



# Ambiguous Loss in Mexican Immigrant Families

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# Research overview

- Mexican immigrant agriculture workers in Minnesota
- 17 immigrant workers and 17 family members in Minnesota = 34 family dyads
- Bi-national team of researchers
- Interviews
- Qualitative analysis – inductive and deductive phases
- Funded by NIFA-ISE

# Research purposes

- To learn how Mexican immigrants maintain a sense of family despite their physical separation
- To examine narratives of Mexican immigrant family dyads to identify experiences of ambiguous loss and coping strategies



# Key ideas in ambiguous loss theory found in this study (Boss)

- **Loss is not clear**
- **Psychological family emerges**
- **Families find ways to cope**

# Experiences of ambiguous loss

- **Began before migrant left home**

“What determined that we would come to work in the USA was that we were going through a difficult financial situation. My husband lost his job and he was the one who supported the family financially. My job was not a steady job and I had to leave to take care of my child myself instead of paying someone to do it.”

# Ambiguous loss experience

- **Uncertainty about arrival, safety in new place, and length of stay**

“Well, he told me that he was coming to the USA to study, and he didn’t mention that he had the purpose to stay. He was coming only for one or two years to study English, but you never imagine how much time you’ll need.”



# Ambiguous loss experience

- **Unfulfilled family roles**

“Frankly, I’m deeply affected when he left because [of his] not being here. At home you see, he’s the head of the family. And then we have problems, things for men to solve, and I have to solve them myself.”

# Psychological family

- Core feature of Ambiguous Loss Theory:
  - psychological presence of a family member despite their physical absence
- Participants in this study wrestled with this presence/absence tension on both sides of the border.



# Maintaining *psychological family* from Mexico

“He is the middle horcón, the one that won’t let it [the beam] down... the one that holds it [the roof] in position.”

(An 86 year-old father explained about the important role his absent son continued to play in their family. )



# Maintaining *psychological family* from Mexico

“He’s the head of the family and whatever we are going to do, we tell him. He is still the father in this family. He has been with us all the time; even being there, he never loses contact.”

“It has never changed because of his not being here..... He tries to make us keep the same relationship, the same way of living together as brothers, sisters and parents. That’s what he misses the most over there.”



# Maintaining *psychological family* from Minnesota

“Well, yes, any details arising are discussed with me. She asks me, she wants my opinion. Things are always done as I say. For example, if she wants to paint the walls at home, I tell her about prices and things like that. And when I tell her it’s all right, she does what is agreed to do.”



## Maintaining *psychological family* from Minnesota continued

“Well, with my children about all the things they do over there, and with my wife, about how everything is going on, the children, some permission they ask me to go somewhere...to be taken into account, that is very nice...it is clear that we trust each other.”



# Families *coped* with their ambiguous losses

- Family, work-based, and community support
- Meaning-making



# *Coping with ambiguous loss*

- **Family support**

“My brothers-in-law were the ones who helped me. They were working here [Minnesota], already. And so, when I came I had an easier way to come in, without risking my health, my integrity.”

# *Coping with ambiguous loss*

- **Work-based support**

“Well, yes, in fact I can’t tell you that the owner is a very noble person, but I can tell you he is very approachable, and he realizes who are the people that work hard and benefit the company. That’s why I have been receiving pats on my back and more concessions and more economic benefits and congratulations directly from the owner...”

# *Coping with ambiguous loss*

- **Making meaning out of their losses**

“I was depressed, I felt bad. I used to say to myself ‘no way, it is for my daughter, just keep going’ and here we are. I won’t say I am all right, but you get used to it.”

“We are better off without the tension that means not knowing if you can make ends meet. And about being far away from my family, one way or the other, you manage to cope.”

# Implications

- Migration from Mexico will remain high while the economy suffers in Mexico and demand continues for low-skilled, low-wage workers, particularly in food processing and agriculture industries.
- Families benefit from financial resources gained through remittances sent home, but suffer from the physical absence of a family member.
- Immigrant families maintain resilience by making meaning out of their loss-filled situations.