

# Judgment toward Misbehaving Children Based on Experiences of Loss and Gender Differences

## Introduction

The psychological effects from unambiguous loss (e.g., death of a loved one) is a well-researched topic. However, there is far less research on the topic of ambiguous loss, which is defined as an unclear and unresolved loss (Boss, 2016).

Some research on ambiguous loss indicates that bias exists toward those experiencing it. For instance, one study found that children with incarcerated parents reported increased external stigma from their teachers (Saunders, 2018). Research also supports the existence of bias toward individuals experiencing unambiguous loss; in one study, people with prolonged grief disorder were perceived as less competent, warm, and emotionally stable (Eisma, Riele, Overgaauw, & Doering, 2019). However, it is unclear whether the bias associated with ambiguous loss and unambiguous loss varies in degree of severity.

Further, research has been conducted on bias based on gender differences. However, contradicting results have been found; one study found that male children received corporal punishment four times as much as female children (Mcfadden, Marsh, Price & Wang, 1992) while another found that harsher disciplines were given to female children than male children (Gansen, 2019).

Due to the uncertainty of both ambiguous loss and gender bias findings, I have decided to explore the topics further through my own research.

### Hypotheses

1. Participants will recommend harsher disciplines for misbehaving students who are experiencing ambiguous loss than misbehaving students who are experiencing unambiguous loss
2. Participants will recommend harsher disciplines for misbehaving male students than misbehaving female students
3. There will be an inverse relationship between discipline recommendations and Values in Action (VIA) Equity & Fairness scores

## Methods

### Participants

- 152 people aged 18-74 were recruited from introductory psychology courses and social media networks; 35 participants did not finish the survey, making a total of 117 participants who completed the entire questionnaire. Of the 152 participants, 98 were females and 46 were males; eight participants did not disclose their assigned sex. The mean and median age of participants was 35 and 32, respectively.

### Procedure

- Participants read a series of vignettes that described children misbehaving in a school setting. They were then asked to indicate a degree of discipline for the misbehaving children. Paired sample t-tests and repeated measures ANOVA analyses were used to understand the relationships between constructs.

### Measures

- Vignettes: 20 vignettes of misbehaving children divided into four categories: (1) males experiencing ambiguous loss, (2) females experiencing ambiguous loss, (3) males experiencing unambiguous loss, and (4) females experiencing unambiguous loss. After reading each vignette, participants recommended a degree of discipline using a slider scale (endpoints “1” & “5”).
  - Ambiguous Loss  $\rightarrow \alpha=0.898$ ;  $M=1.892$ ;  $SD=0.741$
  - Unambiguous Loss  $\rightarrow \alpha=0.878$ ;  $M=1.776$ ;  $SD=0.685$
  - Males  $\rightarrow \alpha=0.873$ ;  $M=1.850$ ;  $SD=0.700$
  - Females  $\rightarrow \alpha=0.894$ ;  $M=1.814$ ;  $SD=0.724$
  - Overall  $\rightarrow \alpha=0.950$ ;  $M=1.827$ ;  $SD=0.685$
- Values in Action (VIA) Equity & Fairness: This scale measures trait-level individual differences in equity and fairness (endpoints “disagree” & “agree”).
  - $\alpha=0.734$ ;  $M=4.254$ ;  $SD=0.507$

## Results

- Hypothesis 1 – Supported
  - There was a significant difference between the degree of recommended discipline for experiences of ambiguous loss and unambiguous loss ( $p<0.001$ ).
- Hypothesis 2 – Not Supported
  - The difference between recommended discipline for male and female children was not significant ( $p=0.524$ ).
- Hypothesis 3 – Not Supported
  - While there was a weak negative correlation between discipline recommendations and VIA Equity & Fairness scores ( $r_s=-0.143$ ), the correlation was not statistically significant ( $p=0.127$ ).

## Limitations

- Some of the unambiguous vignettes included divorce of a child’s parents, however, some might view divorce as an ambiguous loss.
- Since participants explicitly judged children, findings may not be easily generalized to populations outside of children.

## Discussion

While some participants may view divorce as an unambiguous loss and others view it as ambiguous, this difference in perspective supports the idea that judging loss is a nuanced topic. This nuance can be explored further, such as re-classifying divorce as an ambiguous loss (instead of unambiguous) to determine if it elicits statistically different results.

Findings may not be easily applied to adult populations. However, the findings are highly specific to children. The experimental approach of the study also indicates a high internal validity. Therefore, the findings may be relevant to real-world settings where decision-making by pediatric professionals affects children and their families.

