



## 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.

2012). According to Boss (1999), ambiguous loss should not be confused with 'ordinary loss', as missing people are *physically absent* but *psychologically present* for their families. In Boss's view, this loss is different to the experience of death where one can know it is impossible for the deceased actually to return, even though there may be a powerful 'continuing bond' (Maddrell, 2013). Boss's research and practice leads her to understand the ambiguous loss of missing people as *particularly* difficult and disabling. She represents ambiguity in this case through a fixing language, elaborating its 'freezing' properties, as 'they (the families) cannot make decisions, cannot act, cannot let go' (1999, p61), due to the unknown cause of the absence. Ambiguous loss may also be evoked as a time/space of uncertain waiting that cannot straightforwardly be ended unless there is a body located (Hogben, 2006), although Boss hints that versions of 'flexible waiting' may actually be productive for some: "Those who wait endlessly for news about a lost person do not do so in vain if they find hope and optimism in their struggle. Indeed, they are able to find meaning in the midst of ambiguity because of their ability to remain optimistic, creative and flexible" (1999: 132). So, acknowledging the contradictory spatialities suggested by 'frozen' and 'flexible', as attached to those waiting for missing people to return,<sup>5</sup> we now explore what these dynamics might look like in practice, particularly in relation to the role of *search/ing*. Here we question how and whether family *search/ing* enables ways of managing the emotions constituting ambiguous loss and the difficult absent–presence of their missing people, or prompt a kind of repetitive paralysis where apparent 'flexibility' in constant *search/ing* may be masking frozen loss.

The paper draws on interviews with 25 families of missing people in the UK who were recruited via two police forces in England and Scotland and the UK charity Missing People database.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Here our work connects with critical research on waiting, including forms of chronic waiting that pervade everyday life for refugees, unemployed and incarcerated peoples (Jeffries, 2008), and whereby versions of 'left behindness' constitute inertias and 'lost time'. In reviewing several studies of waiting, Jeffries points out how collective experiences of waiting *can* engender community and political activism (although less so in the poor and isolated). Families of missing people are absent from current discussions, although *their* diverse kinds of waiting may have resonance here. Families of missing people in the UK do not often act politically in their experience of chronic waiting, although the national charity Missing People have attempted to unite families with the aim of supporting each other socially and therapeutically (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The family research was a work-package in a larger ESRC grant on 'Geographies of missing people' [RES-062-23-2492]. The Missing People charity developed the work package in partnership with us, and also allowed us access to families, alongside 2 police forces. The work was intended to shed insight onto family search processes in the context of police relationships, and the resultant report (Parr and Stevenson, 2013) has been well received by the charity and others in the field. In the report we raise other issues about family support services, which the charity's CEO has pledged to act upon. Since publication, the charity has used our data and interpretations to help evidence their bids for money in order to provide further support services. The sample frame for the study was developed in consultation with 2 police forces and the Missing People charity. We proactively sampled for 100% of post-fourteen day cases on police database to ensure that the project had the opportunity to interview families of longer-term missing persons and those where the person might still be missing. In each force and the charity, families were recruited from records relating to 2011. In Police Scotland, North East Region, a total of 333 letters from the police were issued and in London 668 letters were sent out. The total response for Police Scotland was five and MPS was seven giving an overall response rate of 1.3 percent. The Missing People charity made 50 phone calls, but contact was not always achieved and 8 people responded positively from this method. To generate further responses, the charity facilitated recruitment via their family support days and Christmas carol service and this resulted in a further 7 respondents. From a total of 27 possible respondents, twenty-five interviews took place over a 5 month period during 2012–2013. Our data is limited in that it privileged conventional and identifiable 'family members' who made missing reports to the police and the charity, and who were then willing to be interviewed. If we had systematically interviewed across family structures and within wider social networks, we may have produced other findings.

The semi-structured interviews were led by a thematic topic-guide designed to reflect on the search experiences of families (the lead up to the disappearance, reporting the person missing, police and family search, dealing with returns). Family experiences in this regard ranged from having a relative missing for a few hours to a few weeks to 20 years, and included those who have had a return, alongside families who are still *search/ing* for loved ones (Parr and Stevenson, 2013). Of the families interviewed, 11 had relatives who were still missing. Interviews ranged from 1.5 to 3 h and involved couples and single interviewees, focus group and telephone interviews with some follow-up liaison. In what follows, we have deliberately avoided profiling multiple and named emotional testimonies of pain, anguish and profound psychological disturbance that many experience when dealing with a missing relative. This is partly because the emotional impacts of missing loss are noted elsewhere (Holmes, 2008), and partly because in our research project we are interested in the role of family *search practices*. Our exploration of such search practices also reflects how such practices *feel* and here we note that "emotion ... is not a static thing-in-itself, but relationally constituted, dynamic, and so subject to shifts in position and relative power" (Thien, 2008: 312). As *search/ing* may involve *subtle* emotional transformations, this subtlety is what we seek to disclose. In what follows, we subtitle all our empirical sections with the adjective 'search/ing', precisely to convey a sense of *sustained* (maybe even 'relentless') family efforts to locate their missing people.

### 3. Search/ing: reporting a person missing

There are many dimensions to the search for missing family in different times and places and with different technologies of practice (for examples, see Edkins, 2011; Parr and Fyfe, 2012). In discussing UK family experience, it is acknowledged that we are necessarily privileging a *partial* representation of the processes and complexities involved. From the moment a person is noticed as absent, there unfolds not only a search to locate the person, but also a search for meaningful answers to questions such as 'why?', 'how?', 'when?', where? (Landsman, 2002). We might imagine a series of scenes as an absence unfolds: an absence 'becomes' via a concerned glance at a clock, confused phone-calling of friends and family, checking local workplaces, pubs or pathways and finally a call for police help. The arrival at a decision formally to report an *adult* missing is often fraught with anxieties around an individual's right to be absent and a strong desire to know their whereabouts. Once an absence is reported to the police, it triggers official risk assessment and search procedures that can leave some families worried about whether their missing family member will appreciate such intervention. This is especially the case for individuals experiencing mental health problems, where such intervention may result in a medical and legal process, such as a Mental Health Section and detainment in hospital. Some families have clearly struggled in such circumstances about whether and when to report the absence, with some families recalling instances where they have mounted significant searches of their own before calling in police assistance, especially in cases of repeated disappearance. For other families, a lack of knowledge of *when* and *how* to report someone missing has seemingly compounded the distressing nature of the initial stages:

*The police actually said to us "why did you leave it so long to contact us?" and I'm thinking "I thought they had to be missing at least forty-eight hours" and he said "no its a misconception, you know, if somebody isn't very well or has some kind of problems you can get in touch with us in a couple of hours if you are concerned."* (Judy, mother of Andrew, missing for 2 years)

For the police, the ‘golden time’ for success in search for absent people is in the first 24 h after a person has last been seen, although there are barriers to the optimal use of this time-frame, as indicated above. Deciding if a person may be missing is tricky and families do not always feel qualified to make this decision alone. Quite often the decision to report a family member as missing takes place in conjunction with, or is prompted by, conversations with agencies and other family members. *Feeling* as though one can act in the face of another’s absence is clearly a confusing emotional burden, but one with implications for the practicalities of effective search. From the first moment of an absence ‘becoming’, there do, indeed, seem to be ‘freezing’ forces at work in terms of how people respond to human disappearance (Boss, 1999).

#### 4. Search/ing: policing missing people

Once a person is reported as missing to the police, an official search may take place.<sup>7</sup> The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 2006: 94) guidance states that ‘search is a routine element of investigating reports of missing persons. It involves making an assessment of what the initial enquiries suggest are the most likely circumstances of the person’s disappearance, and then concentrating the search in accordance with those circumstances’. Several families reported feeling confident in the police as search experts, recognising that the police are probably the most effective means to locate their loved one, given the knowledge and resources assumed to be at their disposal to carry out effective searches, as summarised here by Alice:

*They were very, very quick at getting searches up and running so there was no need for us to do anything like that. The police are the specialists, they know what they’re looking for.* (Alice, step-daughter to Martha, missing for 5 years)

Family decisions *not to search* may be related to their perception of police as search specialists, although the majority of families did engage in some form of search themselves alongside or in response to police actions. In understanding the drivers for family search/ing, we might recognise not only an emotional need to be ‘doing something’ in the face of human absence, but also consider family relationships with police officers officially tasked with locating the missing person.

Based on contingent information, police search strategy clearly varies in type and extent (Parr and Fyfe, 2012; Fyfe et al., 2014; Glasscock, 2011; Gibb and Woolnough, 2007). However, and unlike Alice above, many families talked about feeling the level and scope of the police search to be inadequate. Knowing that ‘no stone has been left unturned’ in the search was represented as critical for a family’s psychological and emotional welfare. One of the key factors contributing towards a positive experience of police liaison lay in a clear understanding of police decision-making about the parameters of any search. Yet, many interviewees, particularly those who asked precise questions about the *geography* of police search, remained dissatisfied:

*One of the things that I requested was the copy of the [search] map, and they went “well nobody has asked for it before” and they’ve got*

*the map here so I’m peering across the table upside down at the map and I’m saying “well I really can’t see” so I’d be turning it round like this and they’d be turning it back and saying “it’s our map”. So I said “I’d really like a copy” and they went and did a copy in black and white. I was just furious. I said “how dare you? Go and do a colour copy” so they did a colour copy but there was no key on it, there was no legend, so all their little crosses and colours didn’t mean anything to me and the police officer who was explaining it couldn’t interpret either. She said “well we’ve done all of this” and I thought well it doesn’t help me.* (Sasha, wife to Bill, missing for 2 years).

The literal mapping of search could convey the extent of search effort by the police, but some interviewees recalled being met with reluctance by officers to share such technical geographical details. Families interpreted this as a lack of police engagement and that *their particular missing person* was not central to policing process (Edkins, 2013; Parr and Stevenson, 2013). Some discussed feeling confused and frustrated, then, not only over the lack of clarity about who was in charge and how the search was going, but also due to a mismatch of expectations in relation to analytical and spatial parameters of police search:

*I just felt at the time that their analysis was poor. I was expecting a more detailed analysis of what he was wearing and the circumstances and his situation more from them.* (Sasha, wife to Bill).

For others, the lack of demonstrable or varied *technical* search activity led to deep and resentful attitudes towards the police:

*An hour searching for a young women, an hour search!, no heat seeking!, there was no scuba sonar! We are not even one hundred percent sure whether there was even a lifeboat, they just combed the beach and said “I don’t know, we’ll just leave it at that then shall we?”* (Raquelle, sister to Libby, missing for 3 years).

Where specific details of search were well communicated, it directly related to family perceptions of its standard, and their enhanced emotional handling of the (potential) loss. Below Sasha answered a question about what forms of search information helped her emotionally:

*There was a Search and Rescue Officer ... He talked about how difficult it is to find a body after a certain length of time, how the first twenty-four hours are crucial, the fact that fourteen days have gone past made the search much more difficult and would need a specialist dog by then and he talked, but not in a frightening way, he talked about other environmental factors that you would look at .... I know it sounds gruesome, but in a way that actually was tolerable to listen to and I was able to acknowledge it.* (Sasha, wife to Bill).

Here Sasha, expectant and demanding of the police officers involved in her case, was appreciative of the shared environmental knowledge of the possible decay of her husband’s missing body. Her need to understand the technicalities, confront the material details of possible death and share in the detailed geographical analysis of search was critical in her rejection of policing relationships where this service was not offered. Sasha wanted to be involved with the logic and rationale of search based on *her* knowledge of her missing husband (and see Parr and Stevenson, 2014 on witnessing the missing), so that she could be emotionally assured that highly professional and expert work was taking place.

Although many families understood that they cannot obstruct or disrupt police investigation, many were sure that they could have

<sup>7</sup> A new approach (adopted by some police forces in the UK, see ACPO, 2013) focuses on attempting to make the police response more proportionate and risk-based by no longer requiring officers to attend incidents involving people who are not where they are expected to be, but are not thought to be at risk. Such people are classified as ‘absent’ rather than ‘missing’ and this categorisation relates to search tactics and allocated resources.

more productive working partnerships, and that improved communication, information flow, content and task allocation could reflect and produce better police-family liaison. Moreover, such participation could help manage distressing emotions. Indeed, for Sasha, as for others, the reluctance of the police to share information and logic for search parameters led to her conducting her own search enquiries as a response to her strong needs in this respect.

## 5. Search/ing: family practices over time

*It doesn't matter whether its five years, ten years, twenty years. It never stops. It never stops in your mind. You're always searching. So searching is emotionally exhausting as well as physically exhausting and mentally exhausting because you are having to think of new ways to search all the time, as time goes by. Twenty years is a long time.* (Misha, mother of Rob, missing for 20 years).

In light of the varied experiences reported above and the support of an active charity (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013), the families participating in our research reported being forced or inspired to take search/ing into their own hands (and see Olsen, 2008). This section explores what families have to say about such practices, and Table 1 shows the range of practical search activities that the interviewees discussed. The table differentiates different types of activity – physical, documentary and virtual, social networking, liaison with other agencies/professionals and other practices – and captures the enormous lengths to which families may go in order to try to locate their loved one or information about them. Sally explained why the sheer emotional trauma of a loved one's absence can galvanise people into initial search actions:

*It's like a massive shock, but then you kind of feel like, well for me, I kind of felt like I had to take action. If someone dies you can't do anything about it, whereas [for missing people] you kind of feel like you have to do something.* (Sally, daughter to Ned, missing for 7 days, returned).

Advertising the absence via posters, phone-calls, door knocking and route-tracing are some of the very first search practices tried by families. Media reports of human absence (particularly children) can prompt intensive and large-scale family and community search/ing (see photograph 1):

Intensive search may take place with police co-ordination, as in the photograph above, or without, as these memories of the turmoil of early search reveal:

*I got into organisational mode. So I contacted Missing People, got some posters printed out, got some of my old friends from home to hand them out around the town and then we started looking at places that we felt he might have gone to. We went to London and we stayed there for two nights and basically went round all the big stations and stuff like that. As soon as you turn up in London you are like I don't even know where to start you know what I mean, you are just walking through parks and things going "I don't even know what I'm looking for." So I spent two days in London and then we went to [East town] briefly and then we drove down to [the South Coast].* (Sally, daughter to Ned).

Many families pound the streets, draw up maps and follow lines of lateral thinking about where their missing members might be. This initial physical search is characterised by an intensity that belies the weight of the loss for families and the unbearable nature of the absence. Raquelle described how she first intensively

searched the beach where her sister was last seen for the smallest of traces of her, and still finds it difficult to stop doing so:

*Looking, looking. Going up to that beach every day, every day ... A lot of walking, beach combing, looking not just for my sister but for belongings, her house keys. I had my husband climbing up rocks and looking in little crevices, just to see, and the woodlands that were around there. I don't think I'll ever stop.* (Raquelle, sister to Libby).

Several interviewees reported on their detailed search for personal belongings and effects, as they actively seek both a person and their physical traces:

*I put up about two hundred and fifty posters on the hill saying we are looking for a haversack, we are looking for a black coat, black walking boots.* (Sasha, wife to Bill).

Such search/ing practices draw on latent knowledges of the personal geographies of their missing member. In practical terms, this can mean remembering and retracing their usual routes and routines, but also more in-depth and emotive appraisals of 'where matters' to the missing person and why. This difficult task might take in childhood haunts, sites of romantic significance, death places and graves, well-appreciated landscapes and favourite views, or general areas, regions and preferred pathways. For Pauline, whose son has been reported as missing many times, she related how she manages the physical search, bound up with a detailed knowledge of her son and the local area:

*I go out in the car to where I think his normal haunts would be, little paths he would take ... it might be midnight, but usually about ten, eleven, twelve, the streets around our area tend to clear and there's decent street lights. So I go ... I drive round and round ... all the streets [...], because of a pattern that he's followed in past experience.* (Pauline, mother of Paul, missing for 2–4 days repeatedly).

In exercising geographical imaginations about where matters to the missing person, a process of re-considering the person, what is known of the missing life, and the cause of the disappearance often occurs. It is in this reflexive space where transitional and dynamic emotions become most apparent, and a shift in effect from external to more interval search/ing may also occur (from pounding the streets to re-search/ing memories and emotions).

## 6. Search/ing: looking and remembering

In imagining the spaces where a missing person might be, different scenarios are often considered over time. For many people who live with the ambiguous loss of a missing person over prolonged periods, different emotions emerge at different times and relate to changing understandings of what might have happened. Gladys, whose husband has been missing for 20 years, charted such change: from her first recognition that he had gone missing, 'Just complete shock. Shock and fear. Just horrified', to more hopeful 'middle years' where 'I'd been over to [European island] where he'd [possibly] been sighted', to latter feelings of abandonment, 'he's always somewhere. It might not even be his face sometimes [in my dreams], I just wake up feeling deceived'. In such search/ing journeys, which sometimes occur over decades, the absent person resonates across subtly transitional emotional lives, and alongside changing capacities for living life. In parallel, the mode of search may begin to change:

*It's a bit of moving on, but it's also realising that he's made his decision. He's made that decision to go, for whatever reason, we*

*don't know what that is and we haven't got any control over that ... So therefore we might as well get on with what we're doing. I think we've coped by being able to reassure ourselves we've done as much as we could.* (Charles, father of Simon, missing 2 years).

Physical search practices, ones located in external space, and aided by calling, maps, walking, driving, posters and other technologies, may therefore diminish over time as *other types* of search activity take over (such as Internet use). Here search/ing becomes part of a more

**Table 1**  
Range of search activities reported by families of missing people.

Family Search Activity
<b>Physical</b>
<b>Searching personal belongings and accommodation</b>
<b>Site-specific search on foot and in car</b>
<b>Door knocking</b>
<b>Design maps and search teams</b>
<b>Visits to homeless shelters and rough sleeping spaces</b>
<b>Visiting cafes, pubs and supermarkets</b>
<b>Computer search</b>
<b>Interviewing local specialists/significant actors (e.g. shop-workers, landowners, drug dealers, search and rescue services, retired police officers)</b>
<b>Replicating/re-enacting journeys</b>
<b>Documentary /Virtual</b>
<b>Ringling mobile phone</b>
<b>Social media appeals and pages</b>
<b>Posters individually designed and with Charity Missing People</b>
<b>Media appeals (TV news and documentaries, Radio, Print)</b>
<b>Letters to all UK Health boards</b>
<b>Letters to UK monasteries</b>
<b>Letters to all churches in specific locales</b>
<b>Contacting airlines</b>
<b>Phone calls to community psychiatric services and hospitals</b>
<b>Phone calls notifying all-night supermarkets in specific locales</b>
<b>Phone calls to banking services</b>
<b>Contacting specialist services for specialist maps (e.g. RAF)</b>
<b>Contacting specialist services (e.g. VOSA, Search and Rescue services)</b>
<b>Obtaining technical reports on tides and currents</b>
<b>Contacting local MP</b>
<b>Contacting Embassies and the British High Commission</b>
<b>Letters to French Foreign Legion</b>
<b>Contacting celebrities for assistance with media profiling</b>
<b>Formal requests for further search to police teams</b>
<b>Downloading NPIA guidance on missing persons</b>
<b>Research on missing people profiling techniques</b>
<b>Research on private search and rescue and detection</b>
<b>Research on private dive teams</b>
<b>Social networks/alerts</b>
<b>Visits and calls to all family and friends and address book contacts</b>
<b>Other/charitable help</b>
<b>Missing People Charity</b>
<b>Salvation Army; Foreign Legion; homeless shelters</b>
<b>Paying for character statements from psychiatrists, significant professional others</b>
<b>Other practices</b>
<b>'Looking' but not searching</b>



**Photograph 1.** Family and community search for a missing person. Copyright James Glossop/Times Newspapers Ltd.

mutated routine in the newly established life that follows absence in long-term cases. Many discuss a lessening of general search activity, undertaking it every week or every month instead of daily. Some gradually realise or come to believe that they are no longer search/ing for a living missing person, but rather for a dead body, and this is reflected in emotions and practices which may change as a result. Indeed, the initial emotional intensity and effort of search/ing can be extremely difficult to sustain, as Raquelle elaborated:

*I can play private detective until it sends me mad, you know, so I can't. You also have to slow yourself down a little bit because you still have to go to work and you still have to be mum and you still have to function and you do have to tell yourself "just stop, just slow it down a bit" because otherwise you would be out there until it would make you ill I think. (Raquelle, sister to Libby).*

In these shifts, it is, arguably, not only the practical external modes of search that change, but also the emotional search for understanding and meaning, and the place of the missing person in the family imagination of itself. In support services, health and counselling practitioners emphasise the importance of encouraging emotional reflexivity over time:

'Empowering families to work this timeline [a trauma time-line] into a story of emotion as well as practical content, gives depth and perspective to their experience without it being just an external recount of events.' (Wayland, 2007, p16).

Although many families reported the difficult emotional consequences of 'living in limbo' (Holmes, 2008), they do not seem straightforwardly to embody the 'frozen states' that Boss's (1999) early work outlines. Rather, interviewees related nuanced strategies, actions and changing forms of emotional hope (FFMPU, 2005) that morph alongside their continued search/ing: from 'hope of a reunion, to hope of information, which finally became hope of resolution' (cited in Wayland, 2007:12). We explore these themes further, below.

For some families in long-term cases, then, active search/ing is replaced by other practices that exist alongside changing senses of, and hopes about, the missing person. Such intimacies are more

difficult to describe, but relate to an *everyday alertness* and a *latent awareness* that the missing person might be present or appear in routine or random public environments. For Alice, search/ing was hence replaced by *looking*, a qualitatively different experience, one in which the missing person is anticipated as possibly present but in ways other than via 'conscious search/ing':

*You are constantly looking even though you aren't searching ... So even though it's not a conscious search, even today we are still looking. (Alice, step-daughter to Martha).*

Sasha suggested that even 'just looking' – as an anticipatory gaze – can transform into something else again, perhaps a practice of remembering, partly through simply being in places that were significant in the relationship with the missing person:

*So it's much more [...], rather than 'a look' [...], it's a remembrance of how we used to like coming here. (Sasha, wife to Bill).*

Search/ing in family narratives is thus represented as a transformative and transforming process, moving from an intense physical search to more documentary and virtual forms, and to practices of looking and remembering. It is critical that such transformations are not understood as modelling 'normal stages' of loss (as in early conceptions of 'grief stages') and, importantly, that these can be premised on *non-linear* relationships with forms of new information, technological advances or renewed energies or optimism, amongst other factors. Sometimes this can be a dynamic process associated with, or disrupted by, the location of sudden or suspected sightings, which also become a focus for changing geographical imaginations over time. Sasha discussed the changing imaginings that were bound up with her own idealisation of where her missing husband was likely to have ended his life. She related how her initially romantic vision for where he may have chosen to die is now tempered with a more realistic assessment of the likely 'where' of her husband's body:

*We walked there, walked our dogs there and we would often go back to walk there, so it seemed the most natural place for me. In*

*hindsight, I think that's my kind of romantic ideal, because I think when you are planning to go missing with an end result, when you are going to end your life, I am not sure you are choosing to go to the most beautiful place, I think you are choosing to go to the place that you won't be found.* (Sasha, wife to Bill).

Over time, Sasha changed her view to incorporate a new, painful imaginary – that of an unknown and hidden location for her husband's body – as she gradually accepted that, in 'doing absence', missing people like her husband may seek to access precisely "the place where you won't be found" (Sasha). Geographical imaginations of 'where matters?' thus relate to the pragmatic process of search and police liaison, but also the changing ways in which those who are left behind refigure the absent person and the disappearance in their thinking and emotional life (and see also Parr and Stevenson, 2014).

## 7. Search/ing: for ways of living with ambiguous loss

*As soon as someone goes missing, I think one of the things that crosses your mind is what is going to happen if you never find them?* (Sally, daughter to Ned).

Loss that is never ending can be crippling. To be 'left behind', with little or no evidence of where a loved one has gone and whether they will return, is an intensely difficult experience. Although it is recognised that adults have a right to go absent, families often struggle to cope with the possibility that their missing person has left deliberately and without trace, especially when it seems out of character. Regardless of the time period concerned, families often long for some form of communication that would signal connection or resolution, and help them to transition away from feeling ambiguous loss. For some, as new search leads and actions reduce overtime, ambiguity may remain, accompanied with what Horacek (1995) calls 'shadow grief', referencing a sense of loss that is not acute but persists and is part of a continuing relationship with the missing person. Gladys explained her struggle to manage the ambiguity and her sense of simultaneous connection and disconnection with her missing husband following twenty years of search/ing:

*I would like ... only to see that face. I don't want to barge in and destroy anybody's life, it's not what I'm about. I just want peace of mind for myself. That's all I want, just peace of mind and to stop this never ending frustration and sadness.* (Gladys, wife to Samuel).

Until such a time, people like Gladys develop strategies in an attempt to live with absence, such as concentrating on practical issues, keeping busy to try to move away from the pain, and seeking the support of others (see Holmes, 2008). Learning to live with the constant demands of absent–presence in missing situations is complex, and interviewees still found it emotionally hard to use time for leisure instead of search/ing, although they did eventually do so:

*If I go to the ballet at the weekend, there is a little bit of you that says "oh you could have been looking at the map".* (Sasha, wife to Bill).

The need to remain alert and aware for long periods of time, readying oneself for the potential trace of the missing person, is experienced as a form of 'hyper-vigilance' and a well recognised psychological issue for the people affected (FFMPU, 2010). As a result of the long-term effects of hyper-vigilance, family members are sometimes reluctant to leave home, even for short periods, in

case of a return, but some do eventually manage this, if they put contingencies in place:

*Late Friday night, stayed there Saturday and came home Sunday. So I think that's the longest I've been away since Andrew went missing. I [texted] him, that's where we were going. And I said the keys are in the usual place if you want to come home.* (Judy, mother of Andrew).

Until a loved one is located or returned, many express the impossibility of giving up on search/ing or 'moving on'. What may be more common in long-term missing situations, however, is a transition gradually allowing more flexibility in living everyday life, as Raquelle, Sasha, Judy, Gladys and Alice all discuss in their different ways. Here families become more flexible in their search/ing practice and mode, although still perhaps bound and limited by its repetition. Understanding such repetition as examples of 'frozen loss' may risk underestimating how repeated search/ing efforts change and how the felt ambiguity of 'not knowing' can transform from raw trauma into an 'everyday remembrance' of absence, lived out through muted practices of looking, and a latent awareness that the missing person is possibly still present somewhere.

From a 'family resilience' perspective (Becvar, 2013), the quietly transformative experiences hinted at above might be understood to constitute a kind of resilience, what Masten (2001) calls the 'ordinary magic' emerging from ordinary processes in everyday life. Boss (2013, p288) elaborates this claim in the context of resilience theory and ambiguous loss, noting that, in order to move on from the 'frozen states' that a missing situation may produce in those 'left behind', it is necessary to 'revise one's attachment to a person who is missing'. She argues that 'because ambiguous loss is a relational problem, relational interventions are most effective' in achieving this revision. For Boss and Carnes (2012), relational interventions bound up with an array of therapeutic and ordinary strategies, different ways of finding meaning in an irresolvable situation, and via accepting new forms of dialectical thinking: for example, 'I have a son and he is missing, he is present and absent'. As geographers, we might also argue that the changes in the spatialities of search/ing (from 'external' physical practices through to more 'internal' remembrances and reconceptualisations) are critical in such relational dialectics and meaning-making. Flexible geographies of search/ing (reducing intensities and changing modes, re-imagining places of disappearance, accepting spaces of absent–presence) are arguably important in themselves as processes in the difficult task of living with ambiguous loss. Search/ing thus might be understood as comprised of relational spatialities, not just signs and symptoms of frozen or flexible ways of living with loss, but as a means through which emotional transformations might be lived out.

## 8. Conclusion

*"The absence of people that have been, of things that have been but are not anymore, can hurt deeply. The experience of such absence can exert so much force, so much gravity, that it feels as if it pulls one's heart out"* (Frers, 2013; 431/2).

*I still text him every single night, and I suppose I do that because it's a form of contact with him, as if I'm talking to him ... [but] the messages have changed.* (Jane, mother of Paul).

In this paper we recognise that there are different spatialities of search/ing which are related to the ambiguous loss that accompanies the search for a missing person. We have suggested that there are numerous spaces that families of missing people inhabit, both material and emotional. In journeying from police liaison to

street-search/ing to virtual spaces of tracing work to living everyday life with barely conscious practices of 'looking' and remembering in multiple public spaces, family members demonstrate their changing response to their unstable status as 'left behind'. These changing search practices and geographies – deliberately not represented here as a stage model – are also accompanied by changing feelings, with the voices above describing tentative ways of responding to the loss endured. We understand these narratives to do more than demonstrate frozen states of psychological trauma where 'families cannot make decisions, cannot act, cannot let go' (Boss, 1999: 61), but, equally, neither do they represent a straightforward *moving on* whereby the ambiguity of loss is resolved. In arguing thus, we suggest that the experience of a missing person's absence is not *just* endured as a deep and forceful hurt (referencing Frers, above) for those left behind, but is also experienced as a processual emotional geography (referencing Jane, above). Here, spatialities of search become important entities through which ambiguous loss can be newly articulated and understood but never be entirely fixed.

In Boss's later collaborative work (Boss and Carnes, 2012: 457), the authors advocate a new kind of search in the face of ambiguous absence; as they say, 'when loss has no certainty, the search for meaning is excruciatingly long and painful, but it is the only way to find resiliency and some measure of peace'. For Boss (2004), a key step for those left behind is an acceptance of their lack of control and mastery over the situation. Instead of relentlessly search/ing for a physical presence or news of the absent person, a different kind of *search for meaning* may incorporate new relationships with the missing person. In previous work (Parr and Stevenson, 2014), we have suggested (and following Wayland, 2007) that this might happen through small ritualistic celebrations of the story and person *so far*. Indeed, it may be that in generating 'ideas about how the missing person can be celebrated', instead of just missed, that helps produce meaningful lives lived for those 'left behind' (and see Carnes, 2008). This is not the same as remembering the dead and experiencing the continuing bonds in grief (as discussed in the introduction): for in this case, families still hold open the possibility that the absent missing may one day *speak back* to address their place in such narratives. Such an approach acknowledges, and does not deny, uncertainty, and, Boss (2008, 19) argues that, 'it is because of the mystery that we honour rather than memorialise ... by having a tribute, the uncertainty is not denied'. Family members often realise they may *never* know 'the where' of their dead/alive missing person and so a new space between loss and mourning (what Wayland calls 'the space between grief and trauma') may have to be found and occupied in order to live with the ambiguity of present-absence. We hope this article is one extra resource for that difficult journey.

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