To theorize ambiguous gain: Opportunities for family scholarship

Family stressors marked by ambiguity can place significant demands on families. Family scholars have written extensively about ambiguous stressors in the context of loss or separation—situations that represent ambiguous loss. Given extant demographic trends, including those that lead to changes in family structure, there remain valuable opportunities to highlight ambiguous stressors that arise from situations of family gain or acquisition—situations that represent ambiguous gain. A proposed definition for ambiguous gain is presented, namely, as a situation of systemic relational acquisition, either physical or psychological, about which the facts are unclear. Building on foundational theoretical work, ambiguous gain is explicated as a distinct theoretical concept and conceptually positioned with respect to other related concepts, such as ambiguous loss, family boundary ambiguity, and ambivalence. Bolstering the concept of ambiguous gain might promote the theoretical and practical understanding of increasingly common family situations. Suggestions are offered for foregrounding ambiguous gain in family scholarship.

A family systems perspective emphasizes the relational interdependencies that exist between family members (Cox & Paley, 2003). Relational interdependencies in families form a central social context in which stressors, both internal and external to the family, are experienced individually and collectively. A stressor can be defined as a stimulus that is of a significant enough magnitude to provoke change in a family system, with implications for individual and family outcomes (P. Boss et al., 2017). Scholars have developed models that explicate how family systems navigate and respond to stressors. For instance, the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS), rooted in family stress theory, is a versatile framework for understanding how families manage stress (P. Boss et al., 2017). Per the CMFS framework, P. Boss et al. (2017) contend that an essential task among those interested in understanding family stress management is to accurately classify the stressor a family is experiencing.

Family stressors marked by ambiguity—that is, stressors about which facts remain unclear—are viewed as especially demanding for family systems (P. Boss, 2016; P. Boss et al., 2017). Family scholars have written extensively about ambiguous stressors in general and ambiguous loss in particular (P. Boss, 2004, 2016). Ambiguous loss is broadly defined as “a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution” (P. Boss, 2016, p. 270). As denoted in its label, ambiguous loss pertains to situations primarily marked by family loss or separation (P. Boss, 2007; Carroll et al., 2007). Given extant demographic trends that shape family compositions and structural transitions (e.g., divorce or separation, remarriage or repartnership; Brown et al., 2016; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019; Hadfield et al., 2018;
Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Raley et al., 2019; Sanner et al., 2018; Sassler & Lichter, 2020; Smock & Schwartz, 2020), there remain valuable opportunities to highlight ambiguous stressors that arise from situations of family gain or acquisition—or ambiguous gain.

Building on foundational theoretical work, the primary purpose of this article is to highlight the utility of ambiguous gain as a distinct theoretical concept. Bolstering the concept of ambiguous gain could promote the theoretical understanding of increasingly common family stressors, some of which will be reviewed in detail below. To begin, I briefly review the CMFS as an optimal backdrop for exploring ambiguous gain as a theoretical concept. I then provide a definition and non-exhaustive illustrations of ambiguous gain, followed by an effort to differentiate it from other related theoretical concepts. I conclude with a discussion of how foregrounding ambiguous gain as a distinct theoretical concept can guide and enrich family scholarship.

**Family Stressors and Family Stress Management**

As systems, families confront stressors that can challenge the status quo and provoke systemic change. Understanding family experiences is optimized when the characteristics of stressors are clearly defined (P. Boss et al., 2017). Family stressors can be classified with respect to their source, duration, density, and type (P. Boss et al., 2017). Turning to source, stressors can be internal, emerging from someone or something inside the family system; stressors can also be external, emerging from someone or something outside the family system. In terms of duration, stressors can either be chronic, marked by situations of long duration, or acute, marked by shorter events. With respect to density, stressors can be cumulative, such that events or situations pile up and compound, or stressors can be isolated, such that a stressor represents a single event.

Stressors can also vary substantially in terms of type. P. Boss et al. (2017) highlight three typological continua in particular. First, stressors can range from being normative, developmental, and predictable to being catastrophic, situational, and unexpected. Second, stressors can range from being volitional to being nonvolitional. Finally, stressors can range from being ambiguous to being clear. Stressors marked by ambiguity are generally viewed as the most demanding for family systems for reasons I will articulate shortly (P. Boss et al., 2017).

The CMFS explicates the process and context of families’ response to stressors (P. Boss, 1987, 1988; P. Boss et al., 2017). At the center of the CMFS are the ABC-X factors, first articulated by Hill (1958) and later expanded by McCubbin and Patterson (1983) and Lavee et al. (1985). The A factor represents the family stressor event or situation; the B factor represents the family’s resources or strengths at the time of the stressor event or situation; the C factor represents the meaning attached to the stressor event or situation by the family and its members; and the X factor represents the outcome in terms of the degree of family stress (ranging from low to high) or the onset of family crisis (i.e., functional immobilization; P. Boss et al., 2017). As described in the CFMS, the ABC-X factors are bidirectionally associated, such that the degree of family stress or onset of family crisis in response to a family stressor is a dynamic and interrelated function of stressor characteristics (factor A), family resources (factor B), and family perceptions (factor C; P. Boss et al., 2017).

A distinguishing feature of the CMFS is that it embeds the ABC-X factors within the larger context of families; that is, the CMFS acknowledges the role of context in constraining or facilitating the process of family stress management. Specifically, the CMFS highlights families’ external context, which represents macro-level influences over which families have little or no control. Dimensions of the external context include culture, history, the economy, development (i.e., biological processes of human maturation), and heredity (P. Boss et al., 2017). The CMFS also highlights families’ internal context, which represents more proximal influences over which families have some amount of control. Dimensions of the internal context include structural elements (e.g., family boundaries, membership, roles, and rules), psychological elements (e.g., family-level perceptual patterns), and philosophical elements (e.g., family values and beliefs).

An overview of the CMFS makes the value of accurately classifying family stressors more apparent. Indeed, the nature and characteristics of a family stressor interact with family perceptions, family resources, and the level of family stress or probability of family crisis. Ambiguous stressors are particularly demanding.
as they can yield dramatically different perceptual responses among family members (factor C), produce uncertainty about what family resources will be the most hopeful and for whom (factor B), and result in high degrees of stress and perhaps even family crisis (factor X). Ambiguous stressors can be demanding for families structurally as the ambiguity can obscure family boundaries, lead families to halt routines and traditions, and render families functionally immobilized (P. Boss, 2004). Ambiguous stressors can also be demanding for families psychologically as the ambiguity can block cognitive, coping, and stress management processes (P. Boss, 2004). As noted earlier, there are valuable opportunities to expand theory around ambiguous stressors stemming from situations of family gain or acquisition—stressors suitably labeled as situations of ambiguous gain.

**Theorizing Ambiguous Gain**

Ambiguous gain is indeed not an entirely new concept; P. G. Boss (1980) began exploring the idea of ambiguous gain as many as four decades ago. More recently, Carroll et al. (2007) discussed how families can experience ambiguous “situations of inclusion” (p. 225), by which family systems acquire new relationships that are met with uncertainty. Carroll et al. (2007) found that studies focused on such situations of inclusion “have been relatively few in comparison to the number of studies investigating loss or separation” (p. 225). They argued that situations of inclusion warranted further attention. In the same issue of *Family Relations*, P. Boss (2007) agreed with these points, offering rationale for her ongoing focus on situations of family loss—she said, “…unresolved losses lie at the root of most family problems” (p. 109). Her view on this topic was reiterated nearly a decade later (P. Boss, 2016).

In terms of studies in which ambiguous gain has been applied explicitly, there appears to be a severe paucity. A search in Google Scholar yields only one study possessing the term “ambiguous gain” in its title (Lloyd & Stirling, 2011). In this study, ambiguous gain was discussed in the specific context of dementia patient caregivers’ experiences with service use (Lloyd & Stirling, 2011). Lloyd and Stirling (2011) defined ambiguous gain in this context as “…a putative or demonstrated benefit that, as an unintended outcome, results in increased uncertainty and a consequent reduction of agency or wellbeing at the level of individual or collective identity” (p. 900). This conceptualization moved away from viewing ambiguous gain as a family-level stressor experience toward viewing ambiguous gain as an individual-level consequence of service use among dementia patient caregivers. Thus, the current state of the literature further highlights opportunities to bolster the concept of ambiguous gain, and to develop a theory of ambiguous gain, to better situate its application in family scholarship.

Returning to a family systems perspective and a CMFS orientation, ambiguous gain can be defined broadly as a situation of systemic relational acquisition, either physical or psychological, about which the facts are unclear (note that “gain” in this context is not intended to reflect common usages of the term, such as securing something favorable, desirable, or profitable). Physical ambiguous gain occurs when facts remain unclear in the context of a family physically acquiring a new systemic relation (e.g., when a stepparent moves into a household or otherwise formally joins a family system). Psychological ambiguous gain occurs when facts remain unclear in the context of a family psychologically acquiring a new systemic relation (e.g., adopted children discovering the existence of their previously unknown biological parent[s]). Physical ambiguous gain and psychological ambiguous gain are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, perhaps all physical gains are also psychological as physical acquisitions are experienced psychologically and physically. The inverse might not be true. A psychological relational acquisition in a family system is not necessarily accompanied by the physical acquisition of that relation—a point that will be made clear shortly.

In terms of brief examples, consider the following situations: (a) children acquiring a new stepparent, (b) married couples acquiring new in-laws, (c) adopted children discovering the existence of their previously unknown biological parent(s), (d) a foster child acquiring a foster family, (e) a family discovering a previously unknown relative, (f) a family assuming guardianship of a child whose parent(s) passed away, and (g) an individual discovering the existence of a child with whom they are genetically related via sperm donation. In each of these scenarios, a systemic relational
acquisition occurs, each with a high probability of ambiguity—the facts about the relational acquisition might be unclear, unavailable, or disputable. Said another way, each of these scenarios can produce unclarity in terms of how to systemically manage the relational acquisition. It is this unclarity that can make ambiguous gain so stressful for families, often by yielding high levels of family boundary ambiguity or incongruent perceptions about who is in or who is out of the family system—an issue articulated further in subsequent sections.

Also notice that the listed scenarios differ in terms of whether the ambiguous gain is primarily physical or psychological. For instance, a new stepparent joining a family represents a physical relational acquisition—a situation in which the family system physically acquires a new member. An adopted child discovering the existence of their previously unknown biological parent(s), on the other hand, represents a psychological relational acquisition. The child and family likely experience unclarity in terms of how the psychological relational acquisition will influence their conceptualization of family despite there being no physical acquisition of the relation—at least not immediately. These illustrations of physical ambiguous gain and psychological ambiguous gain will be explored in more depth below.

The distinction between physical and psychological ambiguous gain is useful insofar as it informs our understanding of how families experience and manage ambiguous gain as a family stressor. It is plausible that physical ambiguous gain is generally more stressful for families than psychological ambiguous gain. Physical ambiguous gain encompasses the demands inherent in psychological ambiguous gain but with the additional demands imposed by the physical acquisition of a new systemic relation. For instance, physical ambiguous gain often requires a family system to adapt structurally, behaviorally, and interactionally in addition to psychologically. As a result, physically acquiring a new member of a family system can necessitate shifts in family interactional patterns, routines, practices, and roles. Psychological ambiguous gain, on the other hand, often requires psychological or cognitive adaptation on the part of family system members—there might be no immediate or persistent need to adapt structurally, behaviorally, or interactionally.

Because the ambiguity of systemic relational acquisition can range from low to high, it seems advisable to conceptualize ambiguous gain as a continuous variable rather than a dichotomous one. Instead of asking whether a gain is ambiguous or not, it could be more useful to identify the extent to which, and for whom, a family gain is ambiguous. Indeed, families and their individual members might experience some gains as more or less ambiguous than others.

An illustration of psychological ambiguous gain

Again, psychological ambiguous gain occurs when facts remain unclear in the context of a family psychologically acquiring a new systemic relation. Building on one of the brief examples above, consider further the situation in which a child first learns of his or her adopted status. In this moment, the child discovers the existence of his or her previously unknown biological parent(s). This event likely does not include a physical relational acquisition; that is, there might not be any physical engagement between the child and the biological parent(s). Instead, the systemic relational acquisition has occurred psychologically; the child has acquired the idea of new biological family relationships, and the facts associated with these relationships are likely unclear or ambiguous. Indeed, research suggests that children, when made aware of their adopted status, can experience confusion and shifts in how they conceptualize family—evidence of the resultant family boundary ambiguity (Brodzinsky, 2011). Moreover, children can begin questioning the extent to which they “belong” in their family based on biological relatedness (Brodzinsky, 2011). In response, the family system might not need to adapt structurally, although psychological or cognitive adaptations might be warranted.

An illustration of physical ambiguous gain

Physical ambiguous gain, on the other hand, occurs when facts remain unclear in the context of a family physically acquiring a new systemic relation. A highly instructive and rich example of physical ambiguous gain is stepfamily formation. Stepfamilies are formed when one or both adults in a committed opposite-sex or same-sex relationship bring a child or children from a previous relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Couples in first-time, nuclear
families have time to cocreate a general pattern of family interactions and norms into which children are born or adopted, whereas stepfamilies are faced with the concurrent demands of maintaining existing family ties and forming new step-relationships (Papernow, 2013, 2018). Thus, stepfamily formation represents an ambiguous gain on several fronts. For one, given that many children in stepfamilies retain close ties with a nonresident parent and a resident parent (i.e., the parent with whom they share primary residence; Jensen, 2017), children can feel confused about how to interact with their new stepparent (not to mention stepsiblings and inherited stepgrandparents [i.e., the parents of the new stepparent]; Sanner et al., 2019; Sanner et al., 2018). However, the magnitude of children’s confusion is associated with their age at the time of stepfamily formation, as well as dynamics related to the gender identities of children and new stepparents (L. H. Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013).

The acquisition of stepparent–child relationships can also be experienced as an ambiguous gain for the stepparents. Indeed, stepparents can experience a significant level of unclarity about how they should view and engage their new stepchildren, resulting in the development of varying types of stepparent–child relationships (L. H. Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen et al., 2014). Stepparents might engage their stepchildren as a parent-like figure, as a peer-like figure, as an older close friend, or as a distant acquaintance (Crohn, 2006; Erera-Weatherly, 1996; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Some stepparents assume an entirely detached or disengaged style of stepparenting (Crohn, 2006; Erera-Weatherly, 1996).

Moreover, interactional patterns between children and their stepparents can vary across recreational, personal, academic, and disciplinary domains of family life (Jensen, 2019, 2020). Specifically, stepparent–child interactions can reflect (a) an academically oriented pattern, marked by interactions focused on school-related activities and topics; (b) a casually connected pattern, marked by casual interactions focused on personal topics and recreational activities; (c) a versatile and involved pattern, marked by well-rounded interactions centered on recreational, personal, academic, and disciplinary topics and activities; and (d) an inactive pattern, marked by no frequent interactions of any kind (Jensen, 2019, 2020). The ambiguous nature of gaining step-relationships could be a primary catalyst for the development of such a wide array of stepparent roles and stepparent–child interactional patterns. Perhaps the tendency for some stepparents to assume a disengaged, detached, or inactive (Crohn, 2006; Erera-Weatherly, 1996; Jensen, 2019) approach to stepparenting reflects situations in which the ambiguity of stepfamily formation persists indefinitely. Relationship dynamics within former step-relationships following stepfamily dissolution also hint at the capacity for stepfamily formation to persist as an ambiguous gain. Stepparents and children can vary in the extent to which they “claim” each other as kin or family when the stepfamily is intact (Coleman et al., 2015; Marsiglio, 2004). Cases in which stepparents remain unclaimed by children following the dissolution of the stepfamily (Coleman et al., 2015) could signal the persistence of ambiguity in the relational acquisition of step-relationships. The phenomenon of persistent ambiguous gain might also be illustrated in cases where widowed stepparents provide less support to their adult stepchildren than their counterparts whose partners are still alive (van Houdt et al., 2020).

In addition to children and stepparents, resident biological parents likely experience stepfamily formation as an ambiguous gain. Although parents might have a clear vision of the purpose and function of their new couple relationship, they might feel uncertain with respect to the optimal role and function of their new partner in the life(ves) of the child(ren). As a result, resident biological parents often assume roles such as gatekeeper, defender, mediator, and interpreter (L. Ganong et al., 2020; Weaver & Coleman, 2010)—each representing different strategies to oversee, facilitate, or moderate the connection between the new stepparent and the child(ren). Parents’ inclination to employ these strategies could stem from their experience of stepfamily formation as an ambiguous gain; if the facts around new step-relationships are unclear, resident biological parents might seek to shelter their children until the facts related to the gain become clearer.

It is also worth noting that nonresident biological parents likely experience stepfamily formation as an ambiguous gain. Research indicates that the formation of new couple relationships for one or both ex-partners can
exert influence on the coparenting relationship (L. Ganong et al., 2015; Markham et al., 2017). Thus, once their ex-partner forms a new couple relationship, nonresident parents can experience unclarity in terms of how the presence of a new stepparent will shape their own role in the lives of their children. Taken together, stepfamily formation richly illustrates the utility of ambiguous gain in terms of synthesizing and understanding stepfamily experiences. Stepfamily formation also highlights ambiguous gain as a potential catalyst for significant family boundary ambiguity or incongruent perceptions of who is in or who is out of the family.

**Ambiguous Gain and Ambiguous Loss**

At this point, it is instructive to conceptually position ambiguous gain with respect to other related theoretical concepts. Ambiguous loss, for instance, is a commonly applied and well-substantiated concept that serves as a valuable reference point for understanding ambiguous gain. P. Boss (2016) has noted that “loss affected every family at some time or place” (p. 281). As highlighted earlier with examples, situations of family gain are also notable—even if not universal—family experiences (Brown et al., 2016). The ebb and flow of family stressors over time can include both situations of loss/separation and gain/acquisition. As a result, it seems advisable to not treat loss and gain as dichotomous or mutually exclusive—it is possible for families to experience loss and gain sequentially, if not simultaneously.

Ambiguous loss is defined as “a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution” (P. Boss, 2016, p. 270). There are two general types of ambiguous loss: (a) **physical ambiguous loss**, which occurs when a family member is physically absent but psychologically present within the family system (usually when there is no assurance of death or permanent loss), and (b) **psychological ambiguous loss**, which occurs when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent (often as a result of dementia or other health conditions; P. Boss et al., 2017). Consequently, the most obvious difference between ambiguous gain and ambiguous loss is that one focuses on loss or separation and the other focuses on gain or acquisition within a family system. That is, ambiguous loss can occur in the context of systemic relational rupture (P. Boss et al., 2017), whereas ambiguous gain can occur in the context of systemic relational acquisition. Moreover, as stated by P. Boss et al. (2017), “Given the relational nature of ambiguous loss, one must have been previously attached to the missing person in order to experience it” (p. 81). Conversely, given the relational nature of ambiguous gain, it is most often experienced when a family is previously unattached to the person(s) relationally acquired. I say “most often” because we could conceive of situations in which families were once attached to an individual, but the attachment fades to some extent before being reacquired. Consider situations in which a family member is incarcerated for a significant period of time, a family member is away on a long military deployment, or a family member otherwise becomes estranged. The re-entry of the family member into the family system could represent an ambiguous gain to the extent that the relational attachment had faded significantly over time. Or, perhaps the re-entry better reflects the resolution of an ambiguous loss. Such conceptual distinctions warrant empirical attention in future research.

Just as ambiguous loss can be defined in terms of whether a family member is simultaneously physically or psychologically present or absent, ambiguous gain can be defined in terms of whether a systemic relation is acquired physically, psychologically, or both. As noted earlier, it is probable that all physical acquisitions are coupled with psychological acquisitions. That is, the physical acquisition of a family member catalyzes a psychological acquisition among members of the family system. Conversely, it is possible to acquire a family member psychologically without acquiring him or her physically.

Ambiguous gain and ambiguous loss can also produce different family experiences and outcomes. In the words of P. Boss (2016), “the basic premise is this: ambiguous loss is the most stressful type of loss because it defies resolution” (p. 270). Congruously, ambiguous gain is arguably the most stressful type of gain because it demands resolution, but families are not guaranteed to obtain it. Managing ambiguous loss is more about whether families “acquire the facts” or find meaning in the loss, whereas managing ambiguous gain is more about whether families successfully cocreate the facts. Another clear difference between ambiguous gain and ambiguous loss is that losses often persist in
an ongoing absence of clear facts, whereas a situation of ambiguous gain can be explored, discussed, and eventually made clear if all parties involved are willing. However, not all situations of ambiguous gain evolve to a point of clarity. For instance, as illustrated earlier, some stepfamilies persist in the ambiguity of stepfamily formation and the acquisition of a stepparent, never arriving at a point of clarity about the systemic acquisition of step-relationships.

It is worth noting one final similarity between ambiguous loss and ambiguous gain. Similar to points made by P. Boss et al. (2017) about ambiguous loss, ambiguous gain as a distinct concept is most useful in its ability to move pathology away from the family and toward the ambiguity associated with a situation of gain. Indeed, it seems reasonable for a family to struggle with managing a situation of ambiguous gain. A family’s struggle does not necessarily indicate family deficits or inadequacies. Rather, a family’s struggle could simply illustrate the challenge of managing the ambiguity of a family gain—a perspective with notable practical value.

P. Boss et al. (2017) note that strategies to address family boundary ambiguity are often structural; families need to clarify who is functionally in or out of the family system and operationalize family membership and roles. Similar to ambiguous loss, strategies to address ambiguous gain often center initially on finding some meaning in the absence of facts. Situations of physical ambiguous gain have the advantage of including all relevant parties experiencing the stressor situation. As a result, meaning-making can be an inclusive process, allowing families to effectively cocreate meaning and then move onto managing the demands of family boundary ambiguity that can arise as a result of the ambiguous gain.

**Ambiguous Gain and Ambivalence**

It is also helpful to consider how ambiguous gain differs from the concept of ambivalence. Ambivalence in the context of families often refers to one’s experience of mixed—and often contradictory—feelings, emotions, or sentiments about another family member or the quality of a family relationship (Connidis, 2015; Pillemer et al., 2012; Reczek, 2016). As one example, consider how a child might feel both love and angst toward a parent from whom they receive mistreatment. P. Boss et al. (2017) articulated the following general contrast between the concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity: “while ambivalence is a feeling or emotion, ambiguity is a cognitive state of having no answer” (p. 80). Said another way, ambivalence reflects a conflicted or mixed emotional experience, whereas ambiguity marks an unclear situation.

An unclear or ambiguous situation is not a prerequisite for one’s experience of ambivalence, and unclarity is not necessarily a feature of one’s experience of ambivalence. Indeed, one could experience conflicted feelings with a great amount of clarity or in the context of a very clear situation. As a result, there is a clear boundary between the concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity. It does seem plausible, however, that ambiguous gain could serve as a precursor to ambivalence in some families, at least to the extent that the ambiguous gain culminates in a wide range of family perceptions that give rise to conflicting emotions, feelings, or sentiments among family members. Certainly, future research could (and
should) be employed to empirically assess associations between ambiguous gain and other related theoretical concepts, such as ambivalence.

**Opportunities for Family Scholarship**

A core aim of this article has been to highlight the utility of ambiguous gain as a distinct theoretical concept. It would be misleading to suggest that family scholars have not attended thoughtfully to situations of ambiguous gain. My contention is that there are significant opportunities to more explicitly expand, explore, and apply the concept of ambiguous gain in family scholarship. As noted earlier, one practical advantage of explicitly applying the concept of ambiguous gain is to inform the work of family professionals who support families facing stressor events or situations in the form of ambiguous gain. Here, I echo the sentiment extended by P. Boss et al. (2017), that “categorizing such painful stressors as ‘ambiguous’ and naming the culprit as ‘the not-knowing’ is more effective than attributing blame to those who are, through no fault of their own, at the mercy of the ambiguity” (P. Boss et al., 2017, p. 39). That is, incorporating ambiguous gain explicitly in family scholarship can reshape narratives about families that experience ambiguous gain by placing focus on the ambiguity and strategies to resolve it rather than on perceived failings within families.

Important first steps in realizing its potential benefits include empirically testing ambiguous gain as a distinct theoretical concept. Because—as P. Boss et al. (2017) highlight—ambiguous stressors are challenging to quantify, qualitative methods will be invaluable to the process of generating empirical evidence of ambiguous gain (although some researchers have sought to quantify ambiguous stressors by assessing their duration; e.g., Robins, 2010). Researchers could begin by identifying a situation of family gain they posit to be ambiguous and recruit a sample of families that report experiencing the situation (P. Boss, 2016). At this stage, it could be helpful to clarify whether the situation of family gain primarily represents a physical ambiguous gain, a psychological ambiguous gain, or both. Family members could then report whether and to what extent the facts about the situation of family gain are unclear; however, a key challenge here is determining whether ambiguous gain applies well at both individual and family levels. Given the earlier suggestion to view ambiguous gain as a continuous variable (i.e., gain ranging in ambiguity from low to high), rather than a dichotomous one (i.e., gain being ambiguous versus not), one approach on this front could be to assess each family member’s experience of a gain as ambiguous. An aggregate or average of these assessments across family members might reflect well the whole family’s experience of a gain as ambiguous, whereas individual assessments could highlight possible variation across members or foreground members with especially high assessments of ambiguous gain. Together, these empirical efforts could begin to shape and substantiate a theory of ambiguous gain over time, yield ideas about how and under what conditions ambiguous gain can be measured optimally, and begin to catalog the various situations of ambiguous gain that families experience.

Empirical work centered on ambiguous gain could also attend to the various components of the CMFS. For one, researchers could seek to uncover how a particular ambiguous gain, once empirically identified, influences family outcomes in the form of family stress and family crisis (and a variety of its manifestations; e.g., adult and child adjustment, family relationship quality; X Factor). In addition, ambiguous loss can often produce distress, trauma, and irresolvable grief; researchers could investigate the capacity of ambiguous gain to result in positive stress, or eustress, for families. Researchers could also investigate stress management processes in the context of a particular ambiguous gain, attending specifically to family resources (B Factor) and family perceptions (C Factor) that bolster stress management. In addition, researchers could attend to the internal and external contexts that shape whether and how families experience and manage a particular ambiguous gain. That is, researchers could explore how malleable features of the family context (i.e., internal context) and nonmalleable features of the family context (i.e., external context) influence whether and how a situation of family gain is experienced as ambiguous and how families do or do not successfully manage it. Consistent with these suggestions for research, the following questions about a particular ambiguous gain could be addressed:
• What makes a situation of family gain ambiguous for some families but not for others?
• What, if any, situations of family gain appear to be universally ambiguous for families?
• How does culture influence whether a family gain will be experienced as ambiguous?
• For whom in the family is a particular gain experienced as ambiguous? What situations of family gain yield diverging experiences across family members in terms of ambiguity?
• How are particular situations of ambiguous gain resolved or managed by families?
• What are the implications for families when resolution is not obtained with respect to a particular ambiguous gain?

These and other related questions could begin to crystallize the contours of ambiguous gain as a theoretical concept. Thus, the contents of this article are intended to catalyze and support further exploration and refinement of ambiguous gain. Ultimately, these efforts might inform strategies for supporting families that experience systemic relational acquisitions marked by ambiguity—an increasingly common experience for many families. As highlighted earlier, stepfamily life marks a sufficiently narrow and precise context ripe for the testing and development of ambiguous gain as a theoretical concept. Consequently, I suggest that stepfamily formation be prioritized as an initial and primary site for testing the assumptions, propositions, and utility of ambiguous gain posited in this article.

**Author Note**

The author extends gratitude to Dr Gary L. Bowen for being a supportive sounding board as early ideas related to this article were being developed. The author also extends gratitude to Dr Pauline Boss, an inspiring champion of theory development whose prolific and profound work has created a strong foundation on which important theoretical ideas can be explored and refined. Finally, the author extends gratitude to the journal editor and reviewers for providing exceptionally constructive feedback and suggestions.

**References**


