Australian Families of Missing People:
Narrating Their Lived Experience

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Certificate of Authorship

I certify that I am the sole author and that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify to the best of my knowledge that any help in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Geoffrey Thomas Glassock
May 2011
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Publications of This Research to Date


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>Computed Tomography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>Culturally And Linguistically Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFAT</td>
<td>Department of Foreign Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJAG</td>
<td>Department of Justice and Attorney General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFMPC</td>
<td>Families and Friends of Missing Persons Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFMPU</td>
<td>Family and Friends of Missing Persons Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS</td>
<td>International Social Service Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NACMP</td>
<td>National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NALAG</td>
<td>National Association for Loss and Grief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCMA</td>
<td>National Center for Missing Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCMEC</td>
<td>National Center for Missing and Exploited Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NISMART</td>
<td>National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMPCC</td>
<td>National Missing Persons Coordinating Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMPH</td>
<td>National Missing Persons Helpline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMPU</td>
<td>National Missing Persons Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASH</td>
<td>Natural, Accidental, Suicidal and Homicidal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESB</td>
<td>Non-English Speaking Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVCS</td>
<td>Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service</td>
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</table>
Abstract

Australian Families of Missing People
Narrating Their Lived Experience

Increasing numbers of Australians and people across the globe go missing each year and this has triggered an expression of national and international concern. Australia has been at the forefront in developing initiatives to combat this problem. People of all ages still go missing, and for the families of those who disappear, the loss is traumatic. Research on the families of long-term missing persons, to this point, has been limited. Therefore, familial experience is not well understood. Little is known of the trauma, loss and grief associated with a missing person within these families.

This study provides initial empirical data, which examine the experience of families who have a long-term missing family member. In-depth interviews with sixteen family members and one friend revealed narratives of the experience of living with a person who has disappeared. Interview data were analysed using a narrative method, and three major themes emerged from the data. The first narrative component speaks about the universal experience of all families of missing persons. Within this, three themes are presented: the common elements, the cost factor and the coping. The second narrative explores the known outcomes, that is, where families have a definite outcome. Within these definitive outcomes, there are two possibilities: expected outcomes and unexpected outcomes. The third discusses the unknown outcomes: the threads of lost and found and the long-term missing are explored in addition to the continuing relationship with the missing person.
The findings of this study highlight the need for a biopsychosocial framework to understand the ways in which families experience the psychological presence of a person who is physically absent. This framework acknowledges that a person goes missing from a particular social context and that the ambiguity of the loss and the grief the family experiences does not lessen the continuing bond they share with their loved one.

This framework of an ongoing relationship allows for ambiguity over whether the missing person is alive or dead. The findings recognise the uniqueness of the loss experience of these families, and a grief model of missingness is proposed. This initial narrative study of familial experience of missing persons provides the foundation for future areas of research.