

# Unambiguous Definition of Ambiguous Loss: Exploring Conceptual Boundaries of Physical and Psychological Types Through Content Analysis

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**Abstract.** The article aims to extend our understanding of physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss through a systematic review based on content and psycholinguistic analysis. The study encompassed articles aligned with ambiguous loss published between 2019-2023, retrieved from PsycINFO, Web of Science (WoS), and Scopus. To eliminate the bias in the literature review, the study extracted published articles, dissertations, book chapters, and preprints with titles containing the search term “ambiguous loss”. Two reviewers (the first and the third authors worked independently) examined titles and abstracts and identified papers highlighting physical (n=34) or psychological (n=23) types of ambiguous loss. The physical type results from physical absence of meaningful persons (e.g. abducted, missing, adopted), while the psychological type results from psychological absence of meaningful persons (e.g. dementia, mental illness, addiction). The study applies the conceptual and relational content analysis of Leximancer (version 4.5) to develop three cluster maps and lists of concepts separately for physical and psychological types and all selected papers published between 2019–2023. The results show that the physical type primarily encompasses situations related to adoption, potentially leading to the ambiguous loss experienced by both biological parents and children when facing forced separation. Psychological type includes parents of children with disabilities, shaken baby syndrome, and caregivers of individuals with brain injuries and cancer. The present study indicates that the conceptual boundaries between physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss are not only expanding but also erasing, giving way to new applications in settings such as the COVID-19 pandemic, organ donor families, and sexual and gender minority.

**Keywords:** *ambiguous loss, physical type, psychological type, content analysis, cluster map, concept list.*

**Засєкіна Лариса, Абрахам Андреа, Засєкін Сергій. Однозначне визначення невизначеної втрати: дослідження концептуальних меж фізичних та психологічних типів за допомогою контент-аналізу.**

**Анотація.** Мета статті – здійснити теоретичне й емпіричне вивчення фізичного і психологічного типів невизначеної втрати шляхом систематичного огляду літератури з контент аналізом. До систематичного огляду літератури увійшли публікації з предметом

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дослідження невизначеної втрати за період 2019–2023 рр., які проіндексовані в базах PsycINFO, Web of Science (WoS) та Scopus. Для збереження об'єктивності результатів огляду літератури, в дослідженні були відібрані опубліковані статті, дисертації, розділи книг і препринти з назвами, що містять пошуковий термін “невизначена втрата”. Два дослідника (перший і третій автори працювали незалежно) проаналізували заголовки та анотації і визначили публікації, що висвітлюють фізичний (n=34) або психологічний (n=23) типи невизначених втрат. Фізичний тип є наслідком фізичної відсутності потенційно живих значущих осіб (наприклад, викрадення, зникнення безвісти, усиновлення), тоді як психологічний тип є наслідком психологічної відсутності за фізичної присутності значущих осіб (наприклад, деменція, психічні захворювання, залежність). У дослідженні застосовано концептуальний та реляційний контент-аналіз Leximancer (версія 4.5) для розробки трьох кластерних карт та списків понять окремо для фізичного та психологічного типів невизначеної втрати і корпусу всіх відібраних статей, опублікованих у період 2019–2023 рр. Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що фізичний тип, передусім, охоплює ситуації, пов'язані з прийомним усиновленням, що потенційно призводить до невизначеної втрати, яку переживають як біологічні батьки, так і діти, коли стикаються з вимушеною сепарацією. До психологічного типу належать батьки дітей з інвалідністю, синдромом черепно-мозкової травми немовляти, а також особи, які здійснюють догляд за пацієнтами з травмами мозку й онкологічними захворюваннями. Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що концептуальні межі між фізичним і психологічним типами невизначеної втрати не лише розширюються, але й стираються, поступаючись місцем новому типові невизначеної втрати та новими контекстами його застосуванням, зокрема у контекстах пандемії COVID-19, сім'ї донорів органів, сексуальних та гендерних меншин.

*Ключові слова:* невизначена втрата, фізичний тип, психологічний тип, контент-аналіз, кластерна карта, список концептів.

## Introduction

As armed conflicts continue to arise globally, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of ambiguous loss as a form of bereavement that lacks a clear resolution. Boss (2004), who introduced this concept through her own research and clinical practice, defined ambiguous loss as “a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present” (p. 554). Boss's initial study of the concept of “psychologically absent” fathers within intact families has shown a perceived mismatch between psychological absence and physical presence in the veterans' families and later in the families of veterans with dementia (Boss, 1977; Boss, 1999).

In contrast to more conventional and obvious forms of loss, such as death or separation, where the loss is distinctly defined, ambiguous loss is characterised by uncertainty and the absence of closure. One of the critical distinctions of ambiguous loss compared to definite loss lies in the ambivalence experienced by individuals. In ambiguous loss, individuals frequently oscillate between feelings of helplessness and moments of hope. This polarisation impedes their emotional stabilisation and causes frozen sadness (Boss, 2009).

Notwithstanding that a significant portion of research comprises qualitative studies, there are a few quantitative data indicating comorbidity of ambiguous loss with prolonged grief, the need for closure, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and

somatisation (Testoni et al., 2020; Renner et al., 2021; Zaksh et al., 2019). Additionally, ambiguous loss defects environmental mastery as a critical component of psychological well-being, undermining faith in the world as a structured, predictable, and controllable environment (Boss, 2019; Comtesse et al., 2023).

Boss and Yeats (2014) define two types of ambiguous loss: physical and psychological. Physical ambiguous loss occurs when a person is physically absent but psychologically present in somebody's life. These scenarios often involve individuals who disappeared due to military deployment and captivity, natural disasters, kidnapping, terrorism, missing bodies, incarceration, suicide, migration, forced separation and adoption, divorce, or other circumstances where their fate is uncertain. Psychological ambiguous loss occurs when a person is physically present but psychologically absent. Examples include situations where a loved one is suffering from conditions like terminal diseases, coma, dementia, Parkinson's disease, brain injury, autism, or severe mental illness, resulting in a changed or diminished relationship. Recent findings suggest that the frequency of visits with affected patients, tolerance to uncertainty, and beliefs that the patients are psychologically present might reduce the experience of ambiguous loss in caregivers (Zaksh et al., 2019).

Boss and Yeats (2014) associate the psychological type with unresolved grief, homesickness (related to immigration or migration), addictions, hoarding disorder, and preoccupation with lost persons. Coping with both types of ambiguous loss can be challenging because it lacks the spiritual rituals and social support accompanying more clearly defined losses. In this context, there is a shift from research approaches focusing on the individual dimension of ambiguous loss to ethnographic methodologies and sociocultural scopes in recent papers. The latter connect ambiguous loss with social grieving practices by applying ideas of Foulcauldian Discourse Analysis and the concept of disenfranchised grief (Boss, 2023; Knight & Gitterman, 2019; Robins, 2016; Suzuki, 2022; Testoni et al., 2023; Thøgersen & Glintborg, 2022).

Foulcauldian Discourse Analysis reveals how disappeared persons are aligned with politically violent discourse practices in specific social settings (Robin, 2016). From this perspective, social justice and community-oriented interventions are essential healing instruments for trauma resulting from ambiguous loss and the completion of the grieving process. Repairing and restorative discourse practices also construct new meanings for the concrete community and shape its identity. Involving individuals, their families and communities in reinstalling social justice and truth provides a psychosocial map for developing shared resilience after traumas and ambiguous losses (Boss, 2023; Herman, 2003). The absence of acknowledgement for ambiguous loss increases the probability of being marginalised, thereby compromising the resilience and capacity of bereaved individuals to progress in their lives (Knight & Gitterman, 2019; Testoni et al., 2023; Thøgersen & Glintborg, 2022).

Several recent studies suggest new contexts for exploring ambiguous loss based on current discourse practices, new social phenomena, and paradigm changes in modern societies. These include ambiguous loss in family caregivers of individuals

with cancer (Weiss et al., 2023) and Down syndrome (Jeter & Turns, 2022), ambiguous loss experienced by sexual minority (LGBTQIA+) populations (Anderson & McGuire, 2021; Darrow et al., 2022; Germany et al., 2022; Sánchez-Ferrer et al., 2023); ambiguous loss in organ donor families (Aviles et al., 2023); and ambiguous loss in different segments of the population during the COVID-19 pandemic (Craw & Bevan, 2022). These studies indicate a significant increase in the application of the concept in various social settings and circumstances, leading to the diffusion of the previously defined two types of ambiguous loss. Aviles et al. (2023) point out that a third type of ambiguous loss is emerging, illustrating it on new decision-making settings by organ donor families. In this context, the family may experience emotional challenges as they mitigate the complexities of knowing that their loved one's organs are contributing to the life of someone else. The ambiguity lies in the fact that, while the physical presence of the donor is gone, elements of their biological existence persist in another person. The emerging third type underscores the need to understand the conceptual boundaries of existing physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss and their potential to encompass new applications.

To our knowledge, there are no systematic reviews on ambiguous loss based on content analysis of the literature for 2019–2023. Therefore, the article aims to extend our understanding of physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss through a systematic review based on content and psycholinguistic analysis.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main cluster maps and concept lists describing the psychological and physical types of ambiguous loss?

RQ2: What has been the ambiguous loss research's key focus in the past five years?

## Method

This study encompassed articles aligned with ambiguous loss published between 2019–2023, retrieved from PsycINFO, Web of Science (WoS), and Scopus. These databases were selected based on their significant coverage of psychological, social-scientific and philosophical literature and accessibility for the researchers. To eliminate the bias in the literature review, the study extracted published articles, dissertations, book chapters, and preprints with titles containing the search term “ambiguous loss”. Given the diverse settings of ambiguous loss research, our inclusion criteria thus centred on papers placing ambiguous loss as the key focus of their studies. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) inclusion of “ambiguous loss” in the title; (2) inclusion of only English articles; (3) published between 2019–2023; and (4) ambiguous loss being the dominant focus throughout the abstract. In addition, we have included a five known papers on ambiguous loss available on Research4Life. Research4Life is an initiative that provides institutions in lower-income countries with online access to academic and professional peer-reviewed

content to improve teaching, research and policymaking in health and other life, physical and social sciences.

In the PsycINFO database, 156 research articles were identified; in Scopus, 51 research articles were found, while 58 studies were detected in the WoS database (n=265). Two reviewers (the first and the third authors worked independently) examined titles and abstracts to remove irrelevant material and eliminate duplicate articles. Eventually, they identified 68 papers describing physical (n=34) or psychological (n=23) types of ambiguous loss and imported them into the Covidence software. After analysing full-text articles, some abstracts (n=11) were excluded with reasons for not containing the dominant focus on ambiguous loss throughout the abstract. The two reviewers discussed all discrepancies. The next stage was reviewing the full texts. At this stage, two authors have reviewed the full-text papers and justified the final inclusion of 57 papers.

Figure 1  
*Search and Review Strategy Flow Diagram*

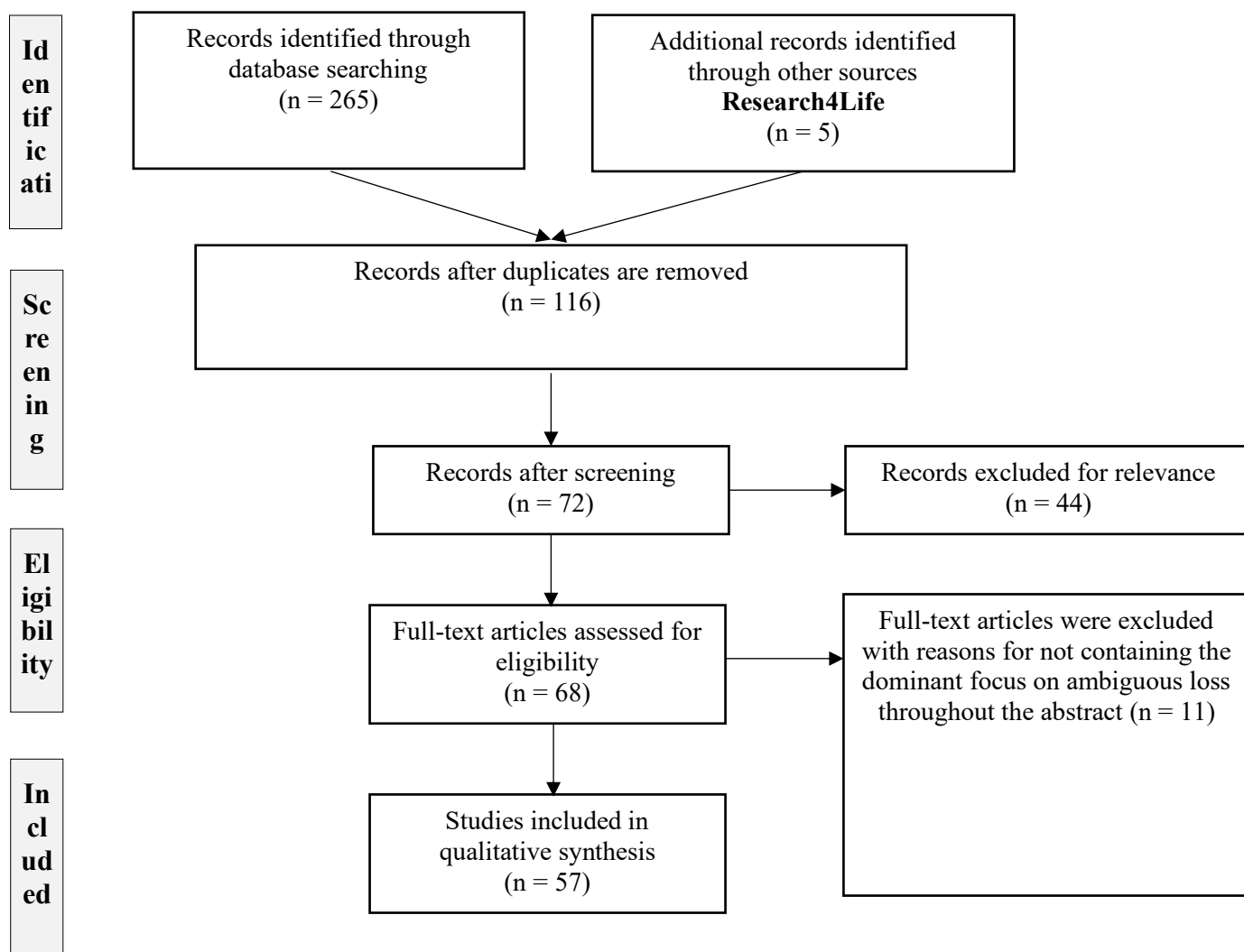


Figure 1 illustrates a step-by-step procedure of the literature search and selection process. The extracted data from the selected studies were then entered into a pre-designed protocol form, summarising the core methodological aspects (research aims, study design, measures, participants) and the results and significant findings of the reviewed studies. Screening and selection of studies were conducted by the first and the third authors. Fifty-seven studies met all eligibility criteria (for PRISMA 2020 flowchart, see Figure 1) (Page et al., 2021).

The study applies Leximancer (version 4.5) as a software tool for content analysis based on word frequency and co-occurrence of data to develop cluster maps and conceptual lists of the texts (Biroscak et al., 2017). Lexomancer performs two types of content analysis: conceptual analysis, measuring the frequency of concepts, and relational analysis, assessing how such identified concepts are related.

The cluster map and concept lists extended our understanding of the conceptual boundaries of psychological and physical types of ambiguous loss. The cluster map and concept list for ambiguous loss of the physical type are illustrated in Figure 2.

Following the procedure described by Fan & Lyu (2021) for preparing the papers' abstracts for analysis, functional words (such as "of", "and", "but", and "not") and general terms commonly used in abstracts (such as "objectives", "methods", "participants", "results", "findings", and "conclusion") were excluded. Data from quantitative analysis irrelevant to cluster maps and concept lists was also excluded. All acronyms, besides PTSD, were replaced with their full names.

## Results

The study applied the visualisation of cluster maps and rank-ordered concept lists to enhance our understanding of conceptual and relational content analysis results.

Figure 2 illustrates four themes: loss (ranked 1), family (ranked 2), adoption (ranked 3), and significance (ranked 4). The theme "loss" is represented by a concept list, including health on one side and grief on the other side. Additionally, ambiguous loss is viewed more as a process than a result or consequence, being experienced as prolonged or continuous grief lasting over time. The theme "family" is closely related to the concept of young people and children from the theme "loss" and introduces the relevant concepts of people belonging to one family setting.

The theme "adoption" aligns with previous themes and indicates foster adoption as the physical type of ambiguous loss. The theme "significant" emphasises the importance of providing social support for people experiencing ambiguous loss in the form of prolonged grief.

Therefore, the results of the content analysis of abstracts encompassing the physical type of ambiguous loss indicate a tendency to explore ambiguous loss by family members in the context of forced adoption and missing young adults and children.

Figure 2  
*The Cluster Map and Concept List in Leximancer for Articles with the Physical Type of Ambiguous Loss (N=34)*



Figure 3 moves on to discuss the main focus of the abstracts, highlighting the psychological type of ambiguous loss.

Figure 3  
*The Cluster Map and Concept List in Leximancer for Articles with the Psychological Type of Ambiguous Loss (N=23)*

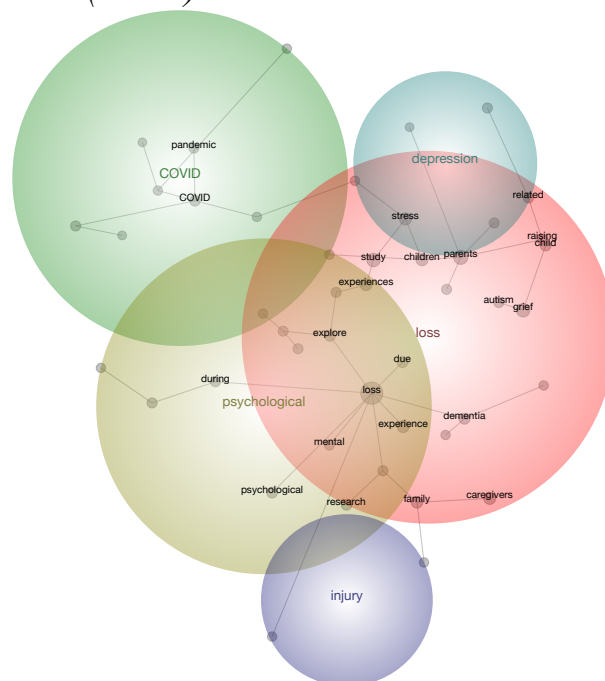


Figure 3 illustrates five themes: loss (ranked 1), psychological (ranked 2), Covid (ranked 3), depression (ranked 4), and injury (ranked 5). The theme “loss” is represented by the subjects experiencing ambiguous loss. Similar to the conceptual map of the psychological type of ambiguous loss, the concept list includes people raising children, parents, caregivers, and children. Ambiguous loss is again viewed as prolonged grief experienced by families. However, the concept list is extended by mental conditions such as autism and dementia.

Compared to the physical type, a separate theme related to the COVID-19 pandemic is emerging. The theme “psychological” expresses the mental burden of experiencing ambiguous loss. Similar to the physical type, ambiguous loss is again viewed as a lasting process. The psychological aspect of ambiguous loss is also extended to the theme of “depression” as a result of continuous stress and prolonged grief. The theme “injury” expresses several studies examining ambiguous loss in the context of physical injury, focusing on brain injury in particular.

The cluster map and concept list for all abstracts (n=57) published in 2019–2023 are illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4

*The Cluster Map and Concept List in Leximancer for Articles with the Physical and Psychological Types of Ambiguous Loss (N=57)*

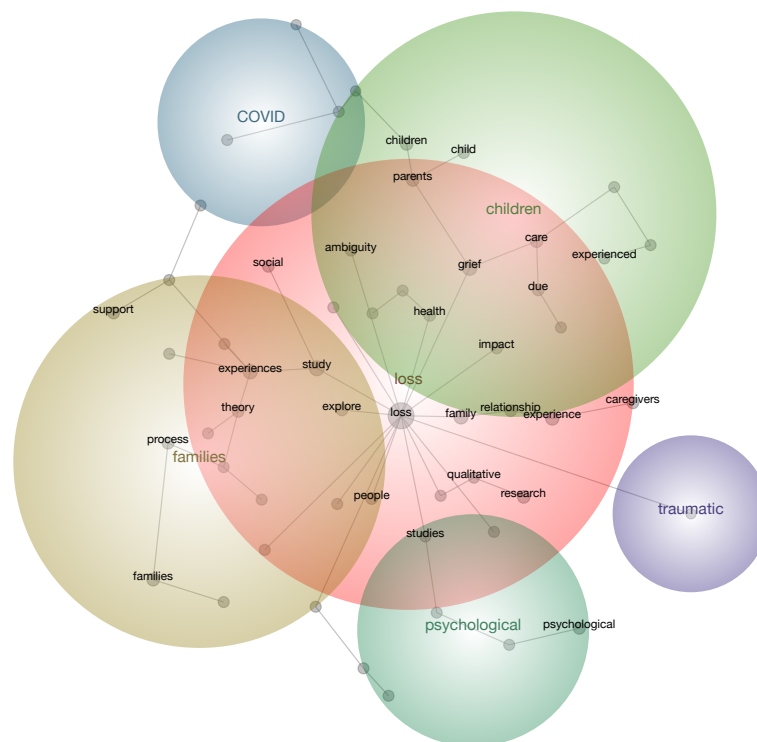


Figure 4 illustrates six themes: loss (ranked 1), children (ranked 2), families (ranked 3), psychological (ranked 4), COVID (ranked 5), and traumatic (ranked 6). The theme “loss” is represented by concepts closely related to other themes and



includes the processes of prolonged grief and the procedural (chronic) experience of ambiguous loss. Additionally, ambiguous loss is operationalised through key concepts: grief and traumatic stress, which have a detrimental impact on an individual's mental health. The cluster map and concept list demonstrate the social dimension of ambiguous loss, which includes families and the social environment. Subjects experiencing ambiguous loss, similar to previous conceptual maps of ambiguous loss, include mostly parents, children and caregivers. The separate theme "COVID pandemic" is still essential and overlaps with the themes "loss" and "children", indicating relations to the concepts of parents and children and the care system.

## Discussion

The continual expansion of diverse environments where ambiguous loss may manifest contributes to broadening this phenomenon's conceptual boundaries. Recent studies investigating ambiguous loss have reported inconsistent findings regarding its typology within the previously established physical or psychological types. As outlined in the literature review, some studies propose the potential for differentiating a third type of ambiguous loss, aligned with decision-making in situations of organ donation and creating a new meaning for losing a loved one (Aviles et al., 2023).

The first question in this study aimed to determine the main cluster maps and concept lists describing the psychological and physical types of ambiguous loss. The findings indicate that both types involve circumstances experienced by family members, predominantly parents, children, and caregivers. A comparison of the findings with previous studies confirms that the experience of ambiguous loss has "a family face" and is related to the contextual model of family stress (Boss, 1979; Boss, 1999). A significant result emerged, revealing that the physical type primarily encompasses circumstances related to adoption, potentially leading to the ambiguous loss experienced by both biological parents and children when facing forced separation. In comparison to previous studies on ambiguous loss in families with intermittent father absence and with former or active duty soldiers, there is a noticeable shift in the recent literature toward family settings and forced separation, aligned with political violence, migration, and deportation (Kor et al., 2023; Landers et al., 2023; Renner et al., 2021; Roetto, 2023; Simpson et al., 2023).

Another noteworthy finding in the psychological type is the theme "COVID", which is also related to the theme "family", representing parents and children. However, the most relevant type of ambiguous loss is connected with the absence of resolution and closure of loss when families were forbidden to perform religious and traditional rituals, including funerals, due to lockdown restrictions (Testoni et al., 2021). Several articles indicate experiencing unprecedented changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing more on

ambiguity and stress than on ambiguous loss (Craw & Bevan, 2022; Governale et al., 2023; Weaver et al., 2022). Therefore, ambiguous loss is not viewed as an unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, but as an unclear loss resulting from not being able to perform traditional spiritual rituals to take leave of loved ones on deathbed and funerals and complete the grieving process (Suzuki, 2022; Testoni et al., 2021).

Consistent with the previous literature, this research found that ambiguous loss is a continuous trauma and prolonged grief which is comorbid with depression and associated with an ongoing process. It is in line with the theory of ambiguous loss introduced by Boss and Yeats (2014), underlining the chronicity and complexities of ambiguous loss symptoms. The results representing the psychological type also corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in ambiguous loss of caregivers of individuals with dementia, autism, Down syndrome, and other mental conditions. However, in contrast to earlier findings, ambiguous loss in parents of children with disabilities, sudden infant syndrome, shaken baby syndrome, and caregivers of individuals with brain injuries and cancer is examined (Flores, 2021; Leach, 2021; Mahat-Shamir, 2022; Powell & Sorenson, 2022; Weiss et al., 2023).

According to the second research question, the main themes of ambiguous loss in the past five years have been revealed. Our results confirm that the primary focus in recent papers is on ongoing loss; however, several articles indicate a wide range of related settings, namely educators supporting students during the Covid pandemic, and experience of sexual and gender minorities (Craw & Bevan, 2022; Darrow et al., 2022; Nam & Jiang, 2021). Anderson and McGuire (2021) point out new aspects of ambiguous loss emerging in transgender youth losing their relationship with a religious community and God.

Notwithstanding the introduction of a new tool, ALI+, by Comtesse et al. (2023), for assessing ambiguous loss and increased instances of its application, ambiguous loss is viewed as an umbrella term for two related concepts, namely traumatic stress and prolonged grief, which are represented in Figure 4 as separate themes. Therefore, the core content of the concept of “ambiguous loss” is yet related to ongoing trauma and grief. This study supports evidence from previous observations on the primary role of family, community, and social support in developing resilience on the path to healing. The lack of this support is highlighted as the disenfranchised grief in recent papers (Testoni et al., 2023; Thøgersen & Glinborg, 2022).

The present study raises the possibility that the conceptual boundaries between physical and psychological aspects of ambiguous loss are expanding and erasing, giving way to new settings for applying this concept. Table 1 illustrates modified settings for physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss suggested by Boss and Yeats (2014) based on the current systematic review with content analysis.

Table 1  
*Types of Ambiguous Loss in Papers Published Between 2019–2023*

Leaving without good bye (physical type)	Good-bye without leaving (psychological type)	Being not able to say good bye (mixed type)
Physical absence with psychological presence	Psychological absence with physical presence	Physical absence with psychological absence and presence
War (missing soldiers, civilians); Natural disasters (missing persons); Kidnapping, hostage- taking, terrorism; Desertion, mysterious disappearing; Missing body (murder, plane crash, lost at sea); Incarceration; Suicide; Immigration, migration, expatriate; Adoption; Foster care; Divorce; Work relocation; Military deployment; Young adults leaving home; Elderly mate or a child moving to the new facility. Miscarriage; Infertility.	Dementia, Parkinson's, Brain injury; Coma; Chronic mental illness; Depression; Unresolved grief; Homesickness; Immigration, migration; Addictions: drugs, alcohol, gambling; Hoarding disorder; Preoccupation with lost person's work; Obsession with computer games, Internet, TV; Autism.	Not being able to perform traditional spiritual rituals to take leave of loved ones on deathbed and funerals during the COVID pandemic; Losing relationship with a religious community and God by transgender individuals; Difficulties in creating a new meaning of loss through organ donations.

## Conclusions

The primary objective of the current project was to conduct a systematic review with content analysis to examine the conceptual boundaries of physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss in recent literature. This study has identified three separate cluster maps and concept lists for physical and psychological types and ambiguity loss of both types highlighted in papers published in the last five years. The results show that the physical type primarily encompasses situations related to

adoption, potentially leading to the ambiguous loss experienced by both biological parents and children when facing forced separation. Psychological type includes parents of children with disabilities, sudden infant death and shaken baby syndromes, and caregivers of individuals with brain injuries and cancer.

The present study indicates that the conceptual boundaries between physical and psychological types of ambiguous loss are not only expanding but also erasing, giving way to new applications in settings such as the COVID-19 pandemic, organ donor families, and sexual and gender minority. The current data highlight the importance of social settings, including family and community support, for healing ambiguous loss and creating new meaning for a psychologically or physically lost loved one. This study has also provided a deeper insight into ambiguous loss as an umbrella concept linking continued psychotrauma and grieving processes, which require spiritual and religious support. The analysis has extended our knowledge of contexts where ambiguous loss might occur.

The major limitation of this study is the five-year period for systematic literature review, which, however, gives fresh insights into physical, psychological, and emerging new types of ambiguous loss. More quantitative data on ambiguous loss would help us establish a greater degree of accuracy regarding its effects on mental health symptoms in different vulnerable groups.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Mendeley Data: Zasiékina, Larysa; Zasiékin, Serhii (2023), “Ambiguous loss\_abstracts\_2019–2023”, Mendeley Data, V1, <https://doi.org/10.17632/dscy8m4g37.1>

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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