

*“I still hope, but what I hope for now has changed”*

**A narrative inquiry study of hope and ambiguous loss when someone is missing.**

Sarah Wayland, BSW

School of Health, University of New England

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England.

8 April 2015

*I certify that the substance of thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.*

*I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.*

Signature



## **Abstract**

More than 35000 Australians are reported missed each year. National data identifies that the incidence of people going missing, and of those who remain missing long-term (more than six months), are increasing. When a person is missing, the impact on the emotional wellbeing of those left behind is profound. There is a dearth of international research examining the experience of long-term loss when a person is missing. Further, limited research exists on the social constructs of what such loss means and how it is experienced. Limited prior literature reports that loss for those left behind is both ambiguous and unresolved. Hope is a persistent inclusion in the narratives of those describing their experience of missing someone, yet the role of hope has not been explored. This study examines the broader experience of what it means for families of missing people to hope. This project was grounded in a narrative inquiry framework bound to a reflexive praxis. Stories of hope and loss were shared by 19 family members of missing people with experiences post-missing stretching from 9 months to 34 years, which reflected on the time since the missing person vanished. Three phases of data collection included 5 narrative in-depth interviews, a virtual focus group of 14 participants, followed by an invitation for all participants to clarify their experiences. Eight individuals chose to reengage the researcher. The analysis revealed five significant findings: 1) hope existed within the participants' narratives which provided meaning to their bond to the missing person; 2) hope splinters once the physical loss of the missing person is realised; 3) hope and time are intrinsically linked where hope does not decrease over time but signifies new attachment to life post-loss; 4) there is scope to identify hope as having public narratives openly shared with others and private

narratives that are not willingly shared by those left behind when engaging with the media and the broader community; and, 5) the acknowledgment that hope allows families to exist in the liminal space between their missing person's presence and absence. Importantly, the study highlights the shifting foundations of hope where its inclusion is not duplicated between family members; rather, the experience of hope is an individual engagement impacted by external forces. Finally, the study recommends that the rich reflections of hope uncovered are incorporated by those agencies and services from whom the left behind seek support. These include law enforcement, the Coroner's Office, and therapeutic support. These agencies and services need to further explore their roles as 'hope enablers' and 'hope detractors' in the lives of those learning to live with the uncertainty of missing.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter One: Peering in – an introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>The significance of the research</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>What is the purpose of the study?</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Definition of terms</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Missing Person .....	24
Long-term missing person.....	25
Ambiguous Loss .....	26
Hope .....	27
Family member .....	27
<b>Overview of the thesis</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Theories and literature relevant to this emerging field</b> .	<b>33</b>
<b>How the review was conducted</b> .....	<b>35</b>
Inclusion criteria.....	38
Exclusion criteria .....	38
<b>Critical analysis of the review findings</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>Situating the research question within the literature</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>1. Bereavement and the theories of loss</b> .....	<b>42</b>
Shifting narratives of bereavement .....	43
The significance of grief theory on the research question .....	45
<b>2. Theories specific to ambiguous loss</b> .....	<b>49</b>
Analysing the literature on ambiguous loss .....	51
The Australian experience of ambiguous loss.....	53
Siblings experience of ambiguous loss .....	55
Responding to ambiguous loss.....	58
The theoretical assumptions about the liminal space .....	65
<b>3. Understanding the missing persons’ population</b> .....	<b>68</b>
Missing persons in Australia – the scope of the problem.....	69
Limitations in understanding the missed and the left behind .....	75
<b>4. The theoretical constructs specific to the study</b> .....	<b>79</b>
Ritual and the missing person .....	80
Belonging to a group where membership is not welcomed .....	83
Interactions between media and the families of missing people .....	86
<b>Reframing ambiguous loss through the telling of stories</b> .....	<b>89</b>
<b>Conceptualising the research project</b> .....	<b>91</b>
<b>Chapter Three: A review of hope</b> .....	<b>95</b>
<b>Is hope socially and/or subjectively constructed?</b> .....	<b>97</b>
What is hope theory?.....	98
<b>Conceptualising hope</b> .....	<b>100</b>
Hope in a bereavement context .....	104
Hope and ambiguity .....	109

Has hope been specifically explored in response to someone missing?	113
Hope and the physical search	115
If someone is missing, does hope always exist?	118
Hope and liminality	121
Does the literature tell us what hope is not?	122
<b>Concluding thoughts</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Shifting focus from practitioner to researcher</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>So how do I utilise this narrative ‘knowing’?</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Conducting the study</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Choice of methodology – can hope be studied given its intangible qualities?</b>	<b>139</b>
Use of qualitative research methods	139
Narrative Inquiry Framework	140
<b>Storytelling and liminality</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Research design</b>	<b>146</b>
Ethics and use of professional sources	146
Recruitment	147
Selection of participants	151
Participants	156
The data collection process	163
Phase One: In-depth interviews via multiple methods of engagement	165
Phase Two: Virtual Focus Group – A computer-mediated engagement	173
Phase Three: Invitation to clarify	181
Transcription	183
Analysing the shared stories	185
<b>Summary</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Chapter Six – Living in the space in between</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>Understanding the results</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>Preparing for the narrative inquiry interviews</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>Phase One outcomes: can you define hope?</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>Deconstructing the tiered schema of hope</b>	<b>200</b>
Being hope-full	201
Multiple weavings of hope	203
Hope-less interspersed with trepidation	205
<b>Preparing the themes to present to Phase Two participants</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Chapter Seven – The shades of hope</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>1. Shifting concepts of hope</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>2. The space between public and private narratives</b>	<b>214</b>
Unspoken narratives and the influence of others	218
Hope and the role of the counsellor	226
<b>3. The shared hope zone</b>	<b>231</b>
What occurs in this shared space?	233
Hope for the self in surviving ‘not knowing’	234
What exists within the space between shared hope?	237

Community impact.....	244
<b>4. A hierarchy of hope.....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>Future-oriented hope practice .....</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Chapter Eight: Conceptualising ambiguity .....</b>	<b>256</b>
Hope is present for all families of missing people .....	256
Hope splinters after the physicality of the loss is realised .....	256
Hope is attached to time.....	257
Hope has public and private narratives .....	257
Hope provides the capacity to live in the space in between .....	258
<b>The needs of those left behind .....</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>Are we good at not knowing?.....</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>Hope, wellbeing and ambiguity.....</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>Hope allows for sustained tolerating in the liminal space .....</b>	<b>266</b>
<b>Hope is fundamental to living with ambiguous loss.....</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>Is the right to acknowledge the loss disenfranchised dependent on the circumstances of the disappearance? .....</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>Chapter Nine: Applying the results of the study and understanding future research direction .....</b>	<b>275</b>
<b>Engagement .....</b>	<b>275</b>
Therapeutic services.....	276
Law enforcement.....	278
Media .....	280
<b>Research gaps .....</b>	<b>283</b>
Section 1: The left behind .....	284
Section 2: The population of missing people .....	288
<b>Chapter Ten: Looking forwards.....</b>	<b>293</b>
<b>Limitations of this study .....</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>302</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>306</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>327</b>
<b>Appendix A Ethics Approval .....</b>	<b>327</b>
<b>Appendix B Information/Media Flyer .....</b>	<b>328</b>
<b>Appendix C Interview Schedule .....</b>	<b>329</b>
<b>Appendix D and E Information Sheets and Consent forms.....</b>	<b>330</b>
<b>Appendix F Email to Participants .....</b>	<b>336</b>
<b>Appendix G.....</b>	<b>337</b>
Pre-group prompt: .....	337
Week One:.....	339
Week Two:.....	341
Week three: .....	344
Week Four:.....	347
Finishing up – concluding comments .....	349

## List of Tables

Table 1	Referral Methods.....	151
Table 2	Participant involvement in the three phases of the study.....	162
Table 3	Virtual Focus Group Engagement.....	180

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Research Timeline.....	155
Figure 2	Comment Additions.....	174
Figure 3	Virtual Focus Group Site Screenshot.....	177
Figure 4	The tiered schema of hope.....	198
Figure 5	The shifting of hope over time.....	210
Figure 6	Shared Hope Zone.....	232

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was undertaken with the financial support of an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship as well as a University of New England Completion Scholarship Award for which I am grateful.

This study began when my son was 16 weeks old. He is now in his final year of preschool. The shift from a small baby, who would sleep on my lap while I wrote, to a little boy driving trucks up and down my arm as I work reminds me that time does truly fly. That the growing of a baby into a walking, talking person parallels my own journey of practitioner to researcher.

Firstly I wish to thank my research team – Associate Professor Myfanwy Maple, Dr Kathy McKay and Dr Geoffrey Glassock. In 2007 Myf approached me at a conference and asked if I had ever considered a PhD. I am indebted to her for sparking an idea that has led me to this point in time. Her good humour and expert guidance has kept me focussed on the endpoint. Kathy's texts reminding me to put down my work and stand in the sunshine alongside her superior editing skills allowed me to craft this significant body of work and Geoff's emails telling me how well I was doing in raising my babies alongside writing kept me in a safe, academic cocoon. Thank you.

I would also like to acknowledge my family and most importantly my constant, my husband. What I found nearer the end of this study was the way that in listening to the traumatic stories of my participants my worldview shifted. Thank you for reminding me that my connection to you all, a chance to have a

laugh, share a meal and be loved in return really is the meaning of life.

To my children Poppy and Henry and my step-girls Gemma and Olivia thank you for letting me be a partially present mum for so long. For gaining independent skills so that you didn't starve and always asking how I was during those long hours at my computer.

This study would not have been possible without the participant's stories – to every person I have met who offered a sample of what was happening for them after their loved one vanished – thank you. I can never reproduce the complexity of your stories within these pages, but I can share them so that others understand that being *between here and gone* is not a path anyone would wish upon another.

Sarah Wayland