“I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE:’” YOUNG ADULT FEMALES’ RETROSPECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF PATERNAL ABSENCE AND AMBIGUOUS LOSS

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Emily Treat Atwell, LCSW, LMFT

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“The journey of one thousand miles begins with a single step” – Lao Tzu

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Chapter 1. Introduction and Statement of Purpose

Introduction

The phenomenon of single-parent households and its social impact on youth who grow up in such family units is a topic of interest in research, policy, and practice domains (Donahue, Garfinkel, McClanahan & Mincy, 2010; Lang & Zagorsky, 2001). The majority of single-parent families in the US are female-headed, with an absent father (ChildTrends: DataBank, 2015). Researchers studying the role that fathers play over the life course of their children, have suggested an association between paternal involvement and positive outcomes in children’s self-esteem, social ability, and overall quality of life (Carlson, 2006; Harris, Furstenberg, Marmer, 1998, & Biller, 1993). Moreover, the absence of a father can leave a child feeling a sense of abandonment and stress (McLanahan & Sigle-Rushton, 2004).

Researchers have suggested that when a non-death-related absence of a parent that is not clearly explained or is left unfinished occurs, for example in the case of military deployment (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermaid, & Weiss, 2008) or parental incarceration (Johnson & Easterling, 2012), a particular type of loss is experienced by family members. Boss terms this specific type of loss “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 1999, 2006). Ambiguous loss has been conceptualized as a relational concept in which the experience of having a family member physically absent and psychologically present, or vice versa, can produce feelings of confusion or uneasiness about an unresolved relationship (Boss, 2006). The phenomenon of ambiguous loss has key implications for the field of mental health, particularly for practitioners working with clients who have grown up with this type of loss.

In her theory of ambiguous loss, Boss (1999) proposed that how the emotional process involved in overcoming ordinary loss is very different from getting over less well-defined, or
unresolved loss. Boss (2006) elaborates that “[t]herapists … may resist the idea of a psychological family because their traditional training and psychometric instruments are geared to assess physical absence or presence (which can be seen and documented) rather than psychological absence or presence (which cannot)” (p. 33). This ambiguity can make this kind of loss difficult to treat. Boss (1999) describes how no specific intervention approach exists for treating ambiguous loss, yet. However, she discusses the usefulness of ambiguous loss theory in informing interventions with a diverse range of clients and for a variety of mental health symptoms (Boss, 1999). Boss suggests that:

because …ambiguous loss has not been yet discussed in …professional textbooks or courses, even veteran therapists have probably never heard of it. In many psychotherapy conferences the topic of loss… is absent, possibly because it is uncomfortable even for psychotherapists (Boss, 1999, p. 6).

Thus, lack of attention being paid to ambiguous loss in therapy suggests a need to understand how issues surrounding feelings of loss are conceptualized both in and out of therapy. In this study, I aim to add to the existing literature and research about ambiguous loss and its usefulness in guiding interventions with clients who have experienced losses when closure is not possible.

My interest in the topic of ambiguous loss and paternal absence stems from my clinical work with many individuals and families experiencing issues of unclear or confusing loss, often relating to the “absence” of a parent. My clinical practice experience has made me wonder whether ambiguous loss theory could be useful in helping to make sense of and to move beyond experiences such as those described by my clients. One way to explore whether the theory of ambiguous loss is pertinent to situations of paternal physical absence is by providing personal reflections of individuals who may have experienced it without fully understanding it.
Researching the extent to which an understanding of ambiguous loss provides language for individuals’ experiences of paternal absence could help them better address the social-emotional issues that can often result from unresolved, ambiguous loss.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The goal of this research is to use the theory of ambiguous loss as a conceptual framework for understanding the stories of a small number of young adult women (aged 22-32) who experienced paternal absence during their childhoods. I set-out to explore the following questions:

1. What are these women’s experiences with paternal absence?
2. How, if at all, do the participants’ stories suggest experiences of ambiguous loss?

By targeting adult females who have experienced paternal absence during childhood, my goal was to explore whether their retrospective and current experiences of father absence suggest themes that resonate with Boss’s theory of ambiguous loss. I interviewed a small group of young adult females who have experienced paternal absence to determine the relevance of ambiguous loss to their experience. Despite the existing research on paternal absence and ambiguous loss respectively, more research can be done to bridge the two phenomena. A dearth of literature exists investigating the retrospective experiences of young women who grew up with a father absent and its connection to feelings of ambiguous loss. Thus, this research was designed to add to existing literature on paternal absence and ambiguous loss, specifically from the retrospective stories of young adult women.

As Boss and Carnes (2012) describe, when a loss without death occurs, for whatever reason, family disruption can ensue, often resulting in an emotionally painful, confusing and unresolved mourning process. The theory of ambiguous loss suggests that in order to come to
terms with these disruptive feelings of loss, individuals must make meaning out of them, rather than ignore them (Boss & Carnes, 2012, Boss, 2006). Learning to understand and to live with the ambiguity of loss, instead of ignoring and seeking closure from it, can make it more manageable to experience.

Chapter 2. Review of the literature

Census data from 2015 show that 35% of all children in the United States live in single-parent households, which represents a significant increase from census reports in 1960, that indicate the prevalence at 15% (ChildTrends: DataBank, 2015). Some researchers even estimate the numbers of children in single-parent households have reached 40% (Donahue, et al., 2010). According to 2015 census data, the majority of families who live in single-parent households report a father absent, rather than a mother absent across racial groups (ChildTrends: DataBank, 2015). This data also reports that the following groups live or have lived without a father present: 49% of African American youth, 26% of Hispanic youth, 15% of White youth, and 11% of Asian youth, in comparison to 2-4% of children in these same racial categories living in father-only homes (ChildTrends: DataBank, 2015, p. 4).

Early work investigating the roles of fathers began in the 1970s as researchers sought to understand whether differences exist in the impact of fathers versus mothers on their offspring. Hetherington (1972) studied the effects of father absence on personality development of females. She determined that in situations where father absence exists because of divorce, daughters experienced increased attention seeking behaviors, early sexual behavior, and proximity seeking behaviors. However, under conditions where fathers were absent because of death, daughters responded with inhibition, rigidity, restraint from males, and avoidant behavior (Hetherington, 1972). This implies that the reason for the absence of a father does influence how children, in the
case of Hetherington (1972) particularly females, responded to it. Research on father absence since its introduction by Hetherington (1972) has examined the phenomenon via varied lenses. One example, demonstrating how father absence has been studied, has been through the lens of ambiguous loss theory.

Research on paternal absence has investigated the phenomenon in families dealing with the issue in a variety of contexts including: divorce (Friesen, 2017, Arendell, 1992, Van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001), incarceration (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Miller, 2006), military deployment (Hillenbrand, 1976; Lester, et al., 2010), and immigration (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, Louie, 2002; Falicov, 2002). Other researchers approached paternal absence in relation to its impact on children and adolescents’ relationship preferences (Boothroyd & Perrett, 2008), sexual behaviors and reproductive development (Draper & Harpending, 1982; Mendle, et al., 2009), personality development (Hetherington, 1972), cognitive development (Santrock, 1972; Shinn, 1978), and mental health outcomes, such as increased levels of depressive symptoms regardless of race (Amato, 1991), high internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Dunn, Cheng, O’Connor, & Bridges, 2004), and increased loneliness and social difficulties (McClanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013).

Studies have suggested that children who experience father absence are more likely to demonstrate cognitive deficits and lower school achievement (Santrock, 1972; Shinn, 1978). For girls, specifically, Hetherington (1972) discovered that father absences could contribute to “inadequate skills in relating to males” (p. 324). Mendle et al. (2009) noted an increased likelihood of sexual promiscuity for girls who grow up with absent fathers. According to Jackson (2003) African American girls, in particular, are more apt to struggle with symptoms of depression in comparison to boys, in response to experiencing paternal absence.
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Ambiguous Loss Theory

Pauline Boss, a researcher from the University of Minnesota, recognized the idea of paternal absence and began studying it within the concept of loss, specifically when it is unclear, unresolved or undefined (Baker, 2014; Boss, 2006; Boss, 2004). She termed this phenomenon “ambiguous loss” (Baker, 2014; Boss, 2006; Boss, 2004). Boss devised the term after noticing an abundance of family members who were physically present, but psychologically absent (due to situations of dementia, Traumatic Brain Injury, addiction etc.) in her clinical practice. She referred to this experience as “psychological absence” (Baker, 2014; Boss, 2004). Working with the military population, Boss also observed many situations in which fathers were physically absent, but psychologically present (Baker, 2014; Boss, 2006) due to deployment. Boss (2006) described “psychological presence” as the phenomenon in which individuals may keep a family member psychologically present when they have an unresolved, or confusing relationship with them. Boss has described how with this type of loss, “[f]amily processes freeze and boundaries are unclear. People become preoccupied with the lost person and may think of little else” (Boss, 2006, p. 7-8). She sought to discover whether labeling the experience of unclear loss would provide meaning for individuals and families and inform how to live with the loss more effectively. Thus, the term “ambiguous loss” was born – existing in two forms: physical presence and psychological absence; and, physical absence, but psychological presence (Boss, 2006).

As Boss continued to study the phenomenon of ambiguous loss in a variety of family situations, she identified that the topic is worthy of continuous study as the structures and contexts of family life shift rapidly (Boss, 2016). In Boss (2016), she reiterated definitions of the term, recapitulated the origins of the theory, but elaborated that one way to differentiate between ambiguous loss and death-related loss is that the former “defies resolution” (p. 270). She offered
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this explanation as a way of highlighting the extent to which the field of mental health has tried to pigeon-hole the concept of loss as a pathology (Boss, 2016). In many of her publications, she explained how individuals are stigmatized for not being able to find closure and left to cope, often without much resolution, on their own – leading to unfair mental health diagnoses or family dysfunction (Boss, 1999, 2006, 2007, 2016).

**Conceptualization of the Theory.** Boss (2004) explained how ordinary loss usually involves a clear death and gives individuals the opportunity to grieve. However, when loss unrelated to death is ambiguous or unclear, the grieving process gets stalled, often leaving individuals feeling emotionally paralyzed or confused (Boss, 2004, 2006).

Boss and Carnes (2012) described the impact of ambiguous loss on individuals and families in the following way:

> [m]eaning is ruptured, relationships go awry, and family conflict increases. When a loved one is here but not here, or gone but not for sure, the family as a whole, and the individuals in it, struggle as their story continues without an ending (p. 456).

Boss (2004) further explained how ambiguity can lead to a sense of hopelessness, increasing individuals’ likelihood for poor mental health outcomes, such as depression or anxiety. Boss coins the term “ambiguous loss” to offer a way of naming and making sense of this type of loss that was never defined before, clarifying the uncertainty of loss and allowing individuals to grieve differently from those who experience more ordinary loss.

Boss (2006) argued that the goal of ambiguous loss is not to resolve or erase the feelings associated with loss, but to allow individuals to embrace the loss and to accept it. Like
researchers who have studied risk and resilience, Boss has been interested in why some families are resilient to stress, but others are thwarted by it (Boss, 1980)? She discussed how as family members’ roles change throughout the lifespan, individuals may be met with confusion about how “family” is defined (Boss, 1980).

Boss (1977) offered a new lens through which to view the confusion and ambivalence that sometimes results after a non-death related loss occurs, terming it “boundary ambiguity” (Boss, Greenberg, Pearce-McCall, 1990, p. 5). Boss et al. (1990) define “boundary ambiguity” as a response to the type of “ambiguous loss” in which family members are unsure of “who is in and who is out” of the family (p. 5, Boss, 1977; Boss, 1980). When family boundary ambiguity is high, dysfunction is likely greater; when it is low, little dysfunction is likely to result (Boss, 1980). How individuals respond to the changes in family structure or roles can be viewed as family stress.

Aligned with the concept of family stress, the theory of ambiguous loss focuses on the tendency for individuals to respond to stress both positively and negatively (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). Boss (2006) highlighted the notion of resilience as a way of managing and preventing stress. She suggested a positive manifestation of ambiguous loss, in the form of resilience: [f]or families with ambiguous loss to sustain resiliency over time, there must be tolerance for ambiguity, and also comfort with it… some even come to see benefit in it. Being able to live comfortably…with unanswered questions is the real test of family resiliency (Boss, 2006, p. 49).

Boss has defined ambiguous loss as existing in two forms: “when a loved one is physically absent, but psychologically present, and when a loved one is physically present but psychologically absent” (Boss, 2007, p. 105). Boss (2006) explained how the experience of loss
is often subjective and ambiguous. Furthermore, she discussed how loss may be associated with experiences and feeling states such as depression, grief, trauma, as well as resilience, and may manifest in a variety of ways depending on factors such as culture, religion, or racial identity (Boss, 2006). How individuals respond to issues related to loss, particularly loss of a parental presence, often depends on the support and the integrity within their family system (Walsh, 2003). Lack of closure after a loss can create negative mental health effects posing risk to wellbeing and stalling the natural grieving process for some individuals (Boss, 2006).

Drawing from psychoanalytic themes, Boss (2006) suggested that “ambiguous loss is… an uncanny situation of traumatic anxiety produced by a combination of known and unknown (p.5).” This situation could result in challenges such as depression, stress, and anxiety, or it could foster resilience to adversity (Walsh, 2003). The degrees of family resilience and community support to combat this form of adversity seem to be primary factors influencing whether individuals are paralyzed or uplifted by the stressful experiences (Walsh, 2003). Such community support could be in the form of clinical social work interventions. Not only did this study seek to gain an understanding of the relevance of ambiguous loss theory to the paternal absence experienced by young adult females, it attempted to discover better ways to bridge theory with clinical practice, so that clinicians can effectively foster resilience in their clients confronted with the family issue of paternal absence through the tenets of ambiguous loss theory.

To help elucidate the importance of viewing ambiguous loss as a contextual situation and not one that should be pathologized, Boss offers ten underlying assumptions to “anchor the theory of ambiguous loss” (Boss, 2016, p. 273). One, she explains how unlike quantitative approaches to research, ambiguous loss shows how phenomena does not have to be measured quantitatively to exist (Boss, 2016) Two, ambiguous loss assumes that truth is individually
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experienced and relative, and we inquire about how individuals can live without the possibility of obtaining the truth (Boss, 2016). Three, ambiguous loss is a relational experience that assumes involvement of a “missing” significant other (Boss, 2016). Four, cultural and value-systems influence how individuals experience ambiguous loss (Boss, 2016). Five, “with ambiguous loss, the source of pathology lies in the type of loss and not in the type of grief,” (Boss, 2016, p. 272) therefore the theory attempts to dissolve pre-conceived notions that individuals “should be able to” experience loss in a certain way, for a certain length of time. Six, with ambiguous loss there exists a myth of closure as individuals accept the reality that getting answers may not happen and learn to live despite that reality (Boss, 2016). Seven, individuals cannot manage a problem until they define it; therefore, ambiguous loss labels the problems of unresolved loss so that individuals can start the coping process (Boss, 2016). Eight, even if an experience of loss remains confusing or ambiguous, meaning can still be made from it (Boss, 2016). Nine, resilience in the context of ambiguous loss theory suggests that individuals are able to increase their “tolerance for ambiguity” despite the often paralyzing nature attached to the lack of closure (Boss, 2016). Finally, the tenth assumption is that families can be made of “physical and psychological entities,” which are “both sources of resilience” (Boss, 2016, p. 272).

**Therapeutic Goals of Ambiguous Loss Theory**

The aforementioned assumptions of ambiguous loss described by Boss (2016) provide a way for ambiguous loss to be examined in a therapeutic context. Tubbs and Boss (2000) stressed the importance for clinicians to facilitate an understanding about how individuals can gain control over how they respond to losses, even ambiguous ones. One way of providing this understanding has been introduced through six main therapeutic goals for working with ambiguous loss in therapy, presented in Boss (2006). These principles include: finding meaning,
tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment, and discovering hope (Boss, 2006). According to Boss (2006) the main goal of finding meaning suggests that labeling uncertain experiences of loss as ambiguous allows individuals to name the problem and make meaning out of it, clarifying confusion they may have about what they are enduring. Tempering mastery refers to the need for individuals to resist the urge to cope with uncertain loss by seeking answers and accepting the situation of their loss (Boss, 2006). Reconstructing identity offers a way to understand family roles and boundaries to become more aware of personal identity (Boss, 2006). Normalizing ambivalence represents the need for individuals to accept that negative feelings felt in response to ambiguous loss are valid and necessary to the process of making meaning. Revising attachment, as presented by Boss (2006), demonstrates the idea of reconstructing family ties as a means for building support systems. Boss (2010) described how in the context of ambiguous loss, revising attachment offers an opportunity to re-create new relational connections when a loved one is physically or psychologically absent, rather than to mourn the loss of the past relationship with the same loved one. Finally, discovering hope by seizing opportunities to make life changes because of the uncertain loss can be a way to build individual and family resilience (Boss, 2006). Explaining these principles, Boss (2006) highlighted how their main purpose is to foster resilience and promote tolerance for ambiguity. Boss has presented these tenets to represent her conceptualization of how ambiguous loss can be implemented in therapeutic practice.

Grief vs. Loss

When talking about loss, it is important to also consider the idea of grief in the conversation. The notions of grief and loss are often considered synonymous when talking about death of loved ones. However, as I attempt to make clear in this research, neither have to relate
to death necessarily. In non-death related situations, grief and loss have stark differences. One clear difference is that in research, grief has been used as a diagnosis and treatment protocols have been developed for it (Crunk, Burke, & Robinson III, 2017; Pillai-Friedman & Ashline, 2014). Loss is less explainable, less understood, and less categorical.

**Disenfranchised Grief.** When non-death circumstances of loss occur, ambiguity can lead to experiences of disenfranchised grief. Pillai-Friedman and Ashline (2014) have defined disenfranchised grief as “a kind of grief that is precipitated by loss that cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged, or publicly mourned” (p. 436). In contexts of disenfranchised grief, individuals may have experienced a loss that is not socially acceptable, such as the death of an ex-spouse (Tullis, 2017), sexual losses of survivors of breast cancer (Pillai-Friedman & Ashline, 2014), the loss of a pet (Cordaro, 2012), or mourning the loss of Nazi descendants (Livingston, 2010). In these cases, individuals’ “rights” to grieve were taken away (Attig, 2004). The mourning of these losses might not make sense to some or ridiculed by others, and thus disenfranchised.

Disenfranchised grief may be an outcome of ambiguous loss when the loss that occurred is not deemed “normal” or understandable to lay people. I consider disenfranchised grief in this research to allow for the possibility that individuals who experience paternal absence, for reasons that may not be universally socially acceptable, such as abuse, addiction, or prison, may have felt ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief.

**Resilience and Ambiguous Loss**

Boss (2006) discussed how “[b]eing able to bend and adapt to situations of ambiguity rather than struggle endlessly for answers can minimize the harmful immobilizing effects of
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…ambivalence” (Boss, 2006, p. 145). The “adapting” that Boss described suggests that ways individuals respond to ambiguity either heighten their risk or foster their resilience to the negative effects an ambiguous situation of loss can produce. Boss (2006) further explained the importance of attachment relationships characterized by strong human connections in order to engender resilience.

Emphasizing the inherently relational nature of ambiguous loss, Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, and Grass (2007) quoted Boss: “…ambiguity coupled with loss creates a powerful barrier to coping and grieving, and leads to symptoms such as depression and relational conflict that erode human relationships” (p. 114). The degrees of family resilience and community support to combat this form of adversity can be viewed as primary factors influencing whether individuals are paralyzed or uplifted by the stressful experiences, likely to have affected how they view attachment relationships (Masten, 2016). Thus, ambiguous loss can be felt by those with absent fathers, justifying the purpose of connecting the two phenomena - ambiguous loss and paternal absence, via attachment theory.

Attachment Theory

While ambiguous loss has been thought of as a theory in and of itself, its relational components can be viewed as rooted in attachment theory (Carroll, Olson, Buckmiller, 2007). Attachment theory, as championed by Bowlby, introduced the notion of the innate tendency for humans to crave “affectional bonds” or close emotional connections with loved ones and the negative socio-emotional consequences that result when these bonds are disrupted or inappropriately formed (Bowlby, 1977, p. 201; 1969) Bowlby (1977) elaborated that the loss or nonexistence of affectional bonds gives rise to mental health conditions, such as “anxiety, anger,
depression, and emotional detachment,” (p. 201), might disrupt psychosocial development, and could impair an individual’s capacity for forming and maintaining healthy relationships with others. Boss (2006) suggested that attachment can provide a framework for understanding the emotional bonds in relationships much like ambiguous loss theory has attempted to do.

Without these bonds, such as in cases of ambiguous loss, devastating effects for individuals’ emotional and relational well-being could contribute to negative mental health outcomes. Fraley and Roisman (2015) have suggested that “[i]f caregivers are generally warm, responsive, and consistently available, the child learns that others can be counted on when needed… the child has developed a secure working model of attachment” (p. 11). However, if such caregiving is not present, insecure attachments could create confusing or complicated parent-child relationships and family stress.

Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz (1999) investigated how parent-child attachments affect children’s friendships with peers in late childhood and early adolescence, which has suggested a link between emotional security provided by parents to their children and children’s subsequent quality of attachment to peers. The natural progression of children relying on their parents as primary attachment figures in early childhood to more reliance on peers in later adulthood is characteristic of the natural progression of attachment across a lifespan (Lieberman et al., 1999).

In a quantitative study on attachment satisfaction in father-daughter relationships, Punyanunt-Carter (2002) concurred with the ideas of Lieberman et al. (1999) that through attachment relationships with their parents, children can learn about how to relate with others and to understand themselves. The aforementioned researchers found that the availability of parental attachment figures throughout development is essential for children to continue on an
emotionally stable life course trajectory (Lieberman et al., 1999; Punyanunt-Carter, 2002). Lieberman et al. (1999) suggested how “[a]lthough the maintenance of physical proximity is clearly less essential in older children due to increased physical and mental capacities, maintaining the availability of attachment figure is hypothesized to remain the set goal of the attachment system” (p. 203). When these attachments are disrupted, in cases such as paternal absence, a loss of emotional connection, inherent to attachment theory, can ensue. Landau and Hissett (2008) added that ambiguous loss can explain this “relational breakdown… [arguably creating] the most stressful kind of loss… and can create a devastating ripple effect… in relationships” (p. 70-71). The relational disconnect can affect how individuals bond with loved ones, making attachment theory a key theoretical player in the discussion of the importance of parental roles for children and adolescents. Thus, as the quality and meaning of attachment relationships change throughout one’s life, it remains important to sustain secure attachment in some form throughout developmental stages.

**Fathers and Attachment.** Lewis and Lamb (2003) have used the framework of attachment to emphasize the importance of fathers in the development of children. They introduced the idea of fathers’ critical roles with an historical reflection on how fathers have been perceived in research in the past suggesting that “[t]hirty years ago, fathers were described as ‘forgotten contributors to child development’” (Lewis & Lamb, 2003, p. 211). The authors have continued to explain how more recently researchers have posed the idea that fathers offer a unique and vital contribution to children’s development that mothers cannot provide as easily (Lewis & Lamb, 2003). Namely, researchers have identified how father involvement is essential to foster healthy physical, behavioral, and emotional development, suggesting that without a father’s presence children could have deficits in these areas (Immerman & Mackey, 2007;
I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE’”


Lewis and Lamb (2003) have suggested that often when it comes to childrearing in two-parent households, fathers are more involved in play, while the brunt of the caretaking and discipline often falls on the mothers. The idea of play has been debated among other researchers who have found no recognizable difference in the play tendencies of mothers and fathers (Lamb, Frodi, Frodi, & Hwang, 1982). However, Popenoe (1996) explained that distinct cognitive and emotional ability inherent in males and females, respectively, can make their parenting styles important for children in different ways. Popenoe (1996) described how females’ tendency to have better verbal ability can allow them to provide emotional support in a comforting way as mothers; however, the visual-spatial abilities in males can make them “…more likely to emphasize ‘rough and tumble’ types of play, which teaches skills related to competition, risk-taking, independence, and self-control” as fathers (Baker, 2014, p. 26; Popenoe, 1996). Thus, the different abilities innate to females and males, respectively, can offer varied parenting styles, no one more important than another, but both highly critical to maintaining secure parent-child attachment.

Viewing the notion of play through an attachment lens, Lewis and Lamb (2003) have presented another way attachment manifests in father-child relationships through a notion called “paternal sensitivity” (Lewis & Lamb, 2003, p. 215). The authors explained how biological propensities towards attachment interact with cultural circumstances to influence the way fathers relate to their child(ren) (Lewis & Lamb, 2003). Citing Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, and Pearson (1996), Lewis and Lamb (2003) reiterated how “[m]en’s recollections of their own childhood relationships are correlated with their paternal sensitivity. Researchers have shown that men who
reported loving and secure relationships with their parents were more sensitive and involved than fathers with less positive memories” (p. 215). Therefore, attachment style can be transferred down generations. Lewis and Lamb (2003) have suggested that fathers’ childhood experiences of their parents can influence their current parenting styles. These perspectives on paternal attachment have many implications for the current study. Not only do they provide an understanding about how secure attachment can strengthen resilience and the lack of appropriate bonding can heighten risk, they also demonstrate what is at stake when fathers are inconsistent in their children’s lives.

The important role fathers play in the lives of their children has been studied more in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (East, Jackson, & O’Brien, 2007; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Literature has revealed varied conclusions about whether the absence itself of a father can cause negative outcomes for children and fathers, or whether other risk factors mediate the effects of paternal absence (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). East et al. (2007) sought to discover whether the absence of a biological father does negatively affect the lives of young women, in particular. East et al. (2007) conducted a phenomenological study in Australia to determine the experiences of nine women who endured father absence during their childhoods, and what impact it has had on their adults lives now. Each participant participated in a non-structured interview and shared their experience with father absence across various developmental stages in their lives. Findings suggested that the participants desired close bonds with their fathers and felt a psychological disconnect, even if they were not able to physically see their fathers. Overall, the women seemed to want their fathers to play a more active and qualitative role in their lives. East et al. (2007) disagreed with the claims of Silverstein & Auerbach (1999) that “father absence has a negative impact on children’s well-being. [I]t is not
father absence that in itself is necessarily negative. Rather, they concluded that a biological parent is not significant to childhood development” (East et al., 2007; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Instead, East et al. (2007) determined from their participants’ narratives that biological fathers are valuable, despite the pain and hurt their disrupted relationships caused. Even though the findings of East et al. (2007) did not directly make the connection between the participants’ experiences and ambiguous loss, their participants’ reported experiences could resonate with Boss’s ambiguous loss theory.

Another study has investigated the impact of father presence or absence on girls’ risk for teenage pregnancy (Ellis et al., 2003). Ellis et al. (2003) explained how in the United States, approximately 10% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 get pregnant every year, regardless of race or cultural group. The study by Ellis et al. (2003) examined this phenomenon via a life-course adversity model and hypothesizes that while father absence has become a more common reality in the 21st century, “it is not father absence per se but various other stressors often associated with father absence (ie. divorce, poverty, conflictual family relationships, erosion of parenting monitoring and control) that can foster early sexual activity” (Ellis et al., 2003, p. 802; Hetherington, 1972). This supports the conclusions of Fraser et al. (2004), that father absence may not be the cause of teen pregnancy, but the experience of it.

Literature has presented controversial opinions about the gender-exclusive notions of parenting that have been demonstrated in research, thus far. Biblarz & Stacey (2010) conducted a meta-analysis, looking at a variety of studies on parenting and implications of the gender of the parent on child outcomes. Their study investigated many different types of parents, heterosexual, homosexual, married and non-married couples (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). The study determined that gender seemed to trump biological parentage, marital status, and predicted “successful,
involved parenting better than marriage or genetic parentage did” (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010, p. 11). They also found that women parenting without fathers scored higher on compassion and warmth than women who were parenting in co-parent situations. However, “father-absent families reported conflicts more severe… than in father-present families” (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010, p. 11). Thus, their findings suggest that parenting without a father present might enhance socially prescribed notions of mothering, allowing mothers the capability of being more “feminine” as they parent that may have been constricted when a father is present. Regardless of the results of The Biblarz and Stacey (2010) study demonstrated that fathers play an important role in determining the level of risk for family adversity depending on how fathers treat the mothers of their children and the extent to which gender-qualities are made salient in parenting.

The studies on gender influences in parenting presented, thus far, have continued to posit theories on risk and resilience in the face of adversity. Ellis et al. (2003) suggested that “certain personality traits that predispose girls toward early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy may co-vary with father absence” (p. 802). They claimed that children who show externalizing symptoms early in life are more likely to practice risky behaviors, such as unsafe sexual activity (Ellis et al., 2003). In their study, Ellis et al. (2003) were primarily interested in determining whether earlier onset father absence contributed to an increased likelihood for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy? They also questioned whether father absence contributes to a greater likelihood for early sexual activity, separate from externalizing behaviors and family stressors? (Ellis et al., 2003). Data were collected from the longitudinal research conducted by the Child Development Project (Ellis et al, 2003). The sample was made up of 81% Whites, 17% African Americans, and 2% Other races; 28% of the sample lived with a single mother at the beginning of the study (Ellis, 2003, p. 803). Ellis et al. (2003) defined “early father absence” as
absence occurring before age 5, which is suggested by the work of Hetherington (1972) who claims “…the first five years of life constitute a sensitive period for the effects of father absence on daughters’ sexual development…” (Ellis et al 2003, p. 804). Results of the Ellis et al. (2003) study determined that early onset father absence is associated with an increased likelihood for adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy. However, the authors found a strong link between girls who experience early onset father absence and family and environmental stressors, such as low socioeconomic status, poor parental relationships, and low-quality parental investment (Ellis et al, 2003).

These results suggest the difficulty of examining the issue of father absence without taking into consideration the compounding risk factor of family stressors and externalizing factors influencing its severity. Thus, considering father absence within the frame of risk and resilience is essential. A shortcoming of Ellis et al. (2003) study could be the lack of even racial representation in the sample. Eighty-one percent of the sample participants identified as being White, while only 17% identified as being African American (Ellis et al., 2003). A more balanced sample of White participants and non-White participants may have yielded different results and could have provided more insight about the role of different family structures in fostering or assuaging the impact of paternal absence.

Ambiguous Loss, Attachment, and Paternal Absence in Context

Historically, ambiguous loss has been studied across different populations based on the type of ambiguous loss, with its earliest origins in research on father absence and military families (Baker, 2014; Boss, 2006). The type of ambiguous loss that occurs in which one member is physically present but psychologically absent has been studied in situations where
there is Traumatic Brain Injury (Landau & Hissett, 2008), Alzheimer’s Disease (Boss, 2003; Caron, Boss, & Mortimer, 1999), chronic physical illness (Boss & Couden, 2002), Autism Spectrum Disorders (O’Brien, 2007), and addiction (Boss, 2006). The second type of ambiguous loss, in which individuals are physically absent but psychologically present has been investigated with military families (Faber et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007), incarcerated families (Arditti et al., 2003; Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner IV, 2009), foster-care families (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Samuels, 2009), and in non-Western contexts (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, Rana, 2008; Robins, 2010).

This research uses ambiguous loss theory, viewed through an attachment lens, to consider the long-term impacts of paternal absence, through retrospective qualitative data from interviews with a group of young adult women. As Boss (1999) noted, a dearth of research exists studying experiences of ambiguous loss, retrospectively. Tubbs and Boss (2000) have identified that “[p]erception of, and therefore adaption and response to loss, are closely related to timing” (p. 286). The value of having participants recount their memories of paternal absence from childhood could not only provide implications for future treatment, but could also help clarify confusion that may have resulted from the paternal absence. Honing in on individuals’ experiences of father absence could also inform how agencies, practice professionals, and families understand the contextual circumstances under which paternal absence exists, through the lenses of risk/resilience and attachment. These overarching theoretical notions contribute to the conceptualization of ambiguous loss theory, informing researchers about ways to understand uncertain or undefined relational experiences.

Boss (1977) has presented the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss through a perspective of ambivalence. The author has suggested that the experience of ambivalence, when
it applies to father absence, often results in confusion about how to respond to it. Namely, Boss (1977) reiterated how, “it is possible for a family to perceive and act upon the presence of a family member when that member’s physical presence is no longer a reality” (p. 141). Boss (1977) described how if confusion exists about a loved one’s status in the family, shifts in roles and responsibilities are likely to occur.

Boss (1977) highlighted the role of past literature on father absence in determining her research focus. Some authors reported that physical absence and psychological absence may not directly influence family or individual dysfunction (Nye, 1957; Reuter & Biller, 1973). Other researchers have emphasized that the quality of physical absence or presence as more important than the circumstances under which the absence occurs (Sprey, 1967). Previously mentioned, boundary ambiguity, could relate to the experience of paternal absence as individuals who do not have regular contact with fathers may experience confusion about their role or status in the family (Boss et al., 1990). This perception could be different for various children in the same family.

A focus of current research is on paternal absence that exists for many reasons and is experienced by young adult females in the United States. Research on paternal absence is extensive, examining the phenomenon across many populations. However, this study aims to continue discovering the applicability of ambiguous loss theory to understand experiences of young adult females. I present research highlighting the impact of paternal absence from the contexts of military deployment and family incarceration, as a means for explaining two different reasons for absence and the applicability of ambiguous loss theory. Some of the following research on paternal absence in the context of military families, divorced, incarcerated families, and foster care families specifically refers to ambiguous loss theory, while other studies cited
below explore the effects of father absence more generally. I also include a section on ambiguous loss in Non-Western contexts.

**Military Families.** Father absence in military families has been studied since the early 1970s, when the phenomenon of paternal absence originally became recognized as a national social concern. In the Boss (1977) study, specifically, the author focused on the experience of psychological father presence when they are Missing in Action (MIA) in military families. For the purposes of the present study, the specific focus of this research will highlight the second type of ambiguous loss, also known as “psychological presence” (Boss, 2006). The theory of ambiguous loss seemed particularly pertinent to military life, because of military deployment which often causes family members to be physically absent. This absence has made relatives at home wonder about the whereabouts of their family members and worry about them. This could create angst, which could lead to a feeling of psychological presence. Huebner et al. (2007) provided an overview of the experiences families face due to military deployment of a family member. The authors explained how after the deployment of a loved one family members are faced with inevitable ambiguity, on both practical and emotional levels (Huebner et al., 2007). On a practical level, families are forced to reorganize their family structure, define responsibilities, and adjust to the absence of their family member (Huebner et al., 2007). On an emotional level, ambiguity about the member’s safety or degree of harm could create psychological turmoil (Huebner et al. 2007). Huebner et al. (2007) specifically looked at the impact of military deployment on 107 adolescents via a qualitative approach using focus groups and in-depth semi-structured interviews that asked about their experiences. Results demonstrated four categories of responses from the adolescents; “overall perceptions of uncertainty and loss; boundary ambiguity; changes in mental health; and relationship conflict” in the aftermath of
military deployment (Huebner et al., 2007, p. 116). The authors also found that adolescents demonstrate emotional and behavioral issues, depression, anxiety, and family conflict, characteristic manifestations of ambiguous loss. Overall, their results revealed the relevance of considering ambiguous loss in the context of military deployment for adolescents.

Faber et al. (2008) conducted a larger qualitative study investigating “ambiguous absence, [yet] ambiguous presence” in response to family member’s returning home from deployment. The authors organized seven rounds of interviews for both reservists and their family members investigating their experiences of coming home. Issues such as boundary ambiguity, renegotiating family roles, and coping with PTSD symptoms of their military members all surfaced as challenges for both the military members and their family members (Faber et al., 2008). The authors discovered that according to the family members, boundary ambiguity was most related to uncertainty about the safety of their military member and the renegotiation of life responsibilities upon their return (Faber et al., 2008). Thus, comparing both of the aforementioned studies that demonstrate the applicability of ambiguous loss theory and military deployment, common themes have emerged. Both sets of participants reported feelings of boundary ambiguity, family disruption, and the hardship of uncertainty about the impacts of their military member’s service.

Boss (1977) conducted factorial analyses assessing wives’ responses to their husband’s physical absence in a variety of ways (ie. willingness to risk change, plans to pursue employment or continuing education, establishing independence, desire to remarry, etc.). The results yielded support for the notion that boundary ambiguity contributes either positively or negatively to family functioning, depending on how it is perceived and handled (Boss, 1977). While the study termed the ambiguous role situation as “psychological father presence,” it also emphasized how
the wives’ responses to that experience determines the children’s adjustment (Boss, 1977). The hypothesis that maintaining an experience of psychological father presence, despite physical absence, was supported and found to be destructive to the integrity and progression of the family system (Boss, 1977).

A study conducted by Campbell and Demi (2000) investigated the experiences of adult children of MIA fathers and their feelings of emotional distress and grief. Utilizing the risk and resilience model, Campbell and Demi (2000) interviewed 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) who endured the loss of fathers due to MIA during the Vietnam War. In addition to the interviews, each participant took several measures assessing levels of emotional distress, bereavement, and family hardiness. Results from the scales measuring emotional distress and grief found that even 25 years after their fathers’ MIA status, feelings of unresolved grief and emotional distress were present for them. Campbell and Demi (2000) suggested that the experiences of these participants are related to ambiguous loss based on interview data from the participants reporting the continued intrusive thoughts and confusion about the loss.

Studies by both Hillenbrand (1976) and Lester et al. (2010) offered insight about how children and families respond to the absence of family members due to military deployment. Although their populations and research foci were different, the large gap in years in which these studies were conducted confirms that this issue has been a concern for several decades. Hillenbrand (1976) suggested that father absence has been shown to impact children and families in the following ways: lower academic achievement, higher incidence of emotional problems, and higher rates of dependency. Hillenbrand (1976) postulated that the impact of father absence is more severe for boys than for girls, due to boys lack of ability to identify with the main male figure in their life, affecting their identity construction. However, Hillenbrand (1976) suggested
that the reason for a father’s absence determined the severity of the negative outcomes that result because of it. She mentioned that paternal absences in military have been more accepted and considered honorable than absences for other reasons.

The Hillenbrand (1976) study aimed to explore the correlates of paternal absence and its effects on children and families. Hillenbrand (1976) studied 73 boys and 53 girls who were sixth grade students in the United States Marine school for children of military service members. The experiences of children of officers and those of enlisted men were compared. An additional cohort of parents was given a questionnaire on demographics and history of their husband’s military involvement. Results suggested that many family members considered their father’s military service as stoic and commendable, despite their feelings of upset in the face of his absence (Hillenbrand, 1976). Although the children reported that they missed their fathers, they felt a sense of pride and honor knowing that he was performing a service to this country.

Hillenbrand (1976) actually found positive impacts on these children in the form of gaining more responsibility and maturity more quickly. Others reported negative behavioral responses to the absence in the form of lower school performance. Thus, the main findings of this study determined that both positive and negative impacts can occur for children of military service members in the face of their absence, which could indicate the prevalence of both ambiguous loss and ambiguous gain. The author does not explain why children respond differently, but based on the aforementioned reiterations of Walsh (2003) and Rutter (1987) it seems that correlates of the risk and resilience framework could be at play.

The impact of parental military deployment on families has been studied by Lester et al. (2010). The research explored how deployment affects children in military families between the ages of 6 to 12 and focuses on parental deployment in general, not specifically fathers. One
hundred and seventy-one families were recruited for the study from military bases all over the United States. Children were given a set of age-appropriate measures to determine their mental health outcomes in response to parental deployment. Non-military parents were also given measures to assess their symptomatology in the face of their partners’ absence. Regression analyses were conducted to determine the impact of parental deployment for the specific cohorts in the study (Lester et al., 2010). Results showed no elevation in symptoms of depression for children in response to their parents’ absence due to military deployment. However, if the non-military parent had heightened depression, then their daughters would also have elevated levels in this area according to Lester et al. (2010). Increased levels of anxiety were a consistent finding discovered for both boys and girls in response to parental military deployment (Lester et al., 2010). Ultimately, Lester et al. (2010) determined that children showed incredible resilience in the face of their parents’ deployment, and their heightened levels of anxiety are understandable given the degree of uncertainty attachment due to military deployment, in general. Lester et al. (2010) further explained that children’s levels of emotional distress is highly correlated with parents’ distress, consistent with developmental research. This outcome could provide implications for future treatment and offer a direction of research that focuses on partners of military parents as well as children.

Riggs and Riggs (2011) researched risk and resilience in military families experiencing deployment. They suggested how military families have often faced many unique stressors at once, such as “frequent relocations and reconfigurations of the family system, ambiguous loss and fear for a loved one’s safety, and high levels of stress and/or dysfunction among family members” (Riggs & Riggs, 2011, p. 675). When military families endure these issues
simultaneously, the bundling of risk they experience can make them more susceptible to experiencing problematic mental health outcomes.

**Divorced Families.** Afifi and Keith (2004) have used a risk and resilience model to discuss the relevance of the experience of ambiguous loss for post-divorce families. The authors explained how, in response to divorce, children can experience heightened risk for depression and disruption in relationships with one or both parents following the divorce (Afifi & Keith, 2004; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1999). Hetherington (1999) countered with the point that sometimes these children show resilience after divorce because the change in family composition can lead them to be removed from a potentially toxic or emotionally harmful situation.

Afifi and Keith (2004) examined loss generally, but sought to understand how the ambiguity of loss “shapes and defines loss in post-divorce families” (p. 68). Specifically, these authors looked at how the risk factors associated with divorce connect to ambiguous loss on individual, family, and community levels (Afifi & Keith, 2004). Through the qualitative interviews with 81 participants (children and parents in divorced families), several themes emerged. Namely, after the divorce, participants reported a feeling of loss of the family they had once known (Afifi & Keith, 2004). Child participants also reported a relationship disruption with the noncustodial parent post-divorce. The most salient form of ambiguous loss demonstrated by the children in this study was shown through the children’s apparent lack of trust and bonding between the children and their fathers. Afifi and Keith (2004) reported how “the children knew their fathers were a part of their lives, but were often unsure how to feel toward them, what their role was with them, or how to communicate on a more intimate level with them” (p. 79). The findings in this study, discussed later, will corroborate what Afifi and Keith (2004) claimed that a sense of psychological presence existed for some of the participants who experienced parental
I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE’”

divorce as they knew of their fathers; but, they struggled to relate to him because of a disruption in attachment. This demonstrates the impact of physical absence and psychological presence, one type of ambiguous loss. Thus, the general loss felt by the participants in the study created heightened risk for these individuals, but ambiguous loss played a role in explaining the complexity of the loss more clearly.

While not specifically referring to ambiguous loss, Kalmijn (2015) explained how the circumstances under which a child develops can influence how they experience the divorce of parents. This study focused on the relationship between fathers and children post-divorce and the impacts on later development (Kalmijn, 2015). Kalmijn (2015) determined that fathers spent more resources and effort to stay connected with their children early on in childhood and their level of contact dropped off as the child got older. The implications of fatherhood becoming more obsolete as a child matures is aligned with the notions of Amato (1994) and Fischer (2004) that children may suffer emotionally by having inconsistent contact with fathers over their lifetime, likely contributing to their risk for other negative mental health outcomes.

Incarceration. DeBell (2008) described the increasing rate of father absence in the United States over several decades, and estimated that half of American children live in a one-parent household. Looking at the phenomenon of single parent households across racial and ethnic backgrounds, the 2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey indicated that more than one-quarter of White students, more than one-third of Hispanic students, and more than two-thirds of Black students have lived without fathers at some point in their lives (DeBell, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Recently, researchers have remarked that an increase in incarceration contributes much to these statistics (Travis et al., 2014).
Travis et al. (2014) offered significant facts about the burgeoning reality of father absence due to incarceration over the last three decades. They posited that between “1980 to 2000, the number of children with incarcerated fathers increased from about 300,000 to 2.1 million … From 1991 – 2007, the number of children with a father… in prison increased 77%” (Travis et al., 2014, pp. 6). Additionally, in 2012, it was estimated that “25% of the world’s prisoners were held in American prisons, although the United States only accounts for about 5% of the world’s population” (Travis et al., 2014, pp. 2). These demographics offer stark examples of the increasingly prevalent experience of father absence due to incarceration, specifically in the United States.

Similar to research with military families in connection to ambiguous loss, research in the context of family incarceration has centered largely around the phenomenon of physical absence, but psychological presence for families. Arditti et al. (2003) focused their research on families’ experiences of having a member incarcerated, and noted negative side effects such as poor school performance, emotional instability, drug and alcohol abuse, and family dissolution. Their exploratory research targeted caregivers who would visit an incarcerated family member while in jail (Arditti et al., 2003). Arditti et al. (2003) implied the relevance of ambiguous loss when they argued that “…the loss connected to incarceration can be defined as ambiguous because it remains unclear, indeterminate, and un-validated by the community” (p. 196). The stigma referred to here suggests another negative outcome connected to ambiguous loss that is largely unique to the incarcerated family community. The authors demonstrated how in research on incarceration, “…loss of a family member because of incarceration elicits sympathy or support from others, forcing family members to face the difficulties of separation alone” (Arditti et al., 2003; Schoenbauer, 1986). In the Arditti et al. (2003) study family members were interviewed
and results illustrated that participants experienced emotional distress, declines in physical health, heightened family disruption, and work-related difficulties in response to their family member being incarcerated. These findings elucidated some of the negative impacts of incarceration that can exist for families throughout the country and suggests a need to devise ways to cope with the uncertainty of loss due to incarceration more sensitively.

A small body of research directly investigated incarceration and its relation to experiences of ambiguous loss (Bocknek et al., 2009). Bocknek et al. (2009) honed in on the relationship between ambiguous loss and posttraumatic stress for children with an incarcerated family member. Implementing a mixed methodology, participants (children grades 1st to 10th grades) completed several surveys examining internalizing and externalizing behaviors, symptoms of posttraumatic stress, and perceptions of social support, the results of which were through a correlational analysis (Bocknek et al., 2009). Themes that emerged from interviews pointed to family relationships, community and context, and stress and coping as concerns verbalized most frequently by these children. Ultimately, the results and findings from the Bocknek et al. (2009) study showed that children experience heightened levels of stress and trauma related to their experiences of ambiguous loss from having a loved one incarcerated. However, in the Bocknek et al. (2009) study, the loved ones were not necessarily biological parents (or parents at all) for these children.

Aligned with the aforementioned discussion about the relevance of the risk and resilience framework for understanding the experience of parental loss, it seems important to identify potential risk factors for children of incarcerated parents as a means for conceptualizing more comprehensively the phenomenon of paternal absence. Researchers have posited that risk factors associated with parental incarceration have included: poverty, substance abuse, and crime-ridden
neighborhoods (Miller, 2006). Johnson and Easterling (2012) reported that other negative effects could be residential instability, disruption in caregiving relationships, and lowered human capital. Johnson and Easterling (2012) have also suggested that children who have experienced parental incarceration have been “at risk” before their parent’s incarceration due to the increased likelihood of adverse pre-incarceration environments, such as ones in which drugs and alcohol use, mental health issues, and poverty are paramount. Mumola (2000) added that 50% of youth in the criminal justice system have a parent who is or has previously been incarcerated. This demonstrated the risk of intergenerational transmission in families with an incarcerated parent.

A study titled *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*, Geller, Garfinkel, and Western (2011) explored the impact of paternal incarceration on children and their families. The Fragile Families study is a national study that investigates a group of children and their unmarried parents in 20 cities in the United States (Geller et al., 2011). Geller et al. (2011) have studied the extent to which fathers contribute financially to the wellbeing of their children and how incarceration (past or present) affected those contributions. By conducting a cross-sectional analysis, the Geller et al. (2011) study determined that 46% of the fathers in the sample were formerly incarcerated. They determined that the fathers who had never been incarcerated (as evident in the Fragile Families Study) paid about $8,000 of child support a year, whereas fathers who were formerly incarcerated contributed about $2,600. The relatively low financial support could be attributed to the economic disadvantage in finding stable jobs or the adjustment process going back into non-incarcerated life. Geller et al. (2011) approached their study from largely an economic policy standpoint, demonstrating little implications for the low financial support and the emotional wellbeing of children. Their research has important implications for examining
the connection between low paternal financial support of incarcerated fathers and their children’s mental health and behavioral outcomes.

Some authors have highlighted long-term mental health effects on children due to parental imprisonment through a lens of loss, arguing that loss due to parental incarceration is worse than loss of a parent due to death because loss due to “death is naturally occurring and final, while separation due to incarceration is ambiguous” (Miller, 2006, p. 478). These sentiments have been supported by Arditti, et al. (2003) who articulated how “…family problems associated with incarceration may be related to its ambiguous context, connecting with situations beyond the family’s control or outside constraints that block coping and grieving processes” (p. 202; Boss, 1999). Arditti et al. (2003) corroborated the claims of Miller (2006) by explaining the relevance of Boss’s ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999). They elucidated how loss related to incarceration often remains uncertain, unresolved, or un-validated by communities affected by it (Arditti et al., 2003). They posited how the level of stigma surrounding the reality of incarceration could result in feelings of isolation or paralysis for the family members enduring it. Thus, allowing family members an outlet to voice potential experiences of loss due to parental incarceration could provide meaningful implications for treatment and community-cohesion for those affected by the phenomenon.

**Foster-care Families.** The idea of the “psychological family” has been examined in recent literature related to the foster-care context. Mitchell (2016) described how the definition of “family” has become more varied as a result of social, economic, and political changes in the United States. With these changes come new ideas about how foster-care families experience family and to what extent ambiguous loss is a factor influencing their experience. Mitchell (2016) explained how children who experience foster-care often feel a sense of confusion and
conflict as they enter into what the author terms a “family dance” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 364). At the most basic level children question who they should consider and name “Mom” and “Dad,” likely leaving them with a sense of bewilderment and isolation (Mitchell, 2016). The impact of this lack of resolution can cause additional distress for a child entering the foster-care system and poses many implications for using ambiguous loss to understand the foster-care experience (Mitchell, 2016).

Literature investigating ambiguous loss in the context of foster-care families has demonstrated similar challenges among family members as those found in military and incarcerated family communities. Research by Lee and Whiting (2007) and Samuels (2009) have both highlighted the relevance of ambiguous loss theory in the discussion of individuals’ experiences with foster-care. Lee and Whiting (2007) focused their research on the narratives of foster children throughout various stages of development via semi-structured interviews. Several themes emerged from the interviews of the children including: confusion, distress, ambivalence, immobilization, helplessness, denial, and guilt. As Lee and Whiting (2007) described, the main responses to ambiguous loss that have been highlighted in previous research align with their findings (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Boss, 2004).

The research by Samuels (2009) honed in on a different population from that of Lee and Whiting (2007). Samuels (2009) investigated the experiences of young adults who transitioned out of foster-care without legal permanence through the context of ambiguous loss. Samuels (2009) suggested that unlike other forms of ambiguous loss, situations for foster youth can be unique in that: foster youth might experience repeated losses of both types across their time in foster care… it can be the youth whose presence is only partial within a family – a potentially
distinct type of relational ambiguity that marks not only their relationships with foster parents, but the literal uncertainty of their status within any family system (p. 1230).

Thus, in conditions of foster care, youth may experience both types of ambiguous loss simultaneously or at different points throughout their foster care time, potentially causing even more detrimental outcomes for the relational and developmental functioning. The aforementioned literature presented by Lee and Whiting (2007) and Samuels (2009) described typical reactions to ambiguous loss, and suggests the applicability of the theory within the context of the foster-care community.

Ambiguous Loss in a Non-Western Context. Two pieces of literature have highlighted how ambiguous loss can be viewed in non-Western contexts. Robins (2010) investigated families who had members disappear in Post-conflict Nepal and Luster et al. (2008) studied relatives of Sudan refugees in their experiences of searching for their loved ones. Both studies explored non-Western contexts demonstrating versatility and applicability of ambiguous loss theory in a meaningful way. Continued research on the implementation of ambiguous loss across cultures could provide an important contribution to the existing literature.

Robins (2010) used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather qualitative data from families of relatives missing from the “People’s War” with the Maoist regime in 1996 (p. 256). The conflict left several thousand dead and missing. The sampling frame in the Robins (2010) study represented families of 1,227 individuals missing from the chaos in Nepal. Findings suggested the clear relevance of ambiguous loss theory to the applicability of ambiguous loss theory for these individuals’ hardship (Robins, 2010). Namely, themes emerged such as: ambiguity and closure, trauma symptoms, family and community issues. Robins (2010) then
used the six tenets of ambiguous loss theory to show how the model relates directly to the
experiences these individuals shared in their interviews and focus groups. Through the analysis
of the data, Robins (2010) determined that the framework of ambiguous loss delineated by Boss
(2006) most appropriately captured the impact of the situation for these individuals, highlighting
the importance of sharing stories with others who may have experienced similar adversity.

The study of Luster et al. (2008) offered another example of the non-Western contexts in
which ambiguous loss can be applied. The authors interviewed 10 Sudanese youth, a smaller
sample from the larger population of 75, about their experiences traveling to the United States in
search of their missing relatives. The youth shared their hardship in the form of separation from
family members, uncertainty about discovering their whereabouts, and re-establishing
relationships (Luster et al., 2008). The authors used the frameworks of attachment and risk and
resilience to understand the role of ambiguous loss theory in the youth’s experiences. In the
interviews, youths identified themes of separation, ambiguity about searching for family
members, re-establishing relationships in refugee camps, and family reunification all within the
context of ambiguous loss (Luster et al., 2008). The most reported experience expressed by the
youth was the feeling of isolation about not knowing the whereabouts of their family members
and uncertainty about how it would impact them (Luster et al., 2008). The authors speculated
that the Sudanese have a cultural tendency for attempting to develop mastery, which likely
helped them make sense of their experiences (Luster et al., 2008). This suggests the applicability
of using the tenets of ambiguous loss theory in understanding their experiences as Sudanese
refugees so they can work towards reconnecting with the families they once knew. Ultimately,
ambiguous loss theory with the non-Western communities presented in the literature offers
further evidence of its applicability across a wide array of cultural contexts.
I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE’”

“Ambiguous Loss” and “Ambiguous Gain”

Boss (1977) claimed that the experience of father absence does not have to be a negative one. She suggested, “the father-absent family is considered deficient in structure only if his role is kept open and unattended, that is, if he remains psychologically present when, physically and realistically, he is unavailable to the system” (Boss, 1977, p. 142). This perspective has implications for the importance of providing appropriate and sensitive treatment efforts to support individuals and families responding to father absence, regardless of the reason for that absence. It is important to consider several perspectives when evaluating the impact and role of ambiguous loss on the conceptualization of experiences of paternal absence for children and families, depending on the father’s behavior and role in the family system (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) elaborated by positing the concept of strain theory explaining:

...[an] awareness that imprisonment is sometimes a means by which families encourage the court to remove a parent who has ‘burned through’ the supportive capacity of the family, often as a result of... negligence... violence and abuse. Such a parent is a drain or threat rather than an asset to the family (p. 125).

Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) suggested that parental absence due to incarceration can sometimes produce positive outcomes for children and families to be “ambiguous gain,” if the father was abusive, neglectful, or overall a negative contribution to the family (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Taking into consideration the possibility of ambiguous gain is important to avoid making a-priori assumptions about the meaning of the participants’ experiences.
Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) discussed the ways in which the lack of a parent can result in reduced “social capital” (p. 123). Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) cited Portes (1998) who explained that “social capital” is … “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks…” (p. 123). When one parent is removed from a family network, several implications can result for the child’s level of social capital, potentially causing a disruption in family relationships. In this way, the concept of social capital can be aligned with the notion of ambiguous loss. If individuals are experiencing an ambiguous loss or a confusing relationship, they may not have as much access to social capital, or resources provided by family members. The idea of social capital describes how a lack of access to social and emotional resources provided by a parent, in the form of physical or psychological absence, can place children at a disadvantage in developing relationships. While some children may be disadvantaged by a lack of such resources, other children who may have grown up with less positive parental influences may benefit from parental absence.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Employing a descriptive phenomenological approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the retrospective experiences of young adult females aged 22-32 who experienced paternal absence at some point during their respective childhoods. As stated earlier, the phenomenon of paternal absence has been studied in a variety of ways, using several types of methodologies to gather data. Informed by the subjective nature of paternal absence and ambiguous loss described by Boss (2006), this study used a phenomenological approach. Similarly, Boss (2007) corroborated the use of phenomenological methodology in studying family issues, such as paternal absence, in order “to shed light on the link between… meaning and tolerance for ambiguity” (p. 110). Englander (2012) reiterated how:
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…phenomenological researchers are interested in the subjectivity of other persons and thus it seems logical that we would want to get a description of such subjectivity. Collecting descriptions from others is also an attempt at a discovery of human scientific meaning of a particular phenomenon (p. 15).

Thus, given the fluid and subjective definition of paternal absence and its potential links to an experience of ambiguous loss, a descriptive approach was most feasible and aligned with the research objective (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). For this research a priori codes were devised based on previous literature on resilience, attachment theory, ambiguous loss, ambiguous gain, boundary ambiguity, and human development. From there, themes generated from statements made by the participants in this study told the stories of each young woman and their experiences with paternal absence and the extent to which it connected with ambiguous loss.

History of phenomenological research

According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology has been considered an “educational qualitative research design,” whose roots stem from the discipline of Philosophy (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 101). Philosopher Edmund Husserl has been credited for being the “father” of phenomenology (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Parodi (2008) explained how with his phenomenological ideas, Husserl “emphasized the study of meaning and ideal objects, of the psychological conscience of the world and of science” (p. 473). Through his efforts at framing phenomenology as an experimental method, Husserl sought to denounce the ideals of psychology as a “pure science” and described how phenomenology considers “human perception” and “intentionality of consciousness” as important to understanding human experience (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 102).

In conceptualizing phenomenology as an approach to qualitative research, Husserl has introduced new terms. He presented the Greek notion of epoche or “epokhe” (Greek spelling)
meaning *doubt* to suggest the importance of “the suspension or suppression of judgments and the positioning of the research with regard to the experiences of the studied phenomenon” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 102; Giorgi, 2009). This component of phenomenology makes it unique to other forms of qualitative research and guided me in my research process.

Several types of phenomenological research exist. Most relevant to the current study was “descriptive phenomenology” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 103). This type refers to the investigation of one’s “personal experience and requires a description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomenon experienced by participants in the investigation” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 103). In this way, this study used elements of descriptive phenomenology. However, given that suspending all preconceived notions or biases (as described by the notion of ‘epoche’) is very difficult to do entirely, my methodological approach was an adapted version of descriptive phenomenology devised by Giorgi (1997).

According to Creswell (1998), the main goal of phenomenology to study human experiences requires 3 to 15 participants (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The number of participants allowed me to focus on finding meaning in the data they provide more easily. My aim in the current study was to interview no more than 15 participants for these reasons.

**Current Study and Methodological Approach**

Similar to the retrospective phenomenological research study of East et al. (2007), this study used a phenomenological qualitative approach to investigate females’ experiences of paternal absence. However, dissimilar from the research of East et al. (2007), I inquired whether paternal absence could be understood specifically within the context of ambiguous loss for young adult females. The phenomenological approach I used was employed while considering its possible connection to ambiguous loss theory. For the semi-structured interviews, I presented
general open-ended questions, with the goal of yielding more personal information about participants’ experiences with paternal absence and discovering the extent to which their stories can be expressed through the context of ambiguous loss. In this way, the interview process was aligned with phenomenological theory in that data emerged from the stories individuals told about their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

**Sampling Method**

Common to phenomenological approaches to research, a purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants for this qualitative study (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Padgett (2008) described purposive sampling as “a deliberate process of selecting respondents based on their ability to provide the needed information” (pp. 53). Given that the purpose of my study was to understand young women’s experiences with the phenomenon of paternal absence, it was deemed necessary to utilize a purposive sampling method to recruit participants who would allow me to achieve that purpose. Therefore, given the target population of participants, purposive sampling seemed most appropriate and feasible for this current study of young adult females who have experienced paternal absence. However, recruitment through word-of-mouth required implementation of a snowball sampling method once I found some participants via purposive sampling procedures.

**Inclusion Criteria**

Criteria for inclusion in this study were used to gather participants according to the aforementioned research questions. Only women were targeted for the purposes of investigating whether or not females’ experiences of paternal absence can be understood by ambiguous loss theory. This study consisted of 10 participants. The age range of 18-35 was selected due to the idea that this is a common developmental age for individuals to think about meaningful
relationships; however, each of the participants fell between the ages of 22 and 32. Murray and Farrington (2008) described the hypothesis of Johnston (1995) that children older than age 6 are more likely to be able to process and respond to trauma, such as parental imprisonment, in relation to younger children (Murray & Farrington, 2008). Despite this hypothesis, I chose to allow individuals who experienced father absence at any age before 18 to participate in the study, in order to understand how the developmental age of person experiencing paternal absence informed their experience with it. In addition, I made the decision not to require the females’ fathers to be currently absent, whether physically or psychologically, in order to participate in the study.

**Exclusion Criteria**

Only one exclusion criterion was required for this study. Individuals were considered ineligible if they reported that their “absent” family member was not their biological father, such as a step-parent, pseudo-father, or adoptive father. The rationale for this exclusion criterion relates to the fact that I am studying the specific phenomenon of paternal absence, and a step-parent or pseudo-parent, while they might be considered a father figure, is not a biological father for these young women.

**Recruitment**

Following the purposive sampling methods outlined by Bocknek et al. (2009), I made attempts to recruit participants by contacting organizations and programs that work with families possibly enduring parental absence, such as organizations that help prisoners transitioning back home after incarceration. I also recruited via word of mouth in mental health agencies, who may work with clientele who have experienced paternal absence. To recruit participants, I connected with mental health agencies in the Philadelphia area. I reached out to these agencies to gather
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young adult female participants who have experienced paternal absence and administered a flyer. The recruitment of participants was not limited to clients. Therefore, adult mental health professionals who worked at those agencies and fit the eligibility criteria were included, as well. I contacted representatives at these organizations via phone and administered a flyer (Appendix II) in these locations, to make the purpose, importance, intent, and benefits of my study known. Participants were asked to email me about their interest in this study. From there, introductory meetings via Zoom, a web-base videoconferencing platform, were held with the interested participants to determine whether they are eligible for this study. During that video conversation, I set up a time and place to conduct the interview, prioritizing convenience of the participant over my own convenience. If necessary, interviews took place via zoom if the participant lives too far away for the researcher to travel to easily by bus or train. An incentive in the form of a $25 cash was given to the young adult women as compensation for participating in the study.

Social media, specifically Facebook, was another way in which I advertised my study and sought out research participants. Each method of recruitment had varying levels of success. Most of my participants were gathered through Facebook, word of mouth, and by recruiting at mental health agencies.

Ensuring Anonymity

I required each participant to sign an informed consent form to show that they agree and understanding of the purpose, procedure, and implications of the study. Any identifying information revealed at any point during the research process was altered to ensure anonymity of the participants. However, given the method of contact via email and word of mouth, it is impossible to ensure complete anonymity. At the beginning of each interview, each participant chose a name they would like to be called in this dissertation.
Semi-Structured Interviews

My method of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, designed to allow “rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings” to emerge from the research undertaking (Groenewald, 2004, p. 47; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Kensit, 2000). I conducted in-person interviews with seven of the 10 participants. The other three interviews were conducted via videoconferencing, using a platform called Zoom. Part of the time during the interview was spent asking participants to draw a picture of their family. This exercise was intended to determine whether or not boundary ambiguity, as referred to by Boss et al. (1990), existed for them. This family drawing was helpful in providing the opportunity for individuals to elaborate on their experiences with family relationships throughout the course of the interview. It also yielded important information I could use in subsequent interview questions. Refer to Appendix I for the interview guide.

Audit Trail

Throughout the research process, my thoughts about research questions were recorded by gathering relevant articles on the topic and writing down my cognitive processes in conceptualizing the material. I made note of personal biases or preconceived judgments that may enter into the analysis and interpretation of the findings (Werner-Lin, 2016). In subsequent phases of the research process, I continued an audit trail, for the purposes of remaining organized and helping to improve trustworthiness.

In an effort to reflect on my experience as the researcher during the interview process, I was conscience of my reflections. “Memoing,” a technique described by Miles and Huberman (1984), allowed me to record my thoughts, observations, and reflections about the data collection
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process (p. 69; Groenewald, 2004, p. 48). This also helped to make my audit trail more organized.

**Coding procedures and Data analysis**

**A priori coding.** With its literal term meaning “before” coding, a priori coding involves deriving theories or ideas from relevant research on a topic and developing themes from them (Charmaz, 2003). According to Charmaz (2003), it is important to approach coding with the mindset that pre-conceived ideas are informed by research. Based on the aforementioned research delineated in the literature review, several a priori codes were identified to inform the generation of themes in the current study. Dey (1993) has described that the purpose of a priori coding is to understand the extent to which the current data aligns with the previously held conceptions about the topic represented in published literature. In this study, I sought to discover whether the participants’ stories of paternal absence showed indications of experiences with ambiguous loss. Namely, the a priori codes included: attachment, resilience, ambiguous loss, ambiguous gain, boundary ambiguity, and human development. Examining the participants’ stories through these lenses helped me to conceptualize the extent to which my research contributes to already existing literature and further explains the experiences of a particular subset of young adult women.

**Theme Generation.** After transcribing and reading each transcription thoroughly, several times, I used a priori codes to parse out themes from the transcriptions. Each theme was recognized as existing across at least two of the participants’ stories to create a multi-faceted understanding of how the young women’s experiences of paternal absence intertwined, differed, and were reminiscent of ambiguous loss. Themes emerged from the participants’ data and
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aligned with pre-conceived notions of the relevance of ambiguous loss to their experiences of paternal absence.

I modeled my interpretation of the interview data on the six stage phenomenological method of Giorgi (1997), as delineated in Holroyd (2001). First, I gained a general understanding of the interview data in a holistic way by reading the transcripts several times (Holroyd, 2001). Secondly, I provided an overview of the gathered data and recreated a “constituent profile,” which presents a list of “descriptive meaning statements for each participant” (Holroyd, 2001, p. 2). Third, by employing coding procedure, I searched for common themes, creating a “thematic index” (Holroyd, 2001, p. 2) and determined “referents” or words that identify the meaning of experiences being studied (Holroyd, 2001, p. 3). During the fourth stage, I implemented what Giorgi (1997) refers to as “Searching the Thematic Index,” (Holroyd, 2001, p. 3) in which I merged the central themes, referents, and constituent profile, into “interpretive themes” (p. 3). This allowed for the fifth step of the process, which Giorgi (1997) termed “Arriving at an Extended Description,” during which point the interpretive themes were used to derive meaning about the phenomenon of paternal absence and its relation to ambiguous loss for the young adult female participants (p. 3). Finally, the extended descriptions outlined in step 5 were synthesized and meaning was gleaned from them to create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Holroyd, 2001; Giorgi, 1997). I maintain that the detailed descriptive aspect of this methodology directly impacted the outcome of this research.

Chapter 4. Findings

Interviews were conducted with 10 females who ranged in age from 22-32-years old. Two of the participants self-identified as Black/African American, two identified as mixed race, one as Dominican, and five as Caucasian. All participants had completed college and five had
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earned graduate degrees. Six out of the ten participants reported being non-married, three of whom were in a relationship and three considered themselves single. The other four participants identified being married. These demographic variables are displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Alias)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billy Jean</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caribbean American/Black/Venezuelan</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Non-married/ In relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Non-married/Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Non-married/In a Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Non-married/In a relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Non-married/Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Non-married/Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White/Hispanic/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early on in each in-person interview, participants were asked to draw a picture of their families. They were not given direction about who should be in the picture other than to draw “whomever they considered part of their family.” This drawing activity was meant to be a springboard for further discussion about family dynamics, particularly as related to possible boundary ambiguity. Some participants drew their fathers in the pictures, however in several of those cases, the participants spoke of being unsure about whether to put their fathers in the picture –indicating possible ambiguity. Refer to Appendix III for the family pictures of seven of the women who participated in in-person interviews.

Themes

In order to discover the extent to which the concept of ambiguous loss resonated with the participants, I explained ambiguous loss to each participant during the interview and then asked
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directly about whether they felt it relevant to their stories. The majority of the participants felt their experiences of paternal absence made more sense after knowing about ambiguous loss.

Four themes and a number of subthemes emerged from the interviews (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “Painted Perceptions”/Tainted Tales: Parental Messages and Responses to Paternal Absence | - Enmeshment in Relationships: “Adultification” and “Parentification”
- “Silence Speaks Louder than Words”
- Mom’s response to absence: abandonment issues and women’s empowerment |
| “My dad was a ghost:” Impact of being “there” but not there | - Defining Paternal Role: “Dad” vs. “Father or Sperm Donor” vs. “Moral Compass”
- Ambiguous loss: “Make believe dad” and Seeking Approval
- Disenfranchised grief: “Why am I so upset? My dad’s not dead!”
- Ambiguous gain |
| “I came from this person?:” Making sense of identity | - Mysterious “Other Half”
- Significance of Names
- Connecting via traits: appearance and personality |
| “Why can’t you just love me?” – Resilience and Redefining “Family” | - Navigating (dis)connection with dad
- Non-parental support: school, extended family, and step-dads
- How Dad impacts dating: Relationship sabotage, commitment/attachment issues, partner choice |

The themes built off of each other and provided a foundational understanding of how ambiguous loss can be used to clarify experiences of paternal absence. Theme 1. “Painted Perceptions/” Tainted Tales: Parental Messages and Responses to Paternal Absence set the stage for the influence of parental messages on not only the development of the young women in this study, but how their interpretations of those messages influenced their psychological well-being. Theme 2. “My dad was a ghost:” Impact of being ‘there’ but not there helped solidify an
understanding of the phenomenon of paternal absence and ambiguous loss from participants’ expressed confusion about their fathers’ role. Theme 3. “I came from this person?: Making sense of identity” provided a natural progression to describe the young women’s experiences with paternal absence during adolescence and its implications for identity. Theme 4. “Why can’t you just love me?” – Resilience and redefining family” rounded out the overarching story of paternal absence and ambiguous loss by explaining their implications for non-parental support and resilience in relationships.

Theme 1. “Painted Perceptions”/Tainted Tales: Influence of Parental Messages

Understanding the impact of paternal absence for these participants began with an explanation of how paternal absence was implicitly and explicitly communicated through parental messages. Several of the participants experienced messages passed down to them about their fathers, which influenced their perceptions of his absence. These “painted perceptions” (Susan, L.) provided an important theme for this study and a framework for understanding how childhood perceptions of parenting can shape development and inform future relationships with that parent.

What each of the young women learned about their fathers through messages informed how they made sense of and his absence. Several of the women reported that their mothers explicitly sent negative messages to them about their fathers, affecting how each young woman viewed him as a child. Billy Jean told her story of how her mother spoke to her about her father claiming he was “a piece of shit and she didn’t need him (Billy Jean, G.).” The negativity that her mother instilled about her father seemed to generate confusion about him for Billy Jean. After years passed, Billy Jean reflected that “[she] felt like [her] mom had this disdain and hatred for [her] because she had this disdain and hatred for [her] father (Billy Jean, G.).” This
Like Billy Jean’s experience, Susan’s mother sent a negative message about her father. As a 30-year old mother who had not seen her father since infancy, Susan recalled, “I think my mom did a very good job of painting this very negative picture of him. I guess I just thought he was a bad person and I didn’t need someone so bad in my life (Susan, L.).” The contempt that Susan’s mother felt for her father resulted in more confusion for Susan. She admitted, “I think as a child I would have wished that I had been less shielded by what was going on with my dad. I have a sneaking suspicion that my mom shielded me from communication with him (Susan, L.).” The questioning that Susan depicted above has prevented her from reaching out to her father, thus far, despite her curiosity about him. Unlike Billy Jean, the messages that Susan received, although unfavorable, made her interested in him more. Her suspicion that her mother was hiding something from her could be reminiscent of confusion and lack of resolution she felt about his absence, which could imply an experience of ambiguous loss.

Aligned with the stories of Billy Jean and Susan, Grace also described a sense of confusion about her father due to her mother’s messages about him. Grace, a 32-year old, married woman with one daughter, recognized that her mom sent her mixed signals. Grace described:

[G]rowing up I had this weird thing where she would tell me to call my dad, but at the same time she’d say, “oh he’s such a bad man. I was thrown off, like ‘what am I supposed to believe?’ ‘Is this a good person or is this a bad person?’ You’re
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telling me to call him, but he’s no good. I was always confused growing up

(Grace, P.).

For Grace’s mother, her efforts at trying to connect Grace with her father, despite talking negatively about him, left Grace with a lot of unanswered questions. In the cases of Billy Jean, Susan, and Grace, confusion could be interpreted as an experience of ambiguous loss. All three women had father-daughter relationships that were held in limbo because of confusing and unresolved messages passed down from their mothers.

**Enmeshment in Relationships: “Adultification” and “Parentification.”** The concept of enmeshment has origins in Structural Family Therapy, championed by Salvador Minuchin in the 1980s. Nichols and Schwartz (1995) describe a key component in Minuchin’s work is the notion of “boundaries” in families (p. 214). When boundaries are loose and diffuse, enmeshment occurs, whereby reciprocal support between parent and child can lead to a lack of autonomy and independence (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995; Engelhardt, 2012). The diffuse boundaries can take shape in families in the form of “adultification” and “parentification.” Both experiences of enmeshment were reflected in the stories of the young women in this study and demonstrate a strong connection to the concept of ambiguous loss.

**Adultification.** The term “adultification” is a form of enmeshment in family relationships when children assume relationships with their parents that resemble peers or partners at a developmentally inappropriate age (Garber, 2011, p. 325). Several of the young women explained how the absence of their fathers lead them to take on supportive “adult-like” roles with their mothers as children. Susan explained how, even though she had always wanted to contact her dad, she [didn’t] “want to hurt [her] mother’s feelings. [She’s] afraid it would hurt her
feelings too much, so [she] just [didn’t] do it (Susan, L.).” She elaborated that reaching out to her father would have betrayed her mother. Susan explained how her mother:

- took [the separation] harder than [she] did. I think I just had to step aside and help her more than grieve myself because I was in high school at the time. It was definitely really difficult but I think it was also especially difficult because I was sort of taking care of my mom emotionally at the same time (Susan, L.).

Susan’s experience of having to console her mom while resisting her urge to contact her dad, even though it could have helped her process the loss, could suggest a co-dependent relationship characteristic of “adultification.”

Stephanie’s portrayal of her relationship with her mother paralleled Susan’s portrayal of her relationship with her mother. Stephanie explained how when her father left, her mom struggled with issues of abandonment and leaned on Stephanie for support. She said:

I think my mom had a lot of [emotional] control over me. We had an almost too close relationship because she didn’t have a partner and I didn’t have any siblings. I wasn’t just her child. I was her friend. As I grew older, I was increasingly more like her partner… I was her emotional support (Stephanie, J.).

Stephanie described becoming her mother’s partner and worried that when her mother dies, she will feel alone. Stephanie identified how she “took on more adult roles in [her] family unit” for her mother (Stephanie, J.). In lieu of her father’s position as a support network for her mother, Stephanie stepped into that role. The experience of adultification for Susan and Stephanie could have influenced their perceptions of their fathers and how they felt about his absence.

“Parentification.” Similar to adultification, another consequence of enmeshment in a family relationship is the notion of “parentification.” Parentification describes the experience of
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children adopting the role of parental caregiver, commonly affecting issues of attachment and identity in the child’s development (Garber, 2011; Byng-Hall, 2002). This notion has relevance to some of this study’s participants, particularly the case of Ashley. Ashley, a 25-year old, new family therapist, who just had graduated with a Master’s degree, described how she had to step-up and play more of caregiving role for her mother, who struggled to make sense of her husband’s departure from the family. Ashley shared:

I got very frustrated with her that she was not able to move on from [dad’s leaving] and that’s all I want[ed] to do. Now, I’ve tried setting firm boundaries with her, like a parent, about not talking about stuff related to my dad in my adult life. It was healthy for both of us (Ashley, G.).

How Ashley’s mother responded to the absence of her partner sent a message that seemed to suggest helplessness, which created a need for Ashley to take care of her. Ashley responded to her mother’s upset by becoming more mature and in the process she learned not to be paralyzed by her father’s absence.

“Silence Speaks Louder than Words.” In contrast to the experiences presented by most of the young women in this study, two participants described markedly different reflections of messages passed down from their mothers. For 29-year old, Sara, her mother worked hard to avoid painting a dark picture of her father’s abusive behavior towards her mother. Sara described how: “[My mother] never [said] anything negative. She made quite an effort that whatever she was saying didn’t put a negative light on what happened… I didn’t know the details until much later (Sara, B.).” Possibly Sara’s mother’s efforts at being positive, despite her father’s absence, sent Sara a message about resilience and self-reliance. Sara stated:
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I guess you can go two ways with it. You know you can be a victim and it could hurt you and make things harder, or you could be stronger for it. You just have to make that choice (Sara, B.).

Her mother had made the choice to be resilient and set an example of being the “bigger person” for Sara, too.

April’s story paralleled Sara’s in many ways. They both described strong mothers who demonstrated their power over men. April shared a story about when her father discovered April’s mom was pregnant (with April). His immediate reaction was to ask for her hand in marriage. April proudly explained that her mom’s response to him represented strength and fortitude and in her mom that implied she did not need a man. April’s mom replied to his request by saying, “the only way I would actually say ‘yes’ is if you come to the house (April, D.). Her dad never made it and did not exist in her life ever since. What April seemed to take away from that story was that “[she] never needed anything from him (her father) (April, D.)” or any man, for that matter. Her mother did not share many stories about him, but largely because April never asked.

Mom’s response to absence: abandonment and women’s empowerment. The young women involved in this study all talked about the role their mothers played for them. Some of these experiences were depicted as positive and some were deemed negative. Abandonment and women’s empowerment were portrayed in the stories of these young women when talking about the role of their mothers.

Abandonment. Twenty-five-year old Samantha, who grew up primarily with her mother and sister, described how her mother seemed to give up on parenting once Samantha’s older sister went to college. She explained: “The interesting part was that because my mom was going
through her own stuff… Once my sister went to college it was kind of ‘do everything on your own’ type thing with my mom (Samantha, M.).” As a teenager, Samantha was left to raise herself and become a pseudo-adult. The abandonment issues she felt because of her mother’s abdication of responsibility made her look at her relationship with her father differently.

Samantha shared how:

My mom complained tooth and nail about picking me up for everything. I went to a magnet school in [a Southern state], which is I suppose kind of like charter schools here, which means my school was far… My mom didn’t want to drive, so I would take the [subway]. That never happened with daddy, like he was there [the time that I spent living with him]. He’d say, ‘you’re not letting my daughter take the train home.’ That’s something I never had, which felt very much like care. Safety equaled care [with daddy] (Samantha, M.).

For Samantha, her father only did father-like things when he was physically present. When she was living apart from him and just raised by her mother, her father appeared to give up any parenting responsibilities.

Olivia described a similar type of role abdication on the part of her mother; however, for reasons very different from Samantha’s experience. Olivia explained how both her mother and father were very involved with drugs and would leave her for days at a time, as a child, to fend for herself. She ended up in foster-care and then eventually in the custody of her aunt and uncle. Olivia described how when her mother was clean, it gave her permission to miss her dad more.

**Empowerment.** Sara and April both described how their mothers were positive influences on how each dealt with her father’s absence within the context of resilience. In the case of Sara, her mother was a social worker who made an effort to talk positively about her father, despite the
fact that he physically abused her. Sara described her understanding that when individuals are confronted with hardship, they are faced with two options for how to respond, one in which they proceed in a more destructive avenue, and one more positive avenue. Sara credited her mother for empowering her to keep “…pushing forward and not letting that kind of turn you in a negative way (Sara, B.).” She explained: “I think I built resilience around [my father’s absence] because of my mom. I think, as I said, it’s one of two choices (Sara, B.).”

Similarly, for April, her mother seemed to model empowerment, which fostered April’s resilience in the face of her father’s absence. April explained how, “[r]esiliency is a big part of my life and actions speak louder than words. I am happy that my mom told my biological father, ‘if you want to marry me come to the door.’ (April, D.).” Throughout her interview with me, April repeated that part of her mother’s story several times. It seemed to represent an experience of empowerment for her in that she respected her mother’s hard work, organization, and devotion to parenting, despite raising her daughter without a partner.

Theme 2. “My dad was a ghost:” Impact of being “there” but not there.

The parental messages informed how each participant, as a child, was encouraged (by adults sending those messages) to feel the absence of their fathers. However, as they got older, each young woman began to form her own perspectives of his absence, describing it as confusing and difficult to grasp. As each young woman whom I interviewed shared stories of her father’s confusing absence, several sub-themes related to ambiguous loss emerged. Participants discussed the experience of having a mythical father – an imagined one to make sense of his absence. They identified efforts they made to revise attachment relationships with their fathers by seeking approval. Also, they compared their own family situations to those of other families in an effort to discover meaning from their own experiences. Finally, some of the participants discussed
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feeling “better off” without a father, characteristic of ambiguous gain. All of these notions helped describe the paradox of feeling their father’s physical absence while also sensing his psychological presence, which can be viewed as emblematic of ambiguous loss.

**Defining Paternal Role: “Dad” vs “Father” or “Sperm donor” vs. “Moral Compass?”**

One way in which the confusion of father absence emerged in the interviews, was how the women often stumbled when trying to define the word “father.” All of the women were asked the same question: “How would you define the word ‘father?’” For many, the words “dad” and “father” were defined differently.

Some of the participants’ definitions of father are represented below:

Billy Jean: “I don’t really refer to my biological father as my ‘father.’ He’s more of a sperm donor (Billy Jean, G.).”

Samantha: “A father, I guess, is someone who takes care of their child. A dad is somebody who just has a child (Samantha, M.).”

Olivia: “A father is the person you’re biologically related to, but your dad is the person who raises you (Olivia, W.).”

Emma:

Your father made you exist. Your father provided a sample that made you exist. Your dad is the one who lives with you, who loves you and who has taken care of you. He’s raising you and preparing you for your adulthood. Your father is the person who biologically made you exist...I’m always going to think of it as a person who provided a sperm donation. But if I think about what/who is a dad, it’s someone who provides you with a moral compass (Emma, S.).
Ambiguous Loss: “Make Believe Dad” and Seeking Approval.

In response to the definitions of “father” and “dad” provided by each participant, I inquired about what his absence meant to them. The participants’ responses could suggest experiences of ambiguous loss.

Emma:

a. So for me, my father was a ghost. I knew he was alive and I knew he was not physically present. I knew it was by his choice and also my mother’s choice
b. He was a presence that was always absent that was given to me later in life… he was never ever there and was just peppered in sometimes (Emma, S).

These reflections demonstrated language characteristic of ambiguous loss.

Billy Jean’s experience could also be reflective of ambiguous loss:

a. I was a mess. I was like ‘I don’t understand what’s happening to me right now’… [His absence] stayed with me. Knowing that he never disappeared. [He] was in the same place. [He] could have reached out and never did.

b. I just think he goes through a middle man to try to poke at me. I’m like ‘no, because you could have came to me directly’ (Billy Jean, G.).

Here, Billy Jean described the lingering aspect of the absence, her misunderstanding of what happened, and her upset about his lack of connection with her. All of these responses could suggest that she felt her father-daughter relationship was left unresolved and ambiguous.

Olivia:

a. With a death you get to go through the stages in the process and [with] a definitive amount of time. Whereas, [I thought] ‘am I going to get this back? Is this really gone? (Olivia, W.).’
b. [The effect of his absence was] intermittently pretty significant. I think there were periods I was probably okay. Or the loss of my mom was more paramount at the moment. Because in my mind I was competing with like who do I feel more loss about right now?… If [my mom] had been a stable presence, I’m sure my dad would have taken more mental energy, but because she had her own stuff and that was affecting me so greatly, he probably went to the backburner… (Olivia, W.).

c. …I couldn’t feel both him and her at the same time. It was too much or too overwhelming. When she was safe and okay I knew I was safe and okay. It gave me permission to feel loss for him (Olivia, W.).

Olivia tried to understand her loss by comparing it to death, but she realized her experience was much less concrete and unresolved. She also explained how the extent of her mom’s presence probably influenced her ability to acknowledge the loss of her father. Processing the loss of both parents was overwhelming for her, so she prioritized the relationship that was more stable.

Susan:

a. But looking back now as an adult the not knowing leaves this gap of needing to fill in with whatever pieces can fit together or this gap of not feeling completely together…Not knowing what kind of father he would have been. Not knowing really much of what he looks like. Not knowing how that contributes to everything that is part of my makeup. It’s not the same kind of loss as the loss that you would grieve. (Susan, L.).

b. I think it’s interesting to think about how there was some sort of psychological influence from my father growing up even though he wasn’t present and I wasn’t in communication with him and I couldn’t like talk to him about stuff. I think it’s
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weirdly comforting to know that there was some sort of presence even if it can’t be captured. It’s a little alarming. I don’t know. It’s a little creepy to think about how someone can have such a psychological effect on you and you never even meet them (Susan, L.).

Susan related her experience of loss and the absence of her father to one of mourning a death, but she also recognized the profound difference. She identified the powerful impact of “not knowing” the answers to many questions and how that affected her on many levels. She reflected on the confusing nature of her loss and described how it was difficult to digest. This experience was likely characteristic of ambiguous loss. Once, she learned the definition of ambiguous loss, Susan seemed to appreciate having a label for the sense of loss that she had felt for most of her life.

Make-believe dad. Another way in which the young adult women responded to the absence of their loved one was by imagining stories about them to make the truth easier to accept. Olivia described:

I remember crying because I think I had always idealized him. In this like sadistic way because I thought ‘oh maybe he had gotten his life together.’ Since he was gone I think it was easier for me to think… I used to delusionally think he became a pastor and like maybe he’s like this great person now and doesn’t know how to find me (Olivia, W.).

Olivia’s psychological efforts at making up stories about his whereabouts made dealing with her father’s absence more manageable.

April attempted to make sense of her father’s absence while in college. She explained how she “killed [her] father off in [her] story (April, D.).” She continued, “… I would tell people
he died in a car crash the day that I was born and that’s it… I’ve never wanted to be attached to it (April, D.).” Similar to Olivia’s story, April seemed to use make-believe to accept her father’s absence. In contrast to Olivia, though, April showed much less hopeful outcome in her fantasy explanation for his absence.

**Seeking Approval.** Some of the young women responded to paternal absence by longing for approval from their fathers. Susan described wishing that her dad could be around to experience her now because she is proud of who she has become. She explained how: “just getting approval from like an outside person, but a little bit different because he’s technically my dad. And then what happens if he doesn’t approve, right? (Susan, L.).” Susan went on to say:

I want to make [her] dad feel bad about leaving and make him be like ‘look at the kid that you could have raised.’ Like trying to paint a positive picture for myself and be like ‘why didn’t you want to stick around for this?’ (Susan, L.).

Susan’s response to her father’s absence left her with questions about her self-worth that she wanted answered from her father. These unanswered questions and the self-imposed stake that she attached to them resonate with the experience of ambiguous loss.

Similarly, Stephanie described how during the most difficult times with her father in high school she had been very proud of her accomplishments and wanted her father’s approval. She described how:

[H]e wasn’t there in terms of giving me permission to go [to {a Central American country} for Rotary International]. He didn’t let me go to {another Central American country} a few years later because he thought it was too dangerous… I was like ‘Come on. Can you just be proud of me?’ (Stephanie, J.).
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Stephanie’s hope and wish for approval was met with frustration, causing more disconnection between her father and her, which served to diminish their relationship. The search for approval described by Susan was presented as hypothetical; whereas, the search for approval described by Stephanie was real and it seemed to be a defining characteristic in the conflict with her father. Ultimately, each woman was left feeling unresolved hostility towards her respective father, also suggesting experiences of ambiguous loss.

Disenfranchised Grief: “Why Am I So Upset: My Dad’s Not dead! Another component clearly represented in the stories of participants was that they compared their own families to those of others as a means of making sense of paternal absence. These comparisons could suggest experiences of disenfranchised grief alongside ambiguous loss. Sara conveyed a complacent attitude about her father’s absence, but she also described how she understood her family structure in comparison to other families. Stephanie expressed frustration about her father’s absence; but, she also admitted feeling guilt about her frustration when considering her father’s absence in relation to that of others whose fathers are deceased. This guilt could be considered a response to disenfranchised grief.

Sara related how she felt about going to sleepovers and feeling uncomfortable about not having her father come to pick her up. She explained: “When I was like in middle school it’s not so much people talking about their fathers as it is that you go over to their homes and you see that figure… nobody necessarily talked about it. I didn’t know what to feel… (Sara, B.).” She remembered feeling a sense of isolation in her experience and she felt as if none of her friends could relate.

Stephanie compared her family structure to fictional ones, causing feelings of sadness to emerge. She also tried to differentiate between loss related to death and loss related to her
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experience, hypothetically processing the two as a means for understanding her father’s absence. She said:

I felt frustrated by the fact that he wasn’t in my life, but that he wasn’t dead. Like I had other friends who didn’t have a dad, but it was because their father had died. At times I felt like, ‘why am I so upset? or ‘I can’t talk about how this upsets me because my dad’s not dead.’ He was just not around (Stephanie, J.).

Stephanie thought she had to justify her upset and seemed to feel guilty that she would experience sadness when no death had occurred. Her story is one example of how ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief can occur simultaneously.

**Ambiguous Gain.** Another common sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was what Hagan & Dinovitzer (1999) term, “ambiguous gain” in which when “bridges are burned” with those people (ie. absent fathers), they (children) are stronger for it. In discussing the term ambiguous loss, I educated Olivia about the term “ambiguous gain” and she seemed to take my explanation of the concept to heart. She noted that it “…definitely relates to [me]. I can totally conceptualize it in my mind that it was a gain, but until I really knew who he really was and how mentally ill [he was]… I had always felt that it was a loss (Olivia, W.).” Until Olivia had answers about her father’s mental state, she experienced his absence from her life as a loss. In retrospect, Olivia acknowledged how resilient she had become in the face of hardship related to her father’s parenting, and she recognized that she might not have become resilient without the ambiguity she felt from it.

In my interview with April, themes emerged that could be reminiscent of ambiguous gain; however, considering herself “better off” due to not having her father in her life seemed
difficult for her to verbalize. When asked whether her relationship with her father inspired a feeling of ambiguous gain for her, she responded:

That’s hard to even say. ‘Because you weren’t there, that’s the reason why I’m awesome.’ That’s like the worst thing to say to a person. Maybe there are a lot of people who are able to say that clearly, but me and my emotional self, I am not able to (April, D.).

As she processed the question about whether she thought she had experienced ambiguous gain further, she seemed to grasp it in a more meaningful way, reflecting:

I don’t know [if ambiguous gain] is true or not [for me], because I’ve never met this man, but you never know. I don’t think it’s a hard assumption to make. But am I better for it? When I am looking at the mug shots of my ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, I think yea! (April, D.).

These participants’ responses could represent the often confusing, unresolved, and convoluted nature of relationships that can result when an unclear “absence” exists, but could also illustrate how “ambiguous gain” can elicit a sense of clarity, positive meaning-making, and growth.

Theme 3: “I came from this person?:” Making Sense of Identity

During the interviews, participants described how their experiences of paternal absence, and the ambiguity they felt about their relationship with their fathers influenced the development of their self-identity. Several sub-themes described the link between experiences of paternal absence and identity development.

Mysterious “Other Half.” The notion of “other half,” as a term, suggests language of ambiguous loss. April and Emma used this terminology likely to imply the nebulous feeling of an “other half” being part of them, yet a confusing, mysterious figure, nonetheless. April
described how she did not think much about her father until her mother and other family members encouraged her to find out about her “other half” for legal purposes. She shared how her mom kept her father’s driver’s license: “…just in case I need it. Like in case I ever needed any legal forms. She has it as evidence of ‘this is the person who is the other half of you… (April, D.).” During the interview, April seemed defensive about talking negatively about her life or her father. For instance, her grandmother wanted her to take a genetic test to find out about her father’s heritage, she responded: “Why in the world would I take [the genetic test] when I am just a dilution… My genes are diluted. So in my mind I’m not even thinking about the other half of me (April, D.).” Although acknowledging that her father’s genes are part of her genetic makeup, in that moment, April did not seem to be interested in investigating his heritage. Instead she felt content knowing that it was a part of her, though the entire subject of her father’s genes and heritage were simultaneously separate and unclear.

Emma described how as a child she was confused about the role of her dad and that she felt upset about not knowing about her “other half.” She told about an experience when this confusion was particularly poignant for her. She had been instructed to draw a family tree in school and remembered:

I never truly understood what [the other side of my family] was. When we were in kindergarten, we had to do a family tree. I remember it was like lopsided because I remember I only drew one side of it. I was like I don’t know who my other half is. The teacher said, ‘okay, draw your dad’s side.’ And I just started crying and said ‘I don’t have a dad… I have a step-dad.’ I was like ‘I don’t know what that means.’ I was freaking out (Emma, S.).
Significance of Names. Another sub-theme related to identity emerged in the stories of the young women in this study related to the idea of family names. The significance of sharing their father’s surname was demonstrated by Sara and April.

In response to the idea of having an “other half,” April seemed to simply accept the fact that although she did not “care” about her father, she did share his last name and it was all the proof she needed to know that he existed. She explained how, “Some people could say it’s the other half because this is me and my last name… I share his last name (April, D.).” During the interview, she mentioned the last name only once and then quickly changed the subject.

Sara displayed a different attitude about sharing the same last name as her father. She was very frank about her father’s presence, how he was abusive, how he did not contact her much, but at the same time, how she felt some connection and pride in the fact that she shared his last name. During the interview, when asked about how it felt to share a last name with someone with whom she did not have much contact she answered, “You know, it’s the one thing that I do have. It’s the one thing that ties me to that side of the family that I don’t have a lot of contact with (Sara, B.).”

Connecting via Traits: Appearance and Personality. In several of the participants’ stories, the idea of a father’s physical appearance in relation to their own seemed to be a significant link to how each conceptualized their self-identity. Preserving memories through pictures and common physical appearances was one way Susan and Stephanie each connected experiences of sense of self. Both participants drew conclusions about themselves that connected previously unknown pieces of their dads’ identities together for them.

Susan described wondering if she looked like her father, since she didn’t bear a resemblance to her mother:
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I’ve only seen a couple of pictures of him, so I don’t know if I am physically like my dad, but I’m not terribly physically like my mother… like my skin tone and body shape are pretty different. I’d be curious if I saw my dad and said ‘oh yea, that’s what I look like.’ I don’t want to approach the subject with my mother (Susan, L.).

Susan’s curiosity about her father’s appearance could have indicated that she felt a sense of ambiguity and a lack of resolution about her relationship with him. She also implied that discovering the aspects that she shared with him revealed qualities about herself that may have never made sense to her. Susan seemed interested in finding answers about her father, but she also felt conflicted in that it would have likely betrayed her mother.

In reference to discussing her father’s appearance, Stephanie remarked that according to comparisons her mother would make, she resembled him in a variety of ways. Stephanie seemed to take pride in the attractive physical qualities she inherited from him. She described:

My mom and I always joke that I got some really good things from him in terms of looks. Like he’s very tall – he’s 6’4.’’ He had like a really cute nose and beau lips. I have all of those things more or less. He has really long legs. My legs are pretty long. He was always pretty fit so we always joke that that’s what he was good for (Stephanie, J.).

**Personality Traits.** Similar to evaluating the appearances of their respective fathers and making connections with their own self-identity, three participants in this study also attempted to make sense of how personality traits of their fathers affected their own personalities. For Olivia, her father’s behavior and personality made her question her own identity as “coming from” him.
Grace acknowledged having personality traits her father had transferred to her and how these have impacted her parenting.

Olivia reflected on the meaning of her father’s absence by describing the doubt she felt about her identity as the daughter of a father, who did some terrible things in his lifetime. As Olivia explained: “I came from this person? This person is like…I know my mom was all kinds of fucking crazy, but I came from this person? (Olivia, W.).” Olivia described how he trafficked drugs and was abusive and neglectful to her mother and to her: “I’m sure I developed all kinds of negative core beliefs about myself even as a young child as a result of his absence and feeling like it was me [who was the problem] (Olivia, W.).” She connected that she “was a very sexually active and promiscuous teenager and that was something there was a lot of shame around…” possibly suggesting that the negative behaviors her father modeled could have made her feel unloved and, thus, they could have contributed to her efforts at finding love elsewhere (Olivia, W.). However, despite acknowledging how his negative behaviors affected her during childhood, as an adult Olivia recognized that she had developed resilience because of them. Olivia concluded:

Life has been very overwhelming for me. It’s been very interesting as you can see. It has not been a boring life God has given me. I think I have become really strong and resilient… I feel like it’s made me really strong and it’s given me the ability that even when things get really overwhelming and toxic that I’m able to push through (Olivia, W.).

Olivia seemed to communicate a sense of pride and accomplishment about the level of resilience she likely gained through experiences of her father’s absence while growing up. Resilience had
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been a key factor in forming her sense of self-identity and helped make sense of her experience of paternal absence growing up.

Grace described how she has more understanding of her father as she has grown older and has more acceptance of personality traits that she might have inherited from him. She shared certain aspects of her father’s personality and life style:

[I can identify with] the workaholic part. I have to catch myself. Sometimes I feel like I take work home a lot or I stay at work really late, when I could be spending that time with my daughter…Now, I’m catching myself more. I’m more aware of it. That’s something I don’t like (Grace, P.).

In the process of discovering her common traits with her father, Grace developed a sense of awareness about the reason he parented her the way he did. She shared:

I think I understand him more now, like why he was the way that he was. He came from a background where he didn’t have much. He felt like he needed to accumulate money in order to have something to fall back on. I think I got that from him too… It’s not something I like about myself (Grace, P.).

Stephanie identified many more positive traits that she shares with her father than those acknowledged by Olivia and Grace. Stephanie seemed to appreciate having certain personality ties to her father and recognized the importance of knowing where those aspects of her identity originated:

It’s not necessarily about wanting to be like him, but taking pleasure in certain things that I am sure are very similar to him…They never involve other people. Like I love plants and he’s really into plants. He’s studied a lot of languages… I’m pretty good at learning other languages…the idea of knowing where that
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comes from…[t]here’s something sentimentally nice about knowing where that
comes from (Stephanie, J.).

Stephanie identified a strong connection to her father through the traits and interests they have in common. She reflected on how the similarities she has with her father could have helped her make sense of how her identity was impacted in different ways by her father’s absence.

**Theme 4. “Why can’t you just love me?:” Resilience and Redefining “Family”**

In understanding how father absence influenced self-identity for the participants in this study (Theme 3), each young woman described experiences of resilience and efforts to redefine “family.” Thus, a final theme discussed by the participants in this study was one of understanding the feeling of connection and disconnection they felt in their relationships with their fathers. The young women’s efforts at navigating relationships with their fathers seemed to impact how “family” was defined for them. Creating new definitions for family, those who are support networks, seemed to engender resilience in understanding their experiences with paternal absence. The stories they shared about the process of navigating relationships with fathers to gaining resilience in new definitions of family can be viewed as emblematic of overcoming ambiguous loss.

**Navigating (Dis)connection.** Ashley told a story of losing connection with her father as a pre-teen after developing an attachment relationship with him during early childhood. Ashley explained how after a few unsuccessful attempts to reach out to her father, she had decided not to seek him out anymore, claiming that all she could do was to keep going on with her own life. She explained, “there’s been so many failed attempts of reaching out that you just kind of build your life without it. You just keep going (Ashley, G.).” While Ashley shared that she wanted her
father to be part of several significant moments in her life, she seemed to have given up hope. She provided a poignant example:

> Throughout high school and like the early year of college he’d reach out for my birthday and he’d send something for Christmas and it felt so impersonal. It would be mostly me trying to reach out to him… When I went to study abroad, I was like 19 and said ‘I’m doing this and I’m really excited about it.’ I got no response. Then after study abroad I got back and I literally have not had a word with him since then and I’m 25 now. (Ashley, G.).

Several of the young women seemed to have made attempts at understanding the disconnection from their fathers. This process could be considered “making meaning” after an ambiguous loss. Billy Jean, April, Grace, and Susan all communicated different understandings of why a disconnection existed and they showed differing degrees of resolution about it.

Billy Jean described how it felt to interact with her father and shares an example of the difficulty in navigating their relationship. She explained:

> I didn’t really know how to maneuver a pattern of conversation with this man that I had not seen in a really long time. I had a lot of feelings of contempt and disdain for him. I also had feelings of like ‘Why can’t you just love me?’ (Billy Jean, G.).

In this example, she told a story of one time in adolescence when her father did come to see her. She reflected on the discomfort of “maneuvering” conversation with him and questioned the love he had for her (Billy Jean, G.). Billy Jean considered the lack of connection with her father a loss and she seemed to recognize the one-sidedness of the relationship. She shared, “‘Why the hell don’t you come see me?’ For me, that’s a big loss. He thinks in his mind that it’s okay what he did. I’m presuming. I have to be the one bowing backwards (Billy Jean, G.).” In this quote,
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Billy Jean seemed to be accept the reality of her relationship with her father in order to placate her own pain. Also in her efforts to understand the disconnection with her father, Billy Jean described how she used to fantasize about a relationship in which he would contact her via writing letters. She said:

I’ve always wanted to say that I have a treasure trunk of my dad’s letters and we write letters to each other. I wish that he would buy me presents for my birthday and he paid child support. I wish he was just there in the best way that he could be without having to be emotionally involved with my mother (Billy Jean, G.).

The wishes that Billy Jean expressed could represent the confusion she has about the idea of fatherhood and what kind of relationship she wanted with her own father. Her desire to rationalize and question are characteristic of ambiguous loss.

At the time of the interview, April conveyed a sense of resignation about the reality of her father’s absence, even though at times she admitted attempting to “find” him on the internet. She described how:

[I]t’s funny because my best friend at the time in Undergrad asked me if I ever wanted to go and visit. She would say, ‘let’s just get in a car and go.’ I was like ‘why?’ To say that I’m numb to it is a complete understatement. I’ve never had a reason [to contact him] because I never felt like I needed anything from him (April, D.).

April seemed to conceptualize her experience of numbness as the way she accepted her situation with her father. In a somewhat defensive manner, April justified her experience of his absence by saying that she never needed anything from him, anyway.
I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE’"

Despite April’s claim, that she never felt interested in reaching out to her father, she did share that she had tried to learn about her siblings via the internet as a way of connecting with her father’s side of the family. She explained:

I found them and I found their faces, but their faces were not like on Facebook or something. Their faces were their mug shots. I was like ‘well I’m glad you weren’t in my life because the people who were in your life ended up in jail’

(April, D.).

This response suggested feelings of ambiguous gain, in that April felt better off not having her siblings or her father in her life. Her search for family members indicated that she was striving for a connection; finding the mug shots provided answers for her and suggested that maybe she was better off without them in her life.

In comparison to Billy Jean and April, Grace reported that her father still makes efforts to contact her and she pushes him away because of the history of abandonment and distrust in their relationship. She seemed to have some level of ambiguity about her feelings about whether or not she wants a connection with him:

I do regret that I pushed him away when he did try to get close to me. Part of me regrets that, honestly, but not all of me. But part of my thinks that he doesn’t deserve that. Because he didn’t take the time to get to know me, he doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t deserve to have a father-daughter relationship with me

(Grace, P.).

In attempting to understanding the disconnection she has with her father, Grace took responsibility for her part in the dynamic. The concept of her father “deserving” a relationship
with her possibly presented a way she justified her pushing him away. She did show some compassion for her father’s efforts describing when she said:

[S]ometimes I think ‘Well, you’ve never really given him a chance. A relationship didn’t develop before, but something stronger could develop now.’ I hasn’t because I haven’t let it; but, he has tried. He calls me often and I just don’t answer (Grace, P.).

Even though Grace did give her father some credit for his more recent attempts at engaging in a relationship with her, she suggested that responding to his calls could put her at risk for more feelings of abandonment and rejection that she is not willing to handle.

**Non-parental support.** The non-parental supportive figures described by the participants in this study were portrayed as playing important roles in helping many of the young women cope with father absence at various points in their development. These individuals also seemed to play a role in informing how each participant defined “family.” Ostensibly, they filled emotional voids left by the “absence” of their fathers. Grace, Ashley, and Stephanie explained how school provided a supportive outlet for them and that certain teachers acted as father figures, which shaped the way in which they viewed men growing up. Several of the participants also identified having step-fathers who were helpful in playing a fatherly role to them in lieu of their biological fathers. Finally, grandparents and other extended family played important roles that contributed to the emotional well-being for April, Billy Jean, and Olivia. Embedded in the stories of the impact of non-parental figures and redefining “family” was the notion of resilience.

**School.** Grace, Ashley, and Stephanie described a common experience that school and teachers, in general, provided for them as a protective mechanism by helping them deal with the hardships related to confusing “absence” of their fathers during their school-aged, adolescent
development. Grace experienced the guidance and support of her math teacher, and thus she seemed to gravitate towards math as a productive outlet. Ashley shared that becoming hyper-studious acted as a distraction from her family situation. Stephanie seemed to find solace in male teachers and the way in which they fulfilled emotional needs that normally could have been met by a father.

Grace explained how her math teacher provided qualities of a father that made her feel supported in high school. She described how:

> Even when I was in high school, as a freshman, I was really close with one of the teachers. He was a priest. I considered him like a dad to me. Like he was my best friend... I would stay after school with him doing math problems...I was such a math geek. He and I were really close even after I graduated. To me, he was like a dad because he protected me. He taught me things. So I didn’t have that from my [biological] father (Grace, P.).

The protective quality that this teacher provided for Grace was an aspect of parenting that she did not receive from her own father.

For Ashley, school appeared to be a distraction from the emotional difficulties she was experiencing during adolescence. As an outlet for the negative feelings she was experiencing, school seemed to be a safe haven. She shared:

> [T]he way I dealt with my anxiety was just to over-work myself and I got a lot out of that in school...I think it just had to find a way to deal with the thoughts that would come up in my head. I would just plug myself into something and get really into it (Ashley, G.).
Although Ashley did not speak about a specific person at school, she seemed to use it as a productive distraction for her emotional pain. She explained how she went to a therapist to help cope with issues related to her father, but therapy only seemed to make her feelings and relationship with him worse. School seemed to be like a viable solution for her at the time.

**Extended Family.** Several participants noted strong influences from extended family members, such as grandparents and aunts/uncles who supported them throughout childhood to make up for the lack of support from their fathers. April discussed the lasting influence of her grandparents during her life and the gratitude felt for them because of their presence. Billy Jean also identified a close relationship with her grandmother, but it did not seem to be as the bond April had portrayed feeling with her grandmother, evidence of which is displayed later. Finally, Olivia was essentially raised by her maternal aunt and uncle and conveyed gratitude for their constructive presence in her childhood when she felt that her parents had been neglectful.

April adamantly maintained that she had “found her people” in her grandparents, declaring that she did not need her father’s presence as long as they were there to ground her (April, D.). During the interview, when April reported feeling pressured to learn more about her father’s family, she seemed to feel disinterested because she had all of the family she needed in her mother and grandparents. April explained how “[it] was funny because my grandmother was like, ‘you should figure out who your people are [meaning her father].’ I said, ‘I know who my people are. I’ve got you’ (April, D.).” She seemed to be completely satisfied with her tight-knit family and identified not wanting her father in her life.

Billy Jean described a very different relationship with her grandmother than the one portrayed by April. However, similar to the fact that April’s grandmother was the one who knew everything about her family history, so did Billy Jean’s Nana:
My nana, she was like a big deal. She just understood me. I felt, in a time when I thought no one else did. She had the information about everything. So she knew about my father. She knew about my mom’s past… I felt like she was the only outlet to understanding who I was as a person family and heritage-wise (Billy Jean, G.).

Olivia related how her maternal aunt and uncle raised her during times when her mother and father were using drugs. She said she felt appreciation for their parenting, but that she considered herself much more bonded to her aunt than to her uncle. Olivia explained how:

I think like my attachment, if we are talking about attachment theory, is definitely from my aunt. My uncle and I, even still with all of the personal growth that I have had… I know he loves me and cares about me, but I don’t think he was ever meant to parent a girl… He doesn’t know how to deal with emotions… My aunt is a very emotionally validating person… and my uncle is very invalidating. It’s my mom’s brother and his wife. So I am biologically related to the person I am not close with of the two (Olivia, W.).

Despite all of the chaos and hardship that Olivia said she had experienced because of her parents’ inconsistent and neglectful parenting, she seemed to feel anchored by the role of her aunt and uncle in caring for her. Their influence on her likely contributed to the high level of resilience that she had developed throughout her life.

**Step-dads Step Up!** Sara, Emma, and Billy Jean all mentioned that their respective step-fathers played a substitutive role for their biological fathers growing up. However, the level of closeness each woman currently has with her step-dads varies according to how they have
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processed the absence of their biological fathers. All three women described different relationships with step-dads.

For Sara, her step-dad’s role contributed a sense of normalcy for her as she compared her family structure as a child to that of her friends. Sara characterized the type of relationship she has with her step-dad now:

   [My step-dad] definitely played that protective role. You know, having that male figure there. I would say that we have a love-hate relationship… we’re close in that he was always there and helped take care of me and was supportive, but…when I think about the mother and father-daughter close relationship… I wouldn’t describe it as that. It’s more like having someone there to teach you how to take care of your car… the type of practical caring instead of a real emotional relationship (Sara, B.).

Sara explained that although her step-father did play an important role of supporting her in a practical way, she still missed out on the emotional care she “should” have received from her biological father. Recognizing the different roles her father and step-dad should have played could be suggestive of ambiguous loss.

   Unlike Sara, Emma described a very close relationship with her step-dad, who “stepped up” and raised her when he was only 21-years-old (Emma, S.). She recounted having a lot of respect for her step-dad who took care of her when her father basically had abandoned her mother. She even asked him to walk her down the aisle at her wedding, even though her biological father was also in attendance. She tells the story of her relationship with her step-dad with compassion and appreciation.
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My step-dad is younger than my mom. When I think about it now as an adult and when I’ve thought about it as I was preparing for my wedding, not only was my step-father paying for my wedding… he deserves to walk me down the aisle… He was so in love with my mom that he didn’t care that he was moving in with his girlfriend (my mom) who had a five-year-old daughter and he was 21… I can’t even imagine being at that point… marrying or dating someone who had a five-year-old child and being like ‘I’m going to step in and take over for that absent parent.’ That’s pretty rare (Emma, S.).

Emma’s relationship with her step-dad seemed to blossom as she got older and it appeared that the closer she got with him, the more she felt indifferent she felt about her biological father.

Billy Jean described how her step-father often played the role of stabilizing her mother’s parenting. For instance, she says he was the one who helped her to become independent, much to the chagrin of her mother. She explained:

[My step-dad] was my only ally in a home where I can only describe as super-dictator-prison! That’s how my mom was. He was the only one who told my mom to calm down… He was there for me as an ally and he wasn’t even my blood (Billy Jean, G.).

When Billy Jean felt trapped or unfairly treated by her mother, she remembered appreciating her step-dad stepping in to parent her. Now, Billy Jean’s step-dad is in prison and she would consider his absence an ambiguous loss because he had represented one of the only men in her life who “had her back” (Billy Jean, G.). Despite her feelings of closeness with her step-dad, Billy Jean’s experience of feeling the loss of both of her father figures seemed to leave her questioning how to define family. She explained how because of her experience of “losing” both
of her dads, she is “…trying to find more people who are going to be genuinely there for me other than family,” suggesting that she needs to seek her family outside of her bloodline (Billy Jean, G.).

By seeking supportive teachers, using academics as a distraction, or leaning on step-fathers and non-biological caregivers, the participants withstood relational changes. Though each young woman’s story of paternal absence was different, every single one attested to how she had coped with the reality of not having a father present by finding a supportive outlet. These efforts were key in building resilience.

**How dad impacted dating: Relationship Sabotage, Commitment/Attachment Issues.**

A final way the stories of the participants intertwine involved the ways in which their fathers impacted their dating choices. Aligned with attachment theory, in order for fathers to have psychological influence on the decisions of a child, it likely requires that a child (an adult child) feel some attachment with their father. In the case of most participants in this study, the influence of their fathers, even in absentia, played a role in future relationship decisions. Samantha, Olivia, and Stephanie reported experiencing relationship self-sabotage in response to having an insecure parent-child attachment. Susan, Olivia, Ashley, and Sara discussed their experiences with commitment issues in relationships which they attribute to growing up with an absent father. Grace, Samantha, Stephanie, and Emma described a pattern of noticing similarities in appearance and personality between the men they have dated and their absent fathers, suggesting the psychological presence of their biological fathers. While Billy Jean, Susan, and Emma (later in her life) all identified looking for men opposite from their respective fathers.

**Relationship Sabotage.** Samantha, Olivia, and Stephanie all described how still today they tend to subconsciously sabotage relationships with men who behave in a similar manner to
how their fathers behaved toward women. Thus, behaviors regarding the treatment of women modeled by their fathers seemed to have directly influenced their own later relationships with men. Samantha acknowledged following a similar pattern of relating to men that she thought she inherited from her father. Olivia shared a story about choosing a man who matched the “chaos” in her life, rather than one who would have provided stability. Stephanie talked about her need for emotional intimacy because she lacked it from her father-daughter relationship; yet, she seemed to be attracted to emotionally unavailable men.

Samantha maintained that her father had implicitly modeled for her that it is best to run away from difficulty in relationships. Her father did that, and she followed suit, but explained that she has recognized this phenomenon with the help of her sister:

[M]y sister seems to think that there has been a big effect on how I date,… my usual instinct is just to run away when it gets awkward. If I think ‘I’m not sure this will work out.’ Or I think, ‘maybe I should just leave.’ My sister’s like, ‘It seems like you’re sabotaging something that could potentially be fine…. Our running theory is that daddy does that as well…. It seems like he is purposefully choosing people who he knows won’t work out and sabotaging the relationship (Samantha, M.).

Samantha elaborated how her view of the type of men she wishes to date clashes with her strong feelings about the empowerment of women. She explained: “[I think] the guy should be more authoritarian. I think subconsciously that’s just what a man should be to me. It doesn’t make sense because it’s not like he was there a lot (Samantha, M.).” She implied that she developed that notion from her dad, despite his physical absence from her life. She continued to explain the conflictual nature of her attraction to men. She stated:
I kind of feel conflicted because it clashes with the new ‘Women can do whatever they want’ [mentality] and I firmly believe that, and yet I’m not attracted to a guy who wants us all on equal playing fields... I want someone who acts like my dad... It doesn’t make sense. It’s not like he’s great at relationships. You probably shouldn’t want to model after him... and it sounds terrible when I say it out loud (Samantha, M.).

Even during the interview, Samantha seemed to confuse herself about her father’s indirect role in her relationship decisions. Samantha’s attempt to make sense of her confusion according to her experience of paternal absence could be her way of trying to understand the ambiguity of her father’s absence.

Olivia told a vivid story about her history as a sex addict, and how her sexual promiscuity was informed by the “chaos” of her childhood, largely related to her father’s absence. Her early relationship decisions seemed to be a subconscious reaction to coping with her parents’ absence and neglect as she sought for a desire to be loved. Olivia described:

[The decisions I have made in the guys that I date] are jacked up. I [used to] choose poorly. I disconnect[ed] sex and emotion. I am a recovering sex addict. I’ve been in recovery since 21...I met a guy in high school who was perfect...Like on the outside I looked really good, but I was stripping and he didn’t know I was stripping. I was cheating on him all the time and he never found out. [We broke up] when I met my son’s father...I met him and it was a really unhealthy dynamic from the beginning, but I think in a way I needed the chaos. I didn’t get the chaos from my high school boyfriend, I got stability (Olivia, W.).
Olivia recognized that because all she knew in her life was chaotic, she innately gravitated towards sameness, or homeostasis, even when stability would have been a better option. She explained how the chaos she experienced was partly fueled by her father’s absence. As Olivia sought to work through past trauma due to paternal loss through many years of therapy, she gained insight about how her father’s role in her life influenced her desire to search for chaos in her life.

Stephanie also showed marked insight about how her dating decisions with men stem from her difficult father-daughter relational history. Stephanie described what she looks for when dating men and how her father influenced ways she interacts with them. She stated:

I think initially [my history with my dad] made me feel scared of opening up in a romantic relationship… In the past I think it made me slower to open up and to become more intimately involved in something and trusting because so many interactions with [my father] were really negative (Stephanie, J.).

Stephanie recounted how she has become more trusting and willing to open up, recently, but that her past hesitance was related to the lack of emotional connection she had felt in her relationship with her father. It had lacked intimacy and therefore, as Stephanie explained, establishing a sense of intimacy in relationships with men has been an essential feature of staying in those relationships. She shared:

I think the way that [my father] has impacted my choices in terms of dating men now or my relationships with men period, I think it’s been more about craving intimacy. Like I NEED that… If I’m not able to have intimate moments of connection with the men that I’m dating often enough, then the relationship doesn’t keep going (Stephanie, J.).
Stephanie astutely connected her experience of craving intimacy in men and to her relationship with her father and her feelings about loss.

**Commitment/Attachment Issues.** Similar to the ways in which several of the participants have discussed their father’s role in subliminally choosing the men they date, Susan, Ashley, and Sara described how his influence led to issues of unwillingness to commit for them. Susan explained her implicit need for approval and her hesitancy to marry and have children because of fears of commitment. Ashley and Sara both discussed how their layered issues with trusting men has influenced how they have entered into their relationships with their current boyfriends and how it has impacted intimacy with them.

Susan remembered that, as a teenager, she would seek approval from other men because she lacked a relationship with her father. Susan expounded on how she had acted out sexually in the process. She clarified: “I think I did that whole typical teenage looking for male approval thing through sexuality when I was in high school… I think I just ended up in relationships because I wanted that… comfort and … approval (Susan, L.).” Later in her life, Susan recognized that she was hesitant to commit to her husband and to have children because of abandonment issues related to her absent father. She told the story of how she conceptualized having a child:

I think it… influenced how I see having children a lot. I think it made me scared to have children because I was afraid that if I have a child then the same pattern would repeat and my husband would decide ‘oh, I actually don’t want kid. I’m going to leave…’ that really colored how I felt about having a family for a long time (Susan, L.).

It took Susan 15 years of being with her husband before she was willing to settle down and have a child. She had needed to build trust in him and be reassured that he would not leave her. In this
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way, the impact her father had on her ability to trust other men remained significant in her life and could be seen as emblematic of his psychological presence.

Similarly, Ashley talked about her need for reassurance from her boyfriend that he will not leave her and its significance on her willingness to make a long-term commitment with him. She explained: “In terms of relationships, I definitely need reassurance from my boyfriend. If we have a fight, I need to be reassured… For awhile in a relationship it was hard for me to accept that it’s okay for couples to fight… I was like ‘things have to be perfect or else it’s my fault’ (Ashley, G.).” Her insecurity in relationships produced a lot of anxiety for Ashley. In her relationship with her boyfriend, Ashley had developed the negative mentality of “something bad is going to happen” probably because she had observed the toxic dynamic between her parents. Her attitude about relationships involved developing high and seemingly unreasonable expectations for men. When expectations were not met, Ashley described being quick to cut people off. She explained:

I guess what comes to mind is this idea that I’m quick to cut people off. I’ve done that with friends…I don’t know if that’s just me or if it has something to do with what I’ve experienced, but sometimes I think it might have something to do with my dad because it’s easy for me to cut him off (Ashley, G.).

Ashley attributed her tendency to end relationships quickly when her expectations are not met to her experiences with her father. Her nihilistic view on relationships seemed to be a testament to what she observed as her parents went through the divorce process.

Sara described fearing abandonment and sheltering herself from being hurt in relationships, similar to Ashley’s experience. She explained how she finds it important not to be dependent on anyone, particularly a man and to live her life in an independent way so as to
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prevent herself from getting abandoned. She shared: “I’ve been in a lot of long-term relationships, but it’s harder because [I’m] afraid people will leave. [I’m] afraid of being hurt” (Sara, B.). She continued to explain how, “sometimes I think [I] sabotage it… [I] think things that aren’t there (Sara, B.).” While Sara did not directly connect her feelings of abandonment and fear of getting hurt in relationships back to her father, she communicated themes similar to those of other participants about the close connections they identified with their father’s role in their later fear of being abandoned and hurt.

**Partner Choice.** Two of the young women described how the partners they chose displayed many attributes similar to those of their own fathers. Grace explained that she noticed similarities between her husband and father in that they even have the same name, which caused her to reflect extensively on her relationships with both men. Emma described how early on in her dating life, she gravitated towards men who resembled her father in personality and behavior. She seemed to consider that tendency to be a negative self-reflection, making her question her judgment in relationships.

Grace described her husband as similar to her father in many ways, but she also explained how that has caused her to attempt to control and mold him into someone whom she wanted as a partner. She explained how in her relationship with her father, she has tried to protect herself from ending up like her mother and so she needed to control the men she dated. She shared:

I think the problem is that my husband has the same name as my dad… He does have a lot of qualities my dad has. In the sense that he is a workaholic. And I’m not saying that work comes before family, but in a sense he’s changed… it did before. In the beginning of our relationship… he would definitely put his job above his other kids… He doesn’t do it now because I’ve drilled a lot of it into his
head. I’m like ‘listen, if you want this to work this is how it’s going to be.’

Initially, I was attracted to someone like that. He was shapeable and my dad was not (Grace, P.).

She described needing the upper hand in relationships with men and being in control of whether the relationship ended or not. Probably Grace’s need to assert control over relationships connected to a sense of powerlessness with her own father. Grace’s tendency to need control over husband because of the lack of control she had over her father could be viewed as emblematic of ambiguous loss. Grace tried to prevent the loss from occurring between her daughter and husband. She shared:

Thinking about it in retrospect, I do feel as if it’s related, because I can control whether the relationship ends or not… This person is not going to be absent from my life the way my dad was. They’re not going to leave me the same way my dad left (Grace, P.).

Emma related how early on in her dating life her attempts at dating were likely connected to her need to make sense of her father’s behavior towards women. She seemed to date men similar to her father so that she could understand them, and thus her father. She shared:

So I started dating at a very young age…I was getting attention really young…I was dating older men… It’s hard to psychoanalyze myself, but maybe because my dad wasn’t around I was looking for an older person… to guide me. I dated two pathological liars. My father’s a pathological liar. I remembered knowing they were liars and hating that they were liars, but continuing to date them. I would think about myself and say, ‘who are you and why are you making these decisions?’ (Emma, S.).
She connected it back to dating men who were similar to her father so that she could understand her parents’ relationship better. Her efforts indicated that she was trying to make sense of the reality to justify her attraction to men like her father through her mother’s relationship with him. In conceptualizing reasons she had dated men in order to understand her father, she realized: “Maybe it was a cry for attention, or it was just like ‘daddy wasn’t around, so I have daddy problems’ (Emma, S.).” Trying to make sense of her father’s absence in her dating relationships could suggest her unresolved need to understand her father, indicating an expression of ambiguous loss.

Eventually, Emma reconciled her understanding of her parents’ relationship and accepted it for what it was, and thus, she became able to date men who were more dissimilar from her father. Emma continued with her story about her choice in partner by stating that she wanted someone dissimilar from her father. She was influenced by advice from her grandmother saying:

So to choose [my husband], I chose somebody who… this goes back to partially my father and partially my grandmother. I chose him because it was extremely practical. He is a good man. He is not a liar. He can’t help but to tell the truth. He lied to me once and when he had to tell me the truth…. I could hear his heart beating outside of his chest because he felt so bad about lying to me… When he watches movies, if there’s cheating on camera, he can’t handle it. He has to leave the room… I knew he was going to be a good husband. I knew he was going to be a good father. I knew he was someone who is going to be around. The love came second. I was very attracted to him. He’s gorgeous, but the love was not the first thing I chose. It was about practicality and I thought ‘thank god I fell in love with this man, because he’s perfect’ (Emma, S.).
The way in which Emma described her husband seems to be polar opposite to the way in which she described her father. Her decision to marry her husband for practical reasons was important because she described that if she had married just for love, she would have married one of the “sociopaths” she had previously dated. Finding someone who fit into her ideal of the life she wanted for herself was primary and she allowed the love to blossom from there. Her self-reflection and ownership in her decision to marry provided a key chapter to her overall story.

The four main themes that emerged from this study together help to shed light on how parental messages influenced views of fatherhood and paternal attachment. Such parental messages related to the individuals’ conceptualizations of self-identity, and informed how family was redefined and resilience was fostered in the face of paternal absence. The stories of these women illustrated how experiences of ambiguous loss played a role in determining how the participants made meaning of paternal absence across the life span.

Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study support the notion that ambiguous loss theory is potentially useful for helping to frame and make meaning of the experience of paternal absence. As they told their stories of what it was like to grow up with a physically absent father, the ten young women who were the subjects of this qualitative interview study continuously invoked experiences that were congruent with Pauline Boss’s theory of ambiguous loss. All of the participants reported experiencing subjectivity, confusion, and a lack of resolution about their father absence. The consequences of ambiguous loss that the participants experienced were evident in their stories of how their father’s absence shaped their choice of romantic partners as adults. Moreover, participants connected their experience with father absence to their choice of adult partner, even when they had never met their fathers. This could speak to the power of
psychological presence in the development of attachment patterns, even when the parental figure is completely absent physically. Participants also described how ambiguous loss had an impact on the development of their sense of self and identity, although for some, the effects of their father’s absence were mitigated by relationships with non-parental figures in their lives. Such non-parental support networks were key in creating resilience in the face of paternal absence.

Learning about the meaning of ambiguous loss and having a term to describe their experience seemed to help the participants make meaning of and normalize their childhood experiences of paternal absence. It validated their experiences of loss, which was often unacknowledged by those around them. Having the opportunity to look back on their childhood experiences of paternal absence enabled the women in this study to reflect on the ways in which their responses to their father’s absence changed over time. Perhaps most relevant in terms of implications for practice, this retrospective understanding of their experiences with paternal absence allowed the women to consider their lives in a way that provided insight about their current relationships with significant others. Most of the women in this study acknowledged relational difficulties with men (not necessarily romantic) throughout their lives, but before the interview, they had not made the connection with ambiguous loss. When the notion of ambiguous loss was explained to them during the interview process, some of the participants acknowledged feeling a sense of relief in being able to label the confusing and unresolved feelings that had been impacting them throughout life.

In short, for the participants in this study, understanding “ambiguous loss” helped them make sense of their individual stories of paternal absence. Learning about “ambiguous loss” and being able to label their feelings accordingly, provided clarity to the formerly nebulous
experience of growing up with a father who was physically absent, but psychologically “there.”
Thus, the findings from this study accomplish what this research study set out to do.

Implications for Treatment, Study Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Boss (2010) stresses the importance of mental health professionals acknowledging and addressing their own experiences of ambiguous loss before they are able to help others. It is important to note that six out of the ten participants in this study were mental health professionals themselves. However, when asked directly about ambiguous loss, none of the six individuals had heard about it before. The findings of this study support Boss’s contention that being able to recognize, label and normalize ambiguous loss is an important skill for clinicians. However, the small sample size precludes generalizing about the findings of this study. An area of further research could include replicating this study with a larger and more diverse group of women, to explore how cultural, religious and other differences related to identity or life circumstances may impact individual’s experiences of ambiguous loss.

Conducting a similar study assessing the impact of father absence on males and its possible connection to ambiguous loss could add insight about the consequences of father absence for men. Also, given that many of the participants in this study were therapists, but had not heard of ambiguous loss before, it could be interesting to interview mental health professionals on their personal experiences with ambiguous loss and/or how it may have shown up in clinical practice. Targeting specific reasons for paternal absence could be another way of honing in on its effects for a specific population and of discovering whether ambiguous loss was experienced. Lastly, conducting a comparative study of the effects of maternal absence in relation to paternal absence could yield insight about how ambiguous loss might manifest differently depending on the gender of an absent parent.
Conclusion

This study examined the real life accounts of the phenomenon of paternal absence of a small group of women. The research gives voice to the stories of these young women who experienced ambiguous loss through paternal absence. The themes that emerged from the interviews suggest a link between paternal absence and ambiguous loss for the participants. The findings also offer important implications for the need to educate and enable mental health professionals to identify and understand the concept of ambiguous loss. The fact that six of the participants in this study were mental health professionals, yet they had never heard of the term “ambiguous loss,” suggests the need for more widespread knowledge about the phenomenon and its significance across populations. Being able to identify natural, universal, and human elements involved in the experience of loss requires more social-awareness about ambiguous loss. For instance, ambiguous loss can exist in many forms. Loss can be felt as ambiguous by anyone who has ever experienced loss in a relationship. In therapy, acknowledging the confusing and ambiguous nature of relationships is frequently avoided. Education and acceptance of ambiguous loss as a real and relevant issue could contribute significantly to therapeutic practice and individual and relational health.

For the women in this study, connecting their relationships with their fathers to the idea of ambiguous loss provided an explanation for their feelings of resentment, anger, abandonment, and distrust. A key takeaway from this study is that upon learning about ambiguous loss, many of the participants felt the term provided relief and clarity about an experience of unresolved paternal loss that had yet to be understood or articulated. Ambiguous loss seemed to provide a language for which they could make sense of their stories of father absence. Another significant
finding was that some participants recognized how they had felt the influence of ambiguous loss of their biological fathers on their later romantic relationships.

Many of the participants in this study identified a personal shift as a result of learning about ambiguous loss. Some of the women described feeling uplifted by being able to apply specific language to the loss they had experienced with their biological fathers. This study fostered self-awareness in the participants and, in doing so, it illustrated how a greater understanding and utilization of ambiguous loss can be transformative to relationships and emotional well-being.
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References


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Interview Guide

Introductory Statements:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. It is so nice to meet you.

All of the participants being interviewed for this study, including you, were eligible because they have a father physically absent from their life during sometime between the ages of 5-18. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which your father’s physical absence impacted you and how you think about it now, years later. I am completing this study in partial fulfillment of my Doctorate in Clinical Social Work degree at the University of Pennsylvania.

This interview is expected to take approximately 1-1.5 hours and will be tape recorded with your written permission. I am aware that some of these questions might be sensitive in nature, therefore you can refuse to answer a question at any time. You can also choose to shut off the tape recording at any time, for your comfort.

While I do have a list of general questions prepared, I will cater the questions I ask around the answers you provide to me. Your story is really important and I want to make sure I can represent it as well as possible in my research. Being open and forthright with your questions will allow me to reflect my understanding of your experience as accurately as possible. For the purposes of protecting your anonymity, all of your answers will be kept confidential. Please share with me your actual first name (for the purposes of keeping track of the consent forms). We can talk about a name you would like to use when referencing your interview responses in my research.

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your childhood?
   a. Where did you grow up?
   b. Who lived with you?
   c. Who would you consider as part of your family?
      i. Please take this sheet of paper and colored pencils provided and draw a picture of your family for me? I am not going to give you any more prompts other than to ask that you make it clear who they are to you (eg. Mother, brother, etc.). After you draw the picture I will ask some clarifying questions and give you the opportunity to share more if you wish.
      ii. (After they’ve completed the drawing) – Tell me about what you drew.
   d. What else is important for me to know about your family?

2. Who was important to you as a child?
   a. What made them important?
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b. To what extent did that person influence how you see yourself today?

3. Tell me about your relationship with your father.
   a. What does the role of “father” mean to you?
   b. To what extent did your father fulfill that role?
   c. What has informed your definition of “father?”

4. What was your understanding of why your father was not physically there?
   a. What age were you when your father left?
   b. Is he still physically absent from your life?
      i. If no, how much communication do you have with him? What form of communication?
      ii. If yes, what has it been like for you since he became more involved in your life?
      iii. If yes, for how long was “away?”

5. With regards to your father’s physical absence, what did it mean to you?
   a. What was your understanding about why he left?
   b. To what extent has the meaning of the absence changed over time?
   c. What were your memories of finding out about him being gone?
   d. What, if any, changes occurred in your life as a result of your father’s inconsistent presence in your life?

6. How has your father’s physical absence affected your relationship with him?
   a. How did his physical absence influence your view of him?
   b. To what extent did his physical absence affect your relationship?
   c. If you could tell him how you feel about him being physically absent, what would you want to say to him?

7. So now I am going to shift gears a little bit. I am going to ask you some questions about loss. How would you define “loss?”
   a. To what extent did you experience a loss as a child?
   b. To what extent would you consider your father’s physical absence a loss for you?
   c. What is your understanding of the reason for that loss?
   d. To what extent has your view of loss changed since childhood?
   e. Explain ambiguous loss. Ask: Knowing this definition of loss, to what extent do you think what you experienced with your father was an ambiguous loss?

8. What can you tell me about other relationships with men in your life?
   a. To what extent has your relationship with your father influenced how you consider your relationships with these men?
   b. What has influenced how you relate with these men (not necessarily intimate relationships)?

9. If you could have three wishes about your family what would they be?
   a. With whom would you share these wishes?
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b. What would it be like if these wishes came true?
Appendix II. Dissertation flyer

Invitation to participate in a Qualitative Research Study!

University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy and Practice

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON PATERNAL ABSENCE

Purpose: To investigate the retrospective experiences of young adult women who grew up with a father physically absent

Interviews will take place one time and be approximately 1-1.5 hours in length. They will be conducted either in person or via zoom video conferencing.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer to participate please contact:

Emily
School of Social Policy and Practice
University of Pennsylvania

Email: etreat44@gmail.com

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania
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Appendix III. Family Pictures

Participant - Billy Jean:
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Participant – Samantha:
I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE’”

Participant – Ashley:
I CAN’T SEE HIM, BUT HE’S ‘THERE’”

Participant – Sara:
Participant – Grace:

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Participant – Stephanie:
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Participant - Emma: