed that siblings with a large age gap did not feel as close as siblings with a small age gap. With living in and out of different households in stepfamilies or being separated by a large age gap, research focused on these aspects of stepfamily life could lend insight into how strong that relationship is and dive further into the ambiguous loss and gain experienced within that subsystem. A wide variety of research exists on how children fare when they live separately from their parent due to divorce; an increased focus on this same situation within the sibling relationship has the potential to bring programs for siblings, support groups, counseling, and awareness to any ambiguous loss experienced.
In addition to focusing more research on specific relationships within the family, studying the use and power of the labels we place on those relationships could be a next step to take in stepfamily research. In this study, the labels that were applied were used by the participants. For example, if someone were to refer to their “stepdad” versus their “father,” it was honored. This maintained consistency within the interview, but also allowed insights into how labels on family members operate within our culture. One distinct case occurred with Tracy calling her half-siblings “sisters and brother,” yet when she referred to her biological sister she said “…my for real sister.” More research on how labeling relationships works within our culture and the deeper meaning behind the label would be helpful in stepfamily research in particular. Viewing these labels through the lens of boundary ambiguity to examine if the label has any link to the relationship could contribute to more fully understanding the stepfamily system, and the importance and power of the labels we provide as a culture for families to use.

Making the research done on ambiguous loss in the family setting applicable is another next step to consider. There are many social programs designed to help families and children cope after a divorce. One popular resource is called the SMILE (Start Making it Livable for Everyone) Program, which aims to educate parents about the impact of divorce on themselves, their children, and to promote healthy coping in both children and adults (Osthaus, 2006-2013). This program has much to offer, yet is missing one component. Although it does speak of the seven stages of grief as applied to divorce, ambiguous loss is not yet included in the educational repertoire. Including ambiguous loss and gain in this program would increase the knowledge parents have to
deal with it, if loss and gain occur in their own family. Incorporating what ambiguous loss and gain means, how it impacts individuals, especially in relation to child developmental milestones, would serve as a great educational opportunity for parents. After becoming aware of the issue and reaching understanding, parents could seek out more information or counseling for both themselves and their children to help decrease any boundary ambiguity experienced and possibly resolve any lingering ambiguous loss issues.

Curriculum Implications

In addition to potential contribution to further areas of study, this thesis raises awareness about the gaps in our culture where ambiguous loss and ambiguous gain should be explained. One practical way to meet this need would be to include more of ambiguous loss and gain in child and family studies curricula, particularly at the collegiate level. Instead of discussing ambiguous loss in a course about grief and bereavement, why not discuss it in the introduction class to most family studies majors? These classes examine and explore family structures, family dynamics, family life cycle, and communication within families. If ambiguous loss and gain are such prominent experiences, with high consequences if not resolved, our family studies curriculum should include such a powerful topic.

Practitioner Implications

For families to gain a practical handle on ambiguous loss and ambiguous gain, those who come into contact with them in a professional capacity have a responsibility to offer their expertise. For those in professional roles such as Certified Family Life
Educators, Certified Child Life Specialists, clinicians, social workers, and teachers, ambiguous loss could be something the families they service are dealing with.

Ambiguous loss and gain should be considered as a new aspect of the stepfamily system. Its importance is paramount when stepfamilies may face this kind of grief that is difficult to resolve. Increasing education about ambiguous loss within the academic and professional communities would allow our culture to help families who experience it.

The common purpose of many of these next steps in research is to raise awareness and educate about ambiguous loss. According to Boss’ research, the grief experienced with ambiguous loss is unresolved in large part due to the ambiguity surrounding the loss. If today’s culture were to shift slightly how it views ambiguous loss, the potential to help families reach closure and healthy resolution could be profound.

**Revisioning Papernow’s Seven Stages for Stepfamily Development.** The seven stages of stepfamily development provide a highly useful model when studying stepfamilies. Papernow’s (1984) research accounts for many emotions and potential issues that stepfamilies face on their way to healthy resolution. However, any notion of ambiguous loss and gain are missing from the model, even though ambiguous loss may exist while stepfamilies navigate their developmental steps. One purpose of research is to build on prior research, and with all that is known currently about ambiguous loss, its inclusion in stepfamily development is crucial. Further work on ambiguous loss and gain, with practical steps to take to enable families to deal with them, would be a helpful addition to Papernow’s existing work on stepfamily development.
The presence of ambiguous loss and gain can be seen in each of the three main phases of development: fantasy, immersion, and awareness, dividing the seven stages among each. In the first phase, family members entertain fantasies of what they expect their stepfamily life to be like. Both adults and children come into the first phase of development with formed expectations. For adults it may be that they expect it will be easy to love and develop new relationships with their stepchildren. For children, research indicates that they mostly fantasize about their biological parents getting back together. Through the lens of boundary ambiguity one can easily see where the situational ambiguous loss, experienced from the initial divorce and again with remarriage, is present. Life is now different for each member of the family, whether the changes that have occurred were positive or negative. The loss of normalcy, which helped formed their expectations and scripts for family behavior and interactions, causes new family reconstructions to be rife with ambiguity and uncertainty.

It would be recommended that during the first phase, ambiguous loss and gain would be introduced to the family members; for example, what it means, how it happens, and what to be aware of. Empathy for family members would be encouraged as well as open and respectful communication. Preparing the family for what might occur serves to equip them to begin processing and coping early on in stepfamily development. This could serve as an intervening action, which could decrease the amount of boundary ambiguity experienced during later stages of development.

In the second phase of stepfamily development, immersion, the previous fantasies held by the family members are now working against their reality. Family members can
see that their expectations were unrealistic, yet they must still deal with the feelings that the fantasies brought up compared to how their new family really is. Papernow (1984) shares that, in this stage, negative feelings can often emerge on the part of the stepparent, due to the lack of authority, permanence, and intimacy in their new family. Lifestyle differences here become obvious and a point of contention. Ambiguous loss and gain, and its impact on family members, is seen more clearly in these situations. Within this phase, new rituals and routines have not developed, so family members are living under their old set of rules and trying to apply them to their new family. This could serve to increase the boundary ambiguity experienced within the family, due to the situational ambiguous loss and gain becoming more prominent.

During the immersion phase, seeking out professional direction and help would be recommended, especially in regards to the role ambiguous loss and gain play in the family system. Helping the family set common goals and reach them could be a rewarding and uniting process. Here, open communication and empathy would still be emphasized so that each member could do their best to seek to understand how everyone is being impacted by all the new changes. Resources like workshops, therapy, counseling, and camps could be utilized in this phase to help the family and its individual members negotiate through a highly ambiguous time.

In the third and final phase of stepfamily development, awareness, the realization of what has been happening emerges. Family members now can start to make sense of what has been happening or why they have been having such trouble defining roles in their new family. A positive aspect of this phase is the recognition that occurs in the
family system; once they can identify a struggle, they are on the path to potentially fix it. However, their feelings and emotions still remain impacted.

At this point, family members are ready to receive support to guide them along toward healthy family resolution. Facing the truth about ambiguous loss and gain early on in the stepfamily development could serve to decrease the amount of resolution that needs to happen in this phase. Acting preemptively could serve to make this final stage a place where the development of genuine stepfamily relationships occurs without the heightened experience of boundary ambiguity. Should families still have lingering struggles, continuing with practical steps in a professional capacity would be encouraged.

**Revisioning the Stepping Ahead Program.** The Stepping Ahead Program, endorsed by the Stepfamily Association of America, is based on the work of *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead* (Burt, 1989), a widely used book for healthy stepfamily relationships. The program aims to educate and help stepfamilies gain a healthy balance. It has been foundational to family research and practitioners alike, providing guidance and insight into the stepfamily system and the negotiations that occur from within. For all of the positive effects it has had in helping stepfamilies, a vital aspect of stepfamily life has been left out of the model, facing ambiguous loss and gain. With the concept of ambiguous loss gaining more ground scientifically, it is important that family models used for stepfamilies include this aspect of stepfamily life.

The model’s steps can be divided into similar areas, the first being nurturing the couple relationship and the self. The couple spending a set amount of alone time together—making memories and strengthening their relationship—will permeate into the
family unit. Adults spending time for themselves is also recommended, doing a hobby they enjoy for example, bringing relaxation and feelings of independence. The second area in the steps toward a healthy stepfamily include nurturing the family relationships as a whole, nurturing the parent-child relationship, and building family trust. Within this arena practical suggestions are to appreciate the good in the new family using positive reinforcement, engaging in fun activities together, and making memories. These all serve to build relationships and allow for uncertainty to slowly become something of the past. Third, strengthening the bond between stepparent and stepchild and working with the child’s other household are ways to have a healthy stepfamily.

The experience of ambiguous loss and gain is evident within the stepfamily system. Each of the steps in the Stepping Ahead Program have practical suggestions for reaching program goals. For example, in nurturing the couple relationship, a weekly date night is encouraged. Ambiguous loss appears in this model because of what is not there, the lack of these practical steps existing in the family to develop healthy relationships within each subsystem. Ambiguous loss lives in the lack of normalcy, and lack of a sense of family. With the little amount of information on ambiguous loss and gain within this model, it is important to include as much information about what ambiguous loss is, how it impacts those in stepfamilies, and practical ways to counteract it. For example, family meetings where these feelings of loss can be specifically communicated and focused on would be encouraged to nourish family relationships. Attending a stepfamily retreat, focusing on the building trusting relationships stage, could also educate about ambiguous loss with various individual and group activities for both parents and children alike.
There are many ways that ambiguous loss and gain could be presented to stepfamilies in the hopes of reaching resolution within programs like the Stepping Ahead Program. The answer lies in shifting the focus in our culture on how loss is viewed and defined. Accepting that ambiguous loss and gain occur in the stepfamily system and preparing our stepfamilies to face it, could have generational impact on developing healthy relationships and reaching much needed closure from highly ambiguous grief.
References


Eldar-Avidan, D., Haj-Yahia, M. M., & Greenbaum, C. (2009). Divorce is a part of my life . . . resilience, survival, and vulnerability: Young adults’ perception of the


Appendix A: Demographics Form

Name: __________________________________________________________________

Please check the appropriate response or fill in the answer.

1. What is your age? _____________________________

2. What is your gender?  Male_______  Female___________
   Other___________

3. What is your race/ethnicity?
   a) _____ African American
   b) _____ Native American
   c) _____ Asian
   d) _____ Caucasian
   e) _____ Hispanic/Latino
   f) _____ Other (please describe)

4. What age were you when your parents divorced?
   ________________________________

5. How much time passed between your parents’ divorce and remarriage?
   __________________________________

6. Do you have any siblings? If yes, please list the gender and age of each sibling.
   __________________________________
   __________________________________
7. Who did you live with after your parents’ divorce?

8. Where does your non-custodial parent (the parent you did not live with) live in relation to you?
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Message

In Class Announcement/Email Message
Hello everyone! I am Tana Reynolds, a second year graduate student at Ohio University in the Child and Family Studies program. I am conducting a study to look at the presence and/or impact of loss in a stepfamily. For my study, I am looking for adults that are between 18-34 years of age, whose parents are separated/divorce and later got remarried or recoupled with someone else. In addition to that, anyone wanting to participate needs to have belonged to a stepfamily in the past or currently still does, and has siblings (biological, half or stepsiblings). The focus of my study is to find if any feelings or experiences of loss exist in a stepfamily and how that loss plays a part in that family, especially from the view of the child. Those who participate in my study will be asked to do a one-time interview asking about his or her memories, experiences, and relationships in their stepfamily. If you are willing to participate in my study, or if you would like any additional information please contact me directly at th244708@ohio.edu Thank you for your time and consideration!

Facebook Message
Hello everyone! Tana Reynolds, a second year graduate student at Ohio University in the Child and Family Studies program is conducting a study to look at the presence and/or impact of loss in a stepfamily. For her study, she is looking for adults that are between 18-34 years of age, whose parents are separated/divorce and later got remarried or recoupled with someone else. In addition to that, anyone wanting to participate needs to have belonged to a stepfamily in the past or currently still does, and has siblings (biological, half or stepsiblings). The focus of her study is to find if any feelings or experiences of loss exist in a stepfamily and how that loss plays a part in that family, especially from the view of the child. Those who participate in her study will be asked to do a one-time interview asking about his or her memories, experiences, and relationships in their stepfamily. If you are willing to participate in my study, or if you would like any additional information please contact Tana directly at th244708@ohio.edu Thank you for your time and consideration!
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Each question will have prompting questions that will be based on the family structure/custodial arrangement for each participant.

1. What is your definition of family?

2. What did your family (or specific family members) do to make you feel like a family?

3. Family Chronological Format: Can you retrace the circumstances of your parents’ divorce to your current family environment?

   (For example: any details you wish to share about the reasons your parents divorced, when they got a divorce, if they dated many people in between, when they got remarried, etc. Anything that has had an influence on the way your current family is).

4. Please describe your relationship with: (a) non-custodial parent, (b) stepparent, (c) siblings (biological, half, and step), (d) custodial parent

   Do you feel closer to certain family members? Who and why?

5. What was the most difficult part of your parents’ divorce and remarriage for you?

   Do you remember the thoughts and feelings you had at those times?

   Do you still have those same thoughts and feelings now?

6. Did you ever fantasize about your parents getting back together? If so, when did this stop?

7. Was your role with your biological family changed when your parents got remarried?

   Custodial parent? Biological siblings?
Did your custodial parent have any impact on your relationship with new stepfamily members?

(For example, access to see them, loyalty issues, communication, etc.)

8. Did your usual/past role in your family change with your new stepfamily?

Is your role the same now as it was then?

9. Did your relationship with your non-custodial parent change once they got remarried? If so, how? How did this change make you feel?

10. What did your stepfamily do to make you feel like you belonged? Did they do anything to make you feel like you didn’t belong?

11. Was being in a stepfamily different than what you expected?

12. Can you identify certain struggles you and your stepfamily had?

13. Did you have new family rules in your stepfamily that you didn’t have when your parents were married? Were these new rules difficult to get use to?

14. What, if anything, prevented you from getting close to your stepfamily members?

(For example: feelings of guilt, loyalty conflicts, jealously, resentment, etc.)

15. Did outside factors like friends, other family members, community members/institutions, the legal system, etc., impact the way you felt about your stepfamily?

16. Were there any internal (self) or external (others) disputes about who was your “real” family?

17. Was there an instance where you acknowledged a stepfamily member as a “real” family member and society didn’t? If so, how did this make you feel?
18. What advice would you give to someone whose parents just got remarried?

19. Do you have any questions for me or anything else you would like to say?
Appendix D: Consent Form

Title of Research: The Presence and Impact of Loss in Stepfamilies

Researcher: Tana Reynolds

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study is being done because the presence and impact of loss in a stepfamily is being examined. This study’s purpose is to see what your experience has been, when your parents divorced/separated and later remarried/partnered with someone and what stepfamily life is like for you today.

If you agree to participate, you will talk to a researcher for an interview. During this interview you will be asked questions about your own experiences, memories, and opinions on your stepfamily. The interview will also talk about your relationships in your stepfamily and how these relationships make you feel. You will be audio tape recorded. The interview should last 45 mins-1 hour.

You should not participate in this study if:

- your parents are not separated or divorced
- your parents did not remarry or partner with someone new
- if you do not have any siblings (biological, half, and step)
- if you are not between 18-34 years of age

Your participation in the study will last for the length of one interview. The minimum length of time for the interview should be 45 mins-1 hour.
Risks and Discomforts
You might feel discomfort about some topics that come up during the interview. However, you can refuse to answer any question you don’t want to answer and can leave the study at any time, with no penalty.

Should you want or need to talk to someone further, contact information for Ohio University’s counseling services will be provided for you.

Benefits
This study may help increase the awareness of the impact of having a stepfamily and how it impacts you, as the stepchild. This study will also enable more understanding about the experience of loss that comes with divorce/separation, with later remarriage and what role loss plays in a stepfamily.

Individually, you may benefit by having the ability to express your own thoughts and feelings in a safe and non-judgmental environment. This may help you feel emotional relief.

Confidentiality and Records
Your study information will be kept confidential. The researcher will be the only person who has access to all of your files. Audio tape recordings will not be shared and will be kept in a locked box. The audio recordings will be transcribed, and then destroyed. I estimate the tapes will be destroyed within three months of when you sign this form. The transcriptions will not have any information that will identify you. The researcher will use pseudonyms (fake names) in the transcriptions. The list connecting your real name to the pseudonym will be kept in a locked box only the researcher can access.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;

* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Tana Reynolds at th244708@ohio.edu or (330)-853-1309 OR Dr. Jennifer Chabot at chabot@ohio.edu or 740-593-2871

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.
By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature_________________________________________ Date ____________

Printed Name__________________________________________

Version Date: [insert 12/03/13]
Appendix E: Electronic Consent Form

Title of Research: The Presence and Impact of Loss in Stepfamilies

Researcher: Tana Reynolds

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. You can save or print a copy of this form for your own records.

If you are participating in this interview via telephone, a waiver of consent implies. However, this consent form will be emailed to you and explained. A response from you will be requested via email stating that you: (1) understand the study, (2) and agree to participate. This response will be kept by the researcher with all the other acquired consent forms.

Explanation of Study
This study is being done because the presence and impact of loss in a stepfamily is being examined. This study’s purpose is to see what your experience has been, when your parents divorced/separated and later remarried/partnered with someone and what stepfamily life is like for you today.

If you agree to participate, you will talk to a researcher for an interview. During this interview you will be asked questions about your own experiences, memories, and opinions on your stepfamily. The interview will also talk about your relationships in your stepfamily and how these relationships make you feel. The audio of the interview will be recorded.

You should not participate in this study if:
- your parents are not separated or divorced
- you do not have at least one parent that has been remarried or re-partnered with someone new
- if you do not have any siblings (biological, half, and step)
- if you are not between 18-34 years of age

Your participation in the study will last for the length of one interview. The minimum length of time for the interview should be 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Risks and Discomforts
You might feel discomfort about some topics that come up during the interview. However, you can refuse to answer any question you don’t want to answer and can leave
the study at any time, with no penalty.

Should you want or need to talk to someone further, contact information for Ohio University’s counseling services will be provided for you.

**Benefits**

This study may help increase the awareness of the impact of having a stepfamily and how it impacts stepchildren in particular. This study will also enable more understanding about the experience of loss that comes with divorce/separation, with later remarriage and what role loss plays in a stepfamily.

Individually, you may benefit by having the ability to express your own thoughts and feelings in a safe and non-judgmental environment. This may help you feel emotional relief.

**Confidentiality and Records**

Your study information will be kept confidential. The researcher will be the only person who has access to all of your files. Audio tape recordings will not be shared and will be kept in a locked box. The audio recordings will be transcribed, and then destroyed. I estimate the tapes will be destroyed by December of 2014. The transcriptions will not have any information that will identify you. The researcher will use pseudonyms (fake names) in the transcriptions. The list connecting your real name to the pseudonym will be kept in a locked box only the researcher can access. This list will be kept to ensure accuracy and consistency with the assignment of pseudonyms and will be destroyed when all transcriptions are completed, no later than December of 2014.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Tana Reynolds at th244708@ohio.edu or (330)-853-1309 OR advisor Dr. Jennifer Chabot at chabot@ohio.edu or 740-593-2871

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By verbally agreeing to participate in this study and/or sending a written response, you
agree that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
Appendix F: Debriefing Form

Research Title: The Presence and Impact of Loss in Stepfamilies
Researcher: Tana Reynolds

Thank you! You have successfully completed your part in this study.

This study was done because the presence and impact of loss in a stepfamily is being examined. This study’s purpose is to see what your experience has been, when your parents divorced/separated and later remarried/partnered with someone and what stepfamily life is like for you today.

Below, you will find information for you if you want or need to seek more help involving your parents’ divorce/separation, loss, or anything else.

Ohio University Counseling Services
Website: http://www.ohio.edu/counseling/index.cfm
Contact Info:
To make an appointment call 740-593-1616 or you can stop by their office on the 3rd floor of Hudson Health Center during their normal business hours: Monday-Friday 8:00 am- 5:00 pm.

Hudson Health Center is building # 35 on the campus map which can be accessed here: http://www.ohio.edu/athens/ioumap.html or printed copies can be found at Baker University Center.

Drop-In sessions can be for NEW or returning clients, who want to start therapy for the first time, or need someone to talk to in a crisis. Drop-In hours are: Monday-Friday 9:45 am- 3:15pm

*If you need to talk to someone immediately or in case of an emergency please call: 740-593-1616 or OUPD at 740-593-1911.