



## Search/ing for missing people: Families living with ambiguous absence



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### ABSTRACT

Families of missing people are often understood as inhabiting a particular space of ambiguity, captured in the phrase 'living in limbo' (Holmes, 2008). To explore this uncertain ground, we interviewed 25 family members to consider how human absence is acted upon and not just felt within this space 'in between' grief and loss (Wayland, 2007). In the paper, we represent families as active agents in spatial stories of 'living in limbo', and we provide insights into the diverse strategies of search/ing (technical, physical and emotional) in which they engage to locate either their missing member or news of them. Responses to absence are shown to be intimately bound up with unstable spatial knowledges of the missing person and emotional actions that are subject to change over time. We suggest that practices of search are not just locative actions, but act as transformative processes providing insights into how families inhabit emotional dynamism and transition in response to the on-going 'missing situation' and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2013).

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## 1. Introduction

*"His last words to us were 'I'm off, see you tonight' "* (Charlotte, mother of Paul, missing for 3 years and still missing)

Most of us in well resourced, democratic societies live with taken-for-granted securities in ordinary life in which our living loved ones are almost always contactable or known to be *some-where*. For some, however, this sense of security is threatened when

a family member or friend or colleague is missing, something that happens with surprising frequency with approximately 306,000 annual incidents in the UK (NCA, 2014). This paper considers what emotive actions accumulate in the space of absence for the people left behind, drawing on a funded research project in which UK families<sup>1</sup> were interviewed about their experience of living with the absence of, and search for, their missing person. As we discovered, search/ing<sup>2</sup> for a missing person is an emotional process, one also marked by (often competing) geographical knowledges and complex relationships with police officers charged with the task of locating the missing (this process may be significantly different elsewhere in the world, and see Edkins, 2011; for examples).

We start by situating the paper with reference to interdisciplinary research concerning *ambiguous* loss and grief. This literature suggests that humans cope with absence via 'continuing bonds' with those who are gone, but that they also may become fixed or frozen by the trauma of their loss, especially in the case of ambiguous

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<sup>1</sup> According to Valentine (2008) 'families' have been uncritically understood within human geography, as they have been primarily interpreted as a unit of analysis through which to study social reproduction. Valentine has sought to broaden debate about the utility of analysing families and their relative 'relatedness' and 'intimacy'. Although we do not explore the use of the term 'family' in this paper, we recognise critical family scholarship that argues that families are complex in form (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996). Each family member will experience being 'left behind' in missing person cases differently and we have endeavoured to use a range of voices (of mothers, a father, daughters and sisters) in the main text, although fathers and brothers are also represented more fully in our wider study. For scholarship on missing persons from the perspective of the siblings of those reported missing see Clark 2011.

<sup>2</sup> In using 'search/ing' we deliberately use a combined construction of 'search' and 'searching' to indicate the simultaneous reference to a practical, material or virtual act with particular parameters (a search) and reference to a constant processional investigation to locate another human being (searching). Search/ing may have emotional or psychological dimensions, and may combine in a variety of ways at different stages of a noticed absence and be operative at different scales.

absence (Boss, 1999, 2013). In the next sections we explore the implications of these arguments through empirical materials related to family experiences of search/ing for their missing person and their communications with police officers. We disrupt a straightforward story of the freezing capacity of loss in relation to missing people, identifying the many ways whereby families are active agents in responding to this particular kind of absence. In this way we are highlighting how people might manage ambiguity, and thus elaborate Boss's work (also explored further below) as she rejects 'stages' or 'steps' of recovery from ambiguous loss, while also pointing researchers towards 'movement, paradoxical possibilities of change, and diverse paths to resiliency' (Boss, 2007: 108. See also the work of Glassock, 2006, 2011 and for a review of literature on loss and hope in a similar context see Wayland et al. 2015). We thereby explore search/ing as a key mode through which such emotional management happens, rather than (just) as a sign of frozen incapacity. Search/ing here is understood not as a unified category, act or feeling, but instead constituted by a diverse geography of shifting modalities, materialities and meanings.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, we move from accounts of family liaison with police in efforts to locate missing people in the *external* world, to more reflexive and *interior* accounts of long-term search wherein the missing person finds a new place in the imaginations of family members. The paper concludes by suggesting that families of long-term missing people find new ways to live with ambiguous loss, closely connected to changing search experiences and evolving emotional geographies of human absence (and see also Parr and Stevenson, 2014).

## 2. Ambiguous loss and missing people

Every year in the UK over 306,000 missing incidents are recorded by the police (NCA, 2014) with around 35% of these being *adult* missing persons (the concern of our paper), some involving *repeat* missing events by the same people. While the majority of cases are resolved within three days, others continue for much longer. It is difficult to gain accurate data of medium and long-term missing incidence, but about 1000 cases are outstanding every week in the UK and although 97% are eventually recorded as closed cases with no harm to the individual, 1% of cases are unresolved after a year according to the UK Missing Persons Bureau (the remainder being recorded as fatal incidence) (NCA, 2014). Despite the increasing (although patchy) statistical data on numbers of missing incidents profiled by age, gender and location, little is known about how missing people's absence affects lives over prolonged periods from the perspective of those left behind (for exceptions see Boss, 1999, 2006, 2012; Edkins, 2011; Holmes, 2008; Henderson and Henderson, 1998; Parr and Stevenson, 2013, 2014; Wayland, 2007; Wayland et al., 2015). The UK charity, Missing People, receives around 17,000 annual calls from families wishing to reach out for support from their 24 hour help-lines and dedicated counselling provision, and so the scale of emotional need is clearly significant.

What kind of loss does such human absence provoke? How might we best understand this from geographical and other disciplinary perspectives? What spaces do people dealing with the absence of a missing person inhabit? How are the missing re-presented and through what kinds of emotional, social and spatial practices? Such questions are ones that chime with contemporary writings, including those stressing how presence and absence exist in unstable and sometimes unexpected

relationships (Till, 2005; Wylie, 2007; McCormack, 2010; Maddrell, 2013). In such work we are often reminded that geographies of absence are not always about spectral remains and ruination: 'less as a disputed articulation or representation of the past and more as part of contemporary everyday activities, bodily experiences and contestations' (Meier et al., 2013: 424). This emphasis on experiential and embodied qualities of absence might also be understood further through analysing feelings and materialities of loss, such as those that accumulate in the wake of missing episodes and journeys. Meier thus provokes us to understand the *experience* of absence further, and as something or someone as *present*, rather than something or someone that is simply *recalled*.

In work on the loss of people made absent via death (Maddrell, 2009; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010; Maddrell, 2013; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2006), rich discussion focuses on the relations surrounding end-of-life, with Maddrell (2013, p1) writing extensively on the liminal spaces of grief and how these are infused by 'dynamic negotiations of absence–presence'. She notes how, for those in grief, the absent deceased person is simultaneously 'nowhere, but everywhere' (ibid: 4). Drawing on recent bereavement studies and the notion that the bereaved experience 'continuing bonds' with the dead, Maddrell argues that the absent dead are 'given presence through the experiential and relational tension between the physical absence (not being there) and emotional presence (a sense of still being there)' (ibid: 5). Maddrell (2009, 2013) has particular interest in how specific places of memorialisation and remembrance can help form bridging relations for absence–presence and be sites of existential encounter with the deceased. For Maddrell, memorials are important material spaces that enable continued relationships between the living and the dead, although they are not the only ways for this continuance to happen. For families of missing people, such material memorial spaces do not *necessarily* exist<sup>4</sup> or feel appropriate, and so they may be left with more diffuse traces of the missing that reverberate through their everyday lives, in a manner not dissimilar to the absence–presence of the grieved-for dead, but perhaps experienced with a particular inflection precisely because they do not know if their person is still *alive* and *somewhere*. Families of missing people, like those in grief, also work to (re)presence the absent but via particular practices and spaces, such as celebrating birthdays, sending nightly text messages, setting up websites or using media to 'witness' the person's character and interests or call for their return (and see other examples in Edkins, 2011 and Wayland, 2007). Most poignantly, the re-presencing of missing people is usually attempted by the *continued search for them* by their families, a practical activity that happens in parallel to, and not always in partnership with, official police search enquiries.

While we have acknowledged some comparisons between the experience of bereavement and the experience of knowing a missing person, we also want to draw out some differences, or particularities, as a precursor to understanding the family search efforts discussed below. Families of missing persons are often described as 'living in limbo' (Holmes, 2008), with the resultant states in which people find themselves often referred to as 'ambiguous loss', as noted earlier. Ambiguous loss is a term coined by the family therapist Pauline Boss who has worked with families of missing people, among others (Boss, 1999, 2002a,b, 2006, 2007,

<sup>3</sup> Glassock (2011) discusses 'internal' and 'external' searching for missing loved ones and there may be some comparison with our conception of 'search/ing' concept, although we are not suggesting that search process discussed in the main paper are *necessarily* and only conceived as inside/outside.

<sup>4</sup> Families of missing people may choose to materialise their loss as a way to deal with its ambiguity. Families set up social media pages, commission songs and poems about *their* missing person, in order to both construct a public witness and also in some cases to reference a politics of disappearance. This reference via photography, song lyrics and pointed comment can and does offer a reflection on those authorities that search.

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