

## Chapter One: Peering in – an introduction

*“Queremos paz’ read a sign at the protest yesterday. ‘We want peace’ it said.”*  
Parents of the 43 students missing in Mexico City (Devert, 2014).

Each day in Australia 100 missing persons reports are received by law enforcement agencies. Of those reported missing many are located quickly yet a small percentage remains missing for an extended period. The psychological and financial costs of being missing long-term (characterised as in excess of six months) are significant. Research identifies that for each person missing up to twelve people will be impacted by that loss (Henderson and Henderson, 1998). The social discourse surrounding the experience of being left behind speaks of a disenfranchised grief exacerbated by the inclusion of ambiguity. Hope exists in this space – between the person being here and gone. What this hope signifies is the primary focus of this study.

Australian reports of missing people are characterized by similar proportions of males and females with episodes of absence explained as unsolved homicides, suicide where the body has not yet been discovered, misadventure or to cases where information as to why a person could be here one moment and then gone the next is not available (James, Anderson & Putt, 2008). A growth in research exploring the experience of being left behind in Australia, Europe, the Americas and the United Kingdom has been evident in the last 15 years. Yet, this expansion of understanding of lived experience is coupled with minimal investment in the Australian sector of therapeutic support for those left behind.

Individuals impacted by this loss – primarily the families and friends of the

missing person – continue to grow numerically, with data showing that an estimated quarter of million people in Australia will be affected by missing at some stage in their lifetime (Henderson and Henderson, 1998).

The aim of this chapter is to provide, through introductory reference to the literature, a foundation as to the reasons why this research was conducted. The chapter is divided in to two parts. The first tells a story that began soon after meeting families of missing people as a way of providing a foundation for the development of the research question: *What do the stories of the left behind tell us about hope and the way it is experienced when someone is missing?* The purpose of storytelling is to demonstrate to the reader how my identity and long-standing association with families of missing people in Australia assisted in building rapport with participants as well as part of my reflexive praxis. This awareness, through reflecting on the stories told to me and in preparation for hearing new stories, are influenced by my professional identity as well as my personal connection to stories of life and loss. This reflexive praxis throughout the data collection and analysis period formed my capacity to explore and dissect the research question. The second part of the chapter provides definitions of key terms utilised within the remainder of the thesis to provide a link between this introduction and Chapter Two (the theories specific to understanding ambiguous loss).

Reflecting upon the purpose of this narrative inquiry study, living with an unresolved loss is understood from the stories read, the news images consumed and our endless queries as to the whereabouts of people lost. Later chapters, that

present the findings of the study, suggest that the families of missing people invite the community, via the media, to participate in their narratives of hope. The early formation of the research question identified a moment for me as a potential researcher – of hearing of the concept of hope for the first time after meeting a woman whose son had vanished on the way home from work. Hoping that someone had seen his car after it turned out of the car park, and out of CCTV vision never to be seen again. Her hope, more than a decade on from the last known sighting, oscillated between wanting him to return and seeking justice on his behalf. I found that I catalogued these shifting concepts of hope unintentionally over the years in my role in providing therapeutic support to families of missing people. Each time I observed, through reflecting on the stories shared with me, of hope-filled narratives, my understanding became more detailed, richer with every anecdote shared.

Through illustrating the use of reflexive praxis in the approach to the study, attention focussed upon what May and Perry (2011) refer to as the ‘knower’ and the ‘known’. What is looked through, in relation to the study, and what is looked at. The use of these stories demonstrates how pre-reflexive assumptions (developed by time spent in the counselling space with families and my own experiences of ambiguous loss) prompted the setting aside of what I assumed to know, to seeking to clarify what Hunter, 2011, refers to as ‘multiple truths’. The narrative inquiry framework situates me in the midst of the stories. Where my pre-study knowledge places me as both knower and what is known, via the participants. This thesis then is a critical analysis of those observations – of the intersection between myself, as the researcher, and the generosity of the families

of missing people who invited me into those spaces with them, who chose to share their stories of hope in a time of absence, irrespective of how long that absence might have been.

Edkins (2011) explains that the socially constructed ideas surrounding the understanding of loss for families of missing people is persistently lacking in depth, but her main point is clear: the community is interested in the narratives of those left behind and the concept of a person being here one moment and then gone the next. Yet this positions itself outside our perspective of how the world is intended to function. Ideas which state as their core that “horrific as it is... we are still holding out hope” (Ralston, Partridge and Levy, 2014) are shared by those in the community who passively participate in stories of loss via the media or their own familial connections. Families speaking of ‘someone, somewhere knowing something’ (Murray, 2014) becomes the call collectively shared by the larger community when attempting to seek answers that are not forthcoming, where extended periods of ‘not knowing’ differentiate themselves from a solution-focused worldview. Boss (1999) identifies that hope is uniquely attached to the experience of an ambiguous or unresolved loss, concepts defined later within this chapter. However, in analysing this unique attachment in comparison to, perhaps, a universal view of hope being a future-oriented belief Cutcliffe (1998) asserts that hope might be subjectively constructed, dependent on life experience, connection to the person lost or exposure to generational trauma.

This thesis aims to provide a breadth and richness to understanding hope

and ambiguous loss. In order to provide a foundation for this curiosity, attached to the idea of hope I have included the following story that offers insight into the complexity of experience for families of missing people, as well as those that support them.

In February 2004 I sat down at my desk to begin a new job. It was a temporary position where my primary role was to respond therapeutically to families who had reported someone missing to the police. Newly approved by the New South Wales (NSW) Government, the funding grant provided 12 weeks of salary for a counsellor to examine whether support was necessary for people left behind. A small group of families of missing people, who felt strongly about their personal experiences of isolation and disconnection following the reporting of their family member to the police, generated significant policy debate about the need for such a service. Lobbying the state government resulted in the funding grant, with the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) established within the Victims of Crime Bureau (now named Victims Services). At that stage in NSW almost 8000 people were reported missing each year (Henderson and Henderson, 1999), yet the number of families who might require support was untested. My new role had asked for limited criteria during the recruitment process, other than a social work or psychology qualification and a willingness to explore what might be useful for people living between absence and presence. It was a solitary position – there were no team members to debrief with, just a desk and the book *Unresolved Loss* (Boss, 1999), a collection of phone messages from those who had already left their details waiting for someone to call them back, and a telephone ready to take calls. After the first few awkward exchanges with families, whose grief had been compounded by years of ineffectual support seeking, I chose to explore both the practical and emotional implications in unison with living with their losses. Traditional

notions of counselling would need to be set aside in order to better understand the practicalities of the families' lived experience before fine-tuning the bereavement counselling skills I had developed during my career as a social worker. Families who contacted the service were often in the midst of hysteria. They had reported someone missing and then became stuck, not wanting to move further than a few minutes from their home in case the person returned, the phone rang or worse – the police came and knocked on their door. So I travelled to them and I listened to their stories.

Two weeks into the job I received a call from a woman whose words had to be deciphered between her sobs. She said she needed me to visit her mother, a woman in her mid-eighties who was struggling with the loss of her husband. It was the second time he had vanished – the first time he had been recovered quickly after injuring himself at the local railway station as a way to manage his declining mental health. This time they thought it was different: he hadn't been found. The weather was getting cooler and they worried where he had gone and if he was warm.

From the daughter's account, her mother was bereft – lost in ideas of where he could have possibly gone. The next afternoon, I drove out to the non-descript suburb in northwest Sydney. I climbed the three flights of stairs to her small apartment. The front door was open but a heavy wire door obscured the view into the flat. As I peered in before knocking a tiny voice jumped back at me. About 10 centimetres from my face was an elderly woman, with a mess of curly white hair. 'Hello Sarah,' she said and opened the door 'I've been waiting for you.'

We sat in her lounge room. She sat across from me on the single lounge chair with the remote control propped on the arm. She told me to sit on the sofa and tried to get me to eat the cake she had laid out.

I'd worked out that this job was different to the statutory social work field I had come from before. No one had ever been happy to see me when I'd knocked on their door; no cakes had ever been baked and if they had I would have been too suspicious to eat them. She pointed to the photos on the wall above me, telling me that they had been transferred from the big family home that they had owned close by when they had moved to this tiny apartment because it was only the two of them. Their three adult children had grown and moved on.

The old antique gold frames were mismatched to the 1970s unit they now lived in. It was as if the whole house had been transported and then shrunk to fit the surroundings. The photos were of her husband – proudly standing in a soldier's uniform decades before. There were a few photos on the coffee table to show me what he looked like now, but she kept glancing back at the older pictures whenever she talked about him. Her stories were long and detailed, there were no tears spent, despite her daughter assuring me that she needed help.

I would come to learn that, in meeting hundreds of families over the years, the insistence by others that a person needed help with their grief often sat with their own discomfort with what this type of loss represented – loss that had no answers. Despite the lack of tears, there was just a sad resignation in her voice, a tiredness that she described as years of hoping that her husband would find his way again – that he had been psychologically missing for years despite sitting next to her on the lounge. His life had been characterized by stories of trauma and torture as part of his time in the army almost six decades before. She said these stories had haunted him his whole life – ones he had tried to escape from by bike riding his spare hours away and when his body said he could ride no more he vanished – first into himself and then literally, physically.

The police were unsure where he had gone and how long he could manage alone. Unlike the disappearance of a young child, the response to this loss of a man who had gone before seemed more measured and calm, but with an underlying despondency that perhaps he wouldn't come home again.

The last-known sighting had been received a week after he left. The sighting spoke of him walking along a street in the place where he and his wife had travelled to for their honeymoon. He had stopped to talk to a woman pruning her camellias, he told her he was out for a walk and that he was far from home. She offered to help, noticing he had a walking stick, but he said he was fine. He was last seen walking uphill to look out of the valley on a cool, crisp day.

Three years later a bushwalker stumbled upon that man's remains at the base of that valley. Just as I had done on that very first meeting, I found myself driving out again to the home. I'd moved from working as a counsellor to writing a book for the Australian Federal Police to assist other health care professionals in responding to the needs of people left behind (Wayland, 2007). The family managed to find my new details and the daughter rang again to ask me to help. I was welcomed back into the house, the place where we'd spent hours as a family navigating the emotional, legal and practical aspects of the complex grief that each of his children and grandchildren had lived through but his wife had not: her conversations with me were rich and complex. Her slow, methodical capacity to work through years of grief layered within the psychological and then physical loss of her husband were profound, the sharing of her insights were calm and measured.

There had rarely been outward displays of this woman's grief, just a chance to speak of regret in not being able to 'reach' her husband, of relief that she no longer had to care for him, and of concern for her children's wellbeing. I was asked to speak at his

funeral, to explain how his wife had held on to hope both while he had been here and after he had vanished. I was asked not to speak about his return, his location, but rather about the years of missing that had permeated their marriage, about the hope that she would survive the loss of the man she had watched disconnect from the world for most of his adult life. The stories she told pushed me to not assume a universal response to loss when a person was missing. Here, the silencing of the story of the missing person needed to be listened to alongside the needs of the family that the ambiguity of the loss gave me, as a counsellor, the chance to sit within that space where the person could be both alive and deceased and to learn how hope shifted within.

In a bereavement context, hope is defined as an engagement in a future-oriented belief (Cutcliffe, 1998) where the inclusion of hope signifies an idea that the person living with loss might be emerging from the past, perhaps ready to live again. It is impossible to turn on the news, open a newspaper, and listen to a story of loss without the word ‘hope’ creeping into its descriptions. As a community we attach meaning to the idea of holding onto a future where answers may be revealed, where complex difficulties will fall away and clarity will return to provide the context for how we live our lives. Yet the stories of hope for the families of the missing are as complex and unique as the story told above – of the public explorations of hope attached to the return of the missing person and the private engagement with hope that the individual will in some ways survive, or at the very least tolerate the ambiguity that such a loss creates.

## **The significance of the research**

The story shared above is one of many that assisted in developing this research study and the motivation to explore hope in a context of ambiguity. The exploration of hope, and its persistent inclusion in the narratives of those left behind, clarified its importance. Hope had not yet been viewed as a standalone concept in the context of missing people and ambiguity, as will be developed further within Chapter Three's literature review. Yet within each of the research studies reviewed, hope was seen as being central to the experience of unresolved loss. Prior research, as outlined in Chapter Three, noted hope in two differing contexts. First, Hogben (2006) spoke of hope in the context that "missing is experienced as a form of waiting where anticipation is populated with both worry and hope" (p. 328): a person within this space of worrying and hoping engage in an idea that the future is uncertain. Second a recent honours thesis by MacBride (2013) spoke of hope in a context of sibling loss where

Participants maintain hope for reunification, clarification of an outcome to end their ambiguity; yet show different types of closure. While [one] waits to hear that her brother has been found, [another] reflects on the confusion of ambiguity and closure, demonstrating that the thought of closure might be harder for him to manage than on-going ambiguity (p. 126).

Ideas of previous explorations of hope that sit within the studies reviewed for this project shaped the formation of this research question.

The notions of hope and resilience were noted during the early stages of the development of the research question. However, it was decided, to focus solely

on hope given that lived experience texts relating to missing people (Jones 1988, Flint 2005) contextualized hope as having scope to move from anticipation to declining optimism and then again of looking to the future. Here Flint (2005) reflected on the disappearance of her brother, four years prior, and the sensation of lightness returning despite ambiguity persisting:

It was quite something to feel good again' Ellen Flint ponders years after the disappearance of her brother Glenn 'to feel hope bursting out of my chest, to be able to feel excited about things, to daydream and want and hope for things. Sadness packed a punch (p. 249).

The term 'resilience' is commonly utilised as "achieving a difficult goal" (Poulson, 2008, p. 27). However given the inherent lack of control when someone is missing, this meaning raised concerns that participants might misconstrue the inclusion of the term in the research question as working towards a resolution. Here, the length of time the participants' missing person had been lost meant resolution might never come. If resilience was included in a similar context of hope, the researcher might inadvertently define hope as optimism for an outcome, minimising the potential of the data to reveal hope as something far more complex than first anticipated. Given these concerns, the research question excluded overt references to resilience, choosing to centre upon detailed open-ended questions such as 'Tell me of your experience of hope following the disappearance of your family member?' refined after significant review of the literature available (additional detail can be located in Chapter Five – Methodology). The focus of the narrative inquiry question was not to define or highlight how the participants might interpret hope, but to provide a

space where hope could be imagined by each of the participants and then explored individually and collectively.

The significance of the research focus and the capacity to gather hope, via storytelling, was that no other primary research studies that focus on hope as a central character in the narratives of the lives of those left behind have been conducted. It was anticipated that asking the question: *'How did hope feature in your life after the loss of your missing person?* might begin to unravel hope— where hope was contextualised within the narratives of families of those missing long-term. It was hypothesized that hope may fluctuate over time, as noted by Clark (2006), as well as the anticipated that new discoveries about the role of hope would assist those with lived experience, as well as the professionals engaged to support them. This was achieved, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

Hope, and its persistent inclusion in the narratives of those left behind when someone is missing, shaped the aim of this study by seeking to understand its role, its function and its potential capacity to flex over time. The study will investigate the way hope is socially constructed by the families left behind, the impact of community acknowledgement of ambiguous loss and the multiple definitions that hope may have when a person remains missing.

Consequently, the primary research question became: how do families of missing people conceptualise the existence of hope when a loss remains

unresolved? The sub-questions, incorporated once participants signalled that hope existed in their lived experience, sought to understand how hope may change over time and, if it changes, when do these shifts occur? Finally, how might the community shape or influence ideas of hope when living with the loss of a missing person? Further, the study also sought to identify how ambiguous loss is acknowledged in the wider community, the impact (as explored by those with lived experience) of media reporting on the experience of ambiguous loss and the rituals provided to individuals as a way to acknowledge their loss.

The study has four specific areas of enquiry;

- Identify, through narrative based interviews, how hope might shape the lived experience of families of missing people.
- Understand the presence of hope in the liminal space between the missing person being both present and absent.
- Explore the potential social constructions of hope, the impact of community acknowledgement of ambiguous loss and the purpose of rituals in being between hopeful and hopeless.
- Use the findings to inform health care professionals and law enforcement agencies regarding the needs of families of missing people in living with loss and engaging with the community about that loss.

### **Definition of terms**

The following definitions have been used throughout this thesis and should be applied whenever these key terms are included:

## *Missing Person*

In the most recent study of the Australian Missing Persons population, James, Anderson & Putt (2008) defined a missing person as “someone whose whereabouts are unknown and there are serious concerns for their safety and welfare” (James et al, 2008, p .4). ‘Missingness’ a grammatically inconsistent term originally utilised by Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak (1990), refers to the psychological space occupied when a person is absent, and their whereabouts are unknown, and the inherent challenges that accompany this space. There are substantial emotional, financial and societal impacts (Henderson & Henderson, 1998; Boss, 1999; Wayland, 2007) for the left behind as well as the needs of those who remain missing.

The cultural and societal implications of attempting to define a missing person were persistent throughout this study. In the participant recruitment phase (see Chapter Five), definitional aspects of what constituted a ‘missing person’ were uncovered with a small number of enquiries equating missing to family disconnection such as the experiences post-divorce. Defining a missing person, specifically for the purposes of this study, was necessary in order to progress. However, questions about the social, cultural and generational assumptions of ‘missing’ and the multitude of lived experiences that accompany this are worthy of further exploration.

International literature accessed for this review used similar definitions when exploring this population: however, it should be noted that the Association of Chief Police Officers (2013) in the United Kingdom actively reclassified missing people using two definitions. The first was ‘missing’ defined as “anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another” ACPO, 2013, (p. 5). The second was ‘absent’ defined as “a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be”, which allowed investigative procedures to only be enacted once the criteria of risk was sanctioned. Utilising this delineation within this study allowed for the participant recruitment to focus on the ‘missing’ definition cited above, where concern for welfare was noted and then placing aside those individuals where absence was noted.

The definition of a missing person to be used in this study will focus on that defined by the Australian Institute of Criminology via James and Colleagues (2008), highlighting concern from both the next of kin, and potentially law enforcement, for the missing person’s safety and wellbeing.

### ***Long-term missing person***

Data reviewed for the study indicated that the majority of people reported missing in Australia return within one month of their disappearance (James et al, 2008). In order to capture the potential fluctuation of the hope experience, the missing person needed to have been absent for an extended period. This was

classified as long-term missing, which is longer than six months (as defined by James and colleagues 2008).

### ***Ambiguous Loss***

Experiences of ambiguous loss have been explored through periods of war, political intervention and migration (Boss, 1999; Glasscock, 2011), in addition to solitary episodes when a person vanishes. Boss (1999) differentiates between, two different types of ambiguous loss. 1) where a person is *physically* absent but psychologically present in the family, and 2) where a family member is physically present but *psychologically* absent (for example, following a brain injury, those with dementia or some mental illnesses).

As a result, ambiguous loss is also perceived to be experienced when a person is missing. This type of loss is when the person is “physically absent with uncertainty as to whether the loss will be final” (Boss, 1999, p. 6).

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘ambiguous loss’ (sometimes interchangeably referred to as ‘unresolved grief’ in the literature) will be defined in relation to the physical absence of the individual without confirmation as to whether or not the loss has finality or a known outcome. Ambiguous loss and the previous research frameworks established in its application will be explored further within Chapters Two and Three.

## ***Hope***

As a central concept, the literature reviewed explored multiple inclusions of hope in relation to loss and bereavement. Each of these explorations shaped the way that hope was included and analysed within this study. Despite the relative simplicity in the term ‘hope’, its multiplicity and inclusivity presents potential challenges in standardising a definition and innate value when included in exploring the human experience.

For the purposes of this study, Clark’s (2007) definition of trajectory of hope, where “participants in the study reported changes over time in what they hoped for” (p. 18) was initially utilised to clarify the participants’ narratives. The concept of a trajectory was used as a platform to explore the potential return of the missing person as well as its potential to change what is/was being hoped for.

Hope, as a term, cannot be explicitly defined given its “intangible qualities” (Nekolachiuk, Jevne and Maguire, 1999, p. 592). In line with this intangibility, Duggleby, Williams, Wright, and Bollinger (2009) suggested that hope might be “a future-orientated belief in existing possibilities” (p. 515). In the context of this study, merging of the idea of future possibility has been incorporated with the concept of a “trajectory of hope” (Clark, 2007, p. 18).

## ***Family member***

Wayland (2007, p. 40) defined a family member as a person who has a close relationship with the missing person, although not necessarily a person related biologically. This definition allowed for the literature search, and

subsequent study, to be extended to looking at the impact of a missing person on a wider range of individuals within a community, rather than limiting it to those with biological or relationship connections. Other studies exploring similar topics noted that there is “no agreed definition of what constitutes a family in today’s society” (Kean, 2010, p. 98). Consequently, for the purposes of this study, ‘family member’ was defined as an individual who has a connection to the missing person – either as a kin-relation or through intimate relationship.

### **Overview of the thesis**

The detail provided within this thesis explores the lived experience of families of missing people. The data collected through the three phases of engagement (see Chapter Five) offers the reader an opportunity to observe the private and public explorations of hope. The thesis also highlights the metaphorical masks participants used to seek refuge within the depth of their loss and how this then shapes the way that the community conceptualises ambiguity. The stories shared of the private experiences of losing a family member were revealed individually to the researcher in Phase One of the study. Additional stories were shared in a group setting using a virtual platform. Those stories explained the shifts between the hope for the physical return of the missing person and the hope for the self in tolerating ambiguity long-term. The participants spoke of their stories being silenced by the community the longer the person was absent – that this extinguished the opportunity to tell others what had happened – and how their hope shaped the way they lived post-loss. This study found that there was a shift away from intense community interest after someone was declared to be ‘missing’ and that those with lived experience acknowledged

and sought to accept that closure is not possible irrespective of how hard they search.

This first chapter establishes the foundation thoughts developed in the years prior to the beginning of the study. It is also an opportunity to further define and extrapolate the key terms used throughout the study and an introduction to the methodology and data analysis utilised in this narrative inquiry study.

Chapters Two and Three present the current scope of the problem within an Australian context – providing a theoretical framework for the study achieved by reviewing the significant contribution from previous researchers in the fields of missing persons and ambiguous loss. A detailed review of the current literature available, with an explanation as to how literature relating to missing persons and ambiguous loss and hope was gathered, and then a comparison of the literature on hope and bereavement to provide a robust knowledge platform prior to data collection has been included.

Chapter Four identifies how the study was conducted using a social constructivist framework, engaging with participants using a narrative inquiry method. In essence, participants were chosen because they met pre-established criteria: they were family members of missing people who had been absent for longer than six months, residing in Australia. Residence was included for the purposes of being able to connect participants with support services should it be required. The process of selecting participants focussed upon a purposive sampling technique, locating individuals willing to share their stories and engage

in a layered exploration of the (potentially) untold stories of loss and hope. This technique was also utilised for the second half of the study, with the expectation that it would provide rich and detailed participant location. This was particularly noticeable in large family groups who had someone missing and encouraged each other to be a part of the study.

Chapter Four offers insight into my role as the researcher and my transition from counsellor to enquirer. The thesis plots the significant shifts noted along this journey and the ways that the stories shared within the counselling space offered some assistance to the ways that the study was approached. The continual revisions required in the art of engaging research participants, to ensure that the contact did not veer into a space where supportive or therapeutic alliances were re-established, are also outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Five explores data collection, and how it was conducted within three phases. The research interviews were completed over a four-month period between August and December 2013, with the final transcription concluding in February 2014. The three stages of data collection included: one-to-one in depth narrative interviews with individual participants, a preliminary analysis of the data and the development of a virtual focus group with participants who explored the data provided from the first round of participants. From there, all participants were invited to clarify their engagement with the study individually with me to explore the impact the sharing of their private and public lived experience of being family members of missing people. The participants ranged from people living with the loss of a family member (including partners,

children, parents) stretching from a nine-month absence to a loss extending more than 25 years. The three phases of participation – individual in depth interviews, a virtual focus group and individual invitations to clarify – yielded significant data that provided scope to answer the research question posed.

Within Chapter Five resides an exploration of how thematic narrative analysis was utilised for data analysis. The data was viewed line by line within a comprehensive spreadsheet in order to establish significant patterns and occurrences of themes. Once familiarity with the transcripts was achieved – by listening to audio-recordings as well as reading the transcripts – some initial key phrases were noted. Separate to the key phrases were particular fields identified by the researcher as each line was explored. At the end of the three-month analysis the data was divided into six key areas, which have been explored in depth within the results section of the thesis.

Hope and its capacity to splinter between the participant and their thoughts of the missing person were discovered and detailed within Chapters Six and Seven. The content and pace of the interviews provided opportunities for narratives to be shared, with each participant offering new insights. It was then that the beginnings of the results and subsequent analysis of the research study began to take shape. The chapters outline the complexity of the stories shared by the participants and the potential to uncover new understandings for families of missing people.

The final chapters identify the strengths and limitations of the study and

how the findings can be incorporated into the work of those who engage with families of missing people – those who engage therapeutically, and those in law enforcement and the legal profession. Recommendations for future direction in the research of ambiguous loss and missing are made as a way to incorporate the lived experience of those who vanish to be brought to the forefront. The final participant of the study explained to me that each day people would suggest to her that “at least you’ve got hope”, leading her to believe that in fact hope was a deficit at times that hope equalled pain. These realisations, persistent throughout the findings of the study, provide enhanced scope for evidence-based interventions that mirror the lived experience of the left behind rather than anticipation that to live with ambiguous loss is to embrace hope.

## Chapter Two: Theories and literature relevant to this emerging field

*It has been a long road and at some point I placed those feelings inside a compartment in my soul and I carry them with me every day, never to see the light of day.*

Val Nettles, mother to missing Damien (Stejne, 2013, p. 10)

Guided by the principles of narrative inquiry, this review explores the current literature surrounding concepts of ambiguous loss, hope, and those left behind. The choice of a narrative inquiry framework provided the telling of rich and detailed stories that sought to investigate the social constructions of hope, the impact of community acknowledgement of ambiguous loss and the multiple definitions that hope may take when a person remains missing. A goal achieved by this study is its exploration of hope as a tool to map the experience of loss long-term without the grief work assumptions of finality, as noted within this review of the literature. This project was grounded in narrative inquiry approach bound to a reflexive praxis. The researcher's reflections of her own lived experiences within the missing person's field, bound to the analytical framework, situate the researcher within the study through the engagement and understanding of relevant grief theory and the evolution of understanding of ambiguous loss.

Posited in the introduction to this study is the research question: *What do the stories of the left behind tell us about hope and the way it is experienced when someone is missing?* The literature review explored within this and the following chapter assists the reader by investigating the current knowledge and research gaps surrounding the practical and emotional needs of families of

missing

people. The learnings from this review extrapolate trends in the literature as a way to uncover how individuals might endure an ambiguous loss, and the potential this loss has to shape the way the rest of their life proceeds. Here, notions of shifting worldview are understood by way of accentuating the complexities of living long-term with ambiguous loss.

Hope is included tirelessly within the literature of ambiguous loss and bereavement. Inclusions of hope are presented within this review through the crucial analysis of grief theory, quantitative and qualitative studies, and the narratives of research participants with lived experience. Due to its intangible nature, as described in the previous chapter, a universal definition of hope – and its purpose and impact on the ability to survive loss – is not possible. The literature highlights a complex paradigm where hope has the capacity to sustain as well as weaken the day-to-day challenges of living with an ambiguous loss given the uncertainty that having someone missing presents. Yet hope has multiple qualities: experiences of hope may exist in the liminal space created when a person vanishes and their return remains uncertain.

The review has been conducted by exploring the current theoretical trends relating to bereavement, ambiguous loss and hope, as well as an understanding of the narratives of families of those left behind when someone is missing. The literature exploring hope and missing people is connects the relational bond of the person left behind with the missing person, as well as the hope for their physical safety and location. Here, the return of the physical missing person is

paramount to those who are searching. Emeritus Professor Pauline Boss (1999) is recognised for her ground-breaking research connecting the experience of loss for those left behind when someone is missing to the experiences of ambiguous or unresolved loss. Boss (1999) argued that this loss is not simply about having someone simply here and then gone – it is about the hope for his or her return, for his or her wellbeing, and for answers if the loss remains unresolved. However, there is limited literature exploring the ways in which individuals navigate the experience of being left behind when a person is missing, especially in the longer-term. Given these limitations, literature from the grief and bereavement field has also been included in this review. This chapter focuses upon the relevant theory and research implications surrounding bereavement and then ambiguous loss as a way to shape the study and its aims. Following on from this chapter is an exploration of the framework that underpins hope theory and the way that social constructions of hope led to the development of a conceptual framework where hope was interpreted from the narratives shared by the research participants in order to begin to address the research question posed.

### **How the review was conducted**

To broaden conceptualisations of ambiguous loss, this review takes note of the social constructions surrounding hope in a context of understanding loss and bereavement. Ambiguity and hope are significant to the research question, thus making the purpose of the review two-fold: to understand loss and to understand the impact of hope on that loss.

For the purposes of the review, literature was sourced systematically to benefit the broader study into hope and ambiguity. Database searches included: Proquest; Proquest Psycinfo; The Cochrane Library; Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL); Informit as a platform for CINCH, CINCH-Health, FAMILY, Humanities and Social Sciences collection and RURAL; SAGE online; Social Services Abstracts; Australasian Digital Theses Program (ADT); PUBMED; and, Google Scholar. The searches were not limited to research within a particular timeframe given the uniqueness of the study. However, only those written in English were selected, as this is the language understood by the researcher. An additional review of the literature was conducted nearer the end stage of the thesis to include work published between 2012 and 2014.

The initial search terms/key phrase ‘hope AND bereavement’ was included in the search given the interchangeable terms which can describe ‘loss’ (for example, grief, bereavement, loss), for the benefit of cross-referencing relevant literature. ‘Missing Persons’, ‘hope’, and ‘ambiguous loss’ were used as standalone searches and then together. The results were not specific to Australia, given the universal experiences of ambiguous loss. Additionally, considering the high incidence of the inclusion of lived experience of those left behind in narratives shared by the media, a keyword search of ‘Missing Persons AND media’ was also conducted.

Additional keyword searches of ‘hope AND ambiguous loss AND family’ were conducted to ensure that the relevant articles were located. Given the

volume of search returns, the search was limited to those published post 1999, following Boss' (1999) landmark publication *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*.

Website searches were also conducted to identify grey literature, including working papers, government reports, or data relevant to the missing persons sector. The sites included: the Australian Institute of Criminology (including the JV Barry Library); The Department of Justice and Attorney General NSW; The Australian Federal Police; National Missing Persons Coordination Centre; SANE Australia; The National Center for Missing Adults (USA); The National Center for Missing Adults US; Centre for the Study of Missing Persons, Portsmouth University; and, Missing People UK.

Other articles in this review were located via citation from landmark publications in the field of missing and loss – particularly those of Boss (1999, 2002, 2007), Clark (2006), and Glasscock (2011). Reference lists of retrieved articles were searched and citations explored for further relevant research material related to both ambiguous loss and specifically to the research question.

A total of 1875 articles were located using the search. Duplicates were excluded, as were articles exploring forensic investigations and search examinations relating to missing people. Abstracts were then evaluated and those exploring experiences of ambiguity for families left behind when someone was missing, in addition to articles relating to the hope experience post bereavement were explored as full texts. A total of 61 articles were retained.

### ***Inclusion criteria***

- Primary research studies, as well as scholarly analysis pieces pertaining to missing persons and/or the psychological impact of missing;
- The reporting of missing people in the media and the language utilised when referring to missing people;
- Research on the impact of ambiguous loss and/or the concept of hope;
- Literature relating to the exploration of hope in relation to loss – regardless of the type of bereavement;
- Published and unpublished literature (including peer reviewed and grey); and,
- English language only.

### ***Exclusion criteria***

- Research/literature on the forensic analysis of missing people or unidentified remains;
- Literature regarding the scientific search methods relating to missing people and their location; and,
- Research not in English.

While the search included both primary and secondary sources, information regarding the forensic or medical exploration of missing was excluded as that data focussed solely on the physical remains of the missing person or the search and rescue methods utilised to conduct investigations. These articles did not provide perceived experience narratives relevant to the research study.

This literature was approached with curiosity, considering the unknown elements of hope and ambiguity. There was also a focus on needing to understand the core components attached to the research question and to grapple with my own conceptualisations of what hope may signify. My own awareness of preconceived ideas, and the challenge to consistently set them aside when new literature or learnings from participants were uncovered, shaped my own conceptualisations of the study. Notions of ambiguous loss and hope were extracted as a way to develop a sharper, more detailed conceptualisation of what was already known as a way to move the study forwards. Searching and analysing the literature with the focus of understanding what had been published, and what gaps currently existed, allowed for new insights to be developed with a gradual piecing together to benefit the eventual collection of data for the study. Slowly funnelling the information readied me for the data collection and analysis phase where these understandings and subsequent gaps could be applied and deconstructed.

Clark (2006) notes that there is a significant dearth of primary research studies in the area of missing persons, particularly in relation to the concepts of loss and hope. As a result, the literature searches explored supplementary areas of ambiguous loss that linked with the experience of someone being missing. These losses include: experiences around caregivers of those with dementia (Boss, 2010), where psychological ambiguity exists; HIV/AIDS (Kelly, 2008), where potential physical and psychological ambiguities are present; as well as research relating to disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and complicated mourning (Rando, 1993), detailed in depth later within this chapter. Ambiguous

loss is not specific to someone being missing. It applies to losses that are unending and potentially disenfranchised by the way the community understands them. An exploration of the ways in which the loss may be acknowledged will be reviewed within this and the next chapter, with reference to the social constructions of hope in preparation for later sections of the thesis.

### **Critical analysis of the review findings**

Through the process of developing the literature review, the main findings and emergent trends revealed a number of key foci: the experience of having someone missing; the theoretical models presented that refer to, or reflect, the experience of that loss; and, the conclusions from literature relating either to similar losses, or to hope and bereavement. A critical appraisal tool was utilised to assist in merging and reviewing the literature available. Wooliams, Williams, Butcher, and Pye's (2009) Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool was utilised to make sense of the qualitative data gathered. The tool, by providing a checklist (including exploring the aims of the research, appropriate methodology, and the relationship between research and participant) guided the development of a spreadsheet to capture and then analyse the studies significant to the research question. The tool allowed space for both key findings and associated trends to be collected in order to understand the research learnings in the field as well as the potential gaps in the knowledge base.

As discussed in chapter two and three, ambiguous loss, and the inclusion of hope within, is an under-researched field. Consequently, no stand-alone quantitative studies were available to assist in the development of the review. It

must be noted that, while a number of reports engaged in a mixed-methodological stance – such as Steyne (2013), Newiss (2011), and James, Anderson, Putt (2007) – the quantitative findings were merged with the qualitative data to develop a more cohesive picture of the cohort living with ambiguity as a result of a person’s disappearance.

In exploring the types of methodological frameworks used in current research, the methods of data collection and findings relevant to the research question, two trends were noted:

1. There is limited primary research relating to the impact of the loss of a missing person; and,
2. Hope has been a prominent term used as a response to loss (including ambiguous loss); however, explorations as to how individuals manage hope over time are limited.

As noted in the introduction, the concept of hope is pivotal to exploring the study question and the review was framed in terms of both hope and missing persons, and hope and loss as a broader reference point. Consequently, the findings of the literature review emphasised a lack of exploration around the key term of hope that is prevalent throughout the articles relating to missing people. Those findings will be explored in depth throughout the remainder of the chapter.

## **Situating the research question within the literature**

The research question seeks to explore what the stories of hope that exist within the space of the missing person being here and then gone for families of missing people illustrate. The role of hope, its social as well as subjective constructions, and the impact on the lived experience of the left behind is explored. The exploration of current theory as well as a review of the literature highlights the theoretical perspectives employed by grief researchers and theorists who engage with social-constructivist inquiry by seeking to explore how knowledge is both constructed and understood (Andrews, 2012). Previous studies relevant to ambiguous loss explore methods used by those with lived experience to live with loss by understanding past experiences to predict how the future may be survived. It is with this view that the current frameworks, relevant to the research question of conceptualising hope in response to ambiguity, have been explored and how the study is to be interpreted. Here, the three components that require exploration to better understand the research question are: bereavement post-loss, ambiguous loss and the literature exploring the incidence and impact of people going missing.

### **1. Bereavement and the theories of loss**

Walsh (2007) asserts that when a loss occurs, a person's basic worldview will be shattered. This shattered view is the foundation from where grief and bereavement theorists explore the way loss will impact the lives of those left behind. Janoff-Bulman's (1994) concept of shattered assumptions post-victimisation identifies a theory of trauma based on the supposition that

harrowing events shape our fundamental assumptions of the world around us. These assumptions, when viewed in the context of this study, assist in understanding how ambiguity has the potential to impact the left behind's existence. The social construction of grief and the ways in which we, as a community, might normalise and pathologise people's reactions to loss (Walter, 2006) are explored within this section.

In order to broaden the literature, given the dearth of studies surrounding ambiguous loss, other explorations of loss were included in the review. These explorations, such as relevant grief and bereavement studies from Kubler-Ross (1969), Worden (2008), Doka (2002), Rando (2000), and Bonanno (2009), provide the opportunity to understand, from the periphery, the ways in which the understanding of grief reactions align themselves, or not, with the experience of missing.

### ***Shifting narratives of bereavement***

Over the last three decades the terms used to explore grief and loss have shifted as research outcomes reveal multiple narratives of those left behind. However, the public narrative of loss continues to be punctuated by terms such as 'closure', 'acceptance', and 'forgiveness'. These terms do not allow for multiple narratives. The filtering down of new concepts of understanding loss, such as those explored by Klass and colleagues (1996) as continuing bonds to the person who was no longer here, has also begun to emerge.

In reviewing the narratives of loss from the families of those left behind who participated in this study, there was continual reference to the ambiguity of their loss preventing them from ‘accepting’ what had occurred. In this way, the stereotypical stages of loss, where certain actions had to occur in order for the person to move on with life, could not be effected because either 1) the uncertainty of the finality or 2) the inability to mourn and being viewed as not holding on to hope for the return of the missing person. The work of Kubler-Ross, spanning more than thirty years after the publishing of her seminal work in 1969, continues to be included in grief narratives within the therapy space and in the media around normative reactions to grief, despite her work originally being intended to assist those who were dying, not those left behind. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kubler-Ross noted the emergence of a death denying society emerged. Her work identified the historical shift where previous generations’ engagement with death, as a part of life, normalised the transition from having the person here and then gone. On the other hand the process of denying that death occurred meant society lost the practice of embracing death, not only for ourselves but those around us.. Here the concept of ‘preparatory grief’ emerged, where those preparing for the death of a person could begin to explore the sensations of mourning as they assisted the person in their last moments. The community became fixated on theories of bereavement developed by Kubler-Ross (1969), as they suggested that stages were required to complete a loss. As a result these changes – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance were mistakenly interpreted as being there to neaten otherwise messy emotions.

As noted by Glasscock (2011), since the 1980s the loss and grief research focus has broadened. Theorists who acknowledged the importance of not disconnecting from the bond with the person who is no longer here became central to the understanding of grief as a process of life. The loss component of that disconnection was embraced and ways to continue on, rather than leaving behind the relationship with the deceased person, were honoured. In line with this way of thinking, Worden (2008) developed the four tasks of mourning – 1) acceptance of the reality of the loss, 2) experiencing the pain of grief, 3) adjustment to life without the deceased person present, and 4) withdrawal of emotional energy attachment to the deceased and investment in the environment that surrounds those left behind. These four tasks move away from the understanding that a sequential model is required to overcome loss, that cognitive approaches where tasks can be enacted at various intervals of time help an individual readjust to life post-loss. However, the theories specific to ambiguous loss note that the absence of certainty makes the use of stages and tasks problematic, as certainty is at their core.

### ***The significance of grief theory on the research question***

Additional theories in grief work literature are directly inform the study. The dual process model of Stroebe and Schut (1999) in addition to the work of Doka (2002), Rando (2003) and Bonanno (2009), provide empirical evidence about loss that may exist on beyond our normative reactions to grief. The dual process model (Stroebe and Schut, 1999) was developed in reaction to the identification of shortcomings of the grief work hypothesis, where there was a lack of empirical evidence around the prescriptive representation as to how the

bereaved should react to loss, led to the development of this model. The model identifies two main components of the bereavement process:

1) Loss orientation which concentrates on, and deals with, processing the loss experience itself with respect to the deceased person. This connects with the previous explorations of the continuing bond to the person who is lost and is viewed as an active phase, where there is limited capacity to take time away from grieving.

2) The restoration phase which is not attached to the desired outcome of life returning to 'normal', but a secondary variable of learning to cope with the stress of the loss. In this phase where the restoration of the left-behinds' wellbeing is mastered through acting out physical tasks like resolving any outstanding legal issues, to learning to challenge feelings of social isolation or disconnection.

The connection between this model and the results of the study demonstrate the complexity in the process of oscillation between adaptive and maladaptive strategies used by the bereaved. The shift away from 'working through grief' is relevant in this context. The application of the model to the circumstances of ambiguity suggests that there is little capacity to focus on loss orientation as the emotional responses to the loss are stunted by the lack of finality, whereas the opposite concept of 'restoring orientation' is also limited, given the delay in time when so much remains unknown.

To further this, Doka's (2002) work adds additional depth as the review moves to focusing on ambiguity and the relevant theories attached to unresolved loss. Doka's (2002) work developed the term 'disenfranchised grievers' – the grievers were disenfranchised by a loss that was viewed as not being socially sanctioned or accepted. This experience – like the loss of a friend or, in some areas, the loss of a same sex partner, or the grief experienced post-divorce – can also be applied to the experiences of ambiguous loss. Here the connection between the feelings of disenfranchisement and the shattered assumptions, as previously explored by Janoff-Bulman (1989), raises concerns about the complication of the reaction to the loss and the capacity to restore orientation in connecting with the model presented by Stroebe and Schut (1999).

The final section includes a brief overview of the work of Rando (2003) and Bonanno (2004, 2005, 2009). Similar to Doka (2002), Rando's work as a grief theorist (1996, 2003) uncovered those bereavement reactions that may not be observed as a common occurrence. Rando's study of anticipatory mourning (1996; as explored in a context of ambiguity later within this chapter) and complicated grieving (2003) are relevant to the application of the research question. Rando (2003) notes that the concept of complicated grieving, where therapists seeking alternatives to provide treatment to those whose grief reactions are ongoing and intrusive in a person's capacity to live a productive life has attracted growing interest among therapists seeking treatment alternatives in the last decade. Rando (2003) further notes that the frequency of complicated mourning is contributed to by the type of death, "in particular these sudden, unexpected deaths, especially when traumatic, violent, mutilating, or random,

death resulting from an overly lengthy illness; death of a child; and death the mourner perceives as preventable” (p. 7). These examples can all be viewed from the perspectives of the loss of a missing person despite Rando’s view that there remains a final layer of certainty for those left behind. The presentation of those individuals who experience complicated grief often present as failing or being compromised in the tasks of mourning, where the individuals more specifically denies or represses the realisation of the loss and can also “hold on to and avoid relinquishing the lost individual” (Rando, 2003,p. 149).

Finally, in reviewing the significant grief theorists relevant to this study, the work of American grief researcher Bonanno has been included. Bonanno and Kaltmann’s assert (1999) that the focus on the ‘work’ of bereavement as a way to respond to the loss is not true for every person. Some individual demonstrate almost no symptoms of grief; they have the capacity to continue on with their life with little focus on readjustment or restoration to this new world post loss: “During bereavement when we are trying to adjust to the death of a loved one, the functions of sadness become essential tools that help us accept and accommodate to the loss” (Bonanno, 2009, p. 31) – that the need to reach out or pathologise the reactions to loss are not the experiences of the general population. Here, Bonanno (2001) suggests that one-third of those responding to bereavement grow as a result of their learnings from surviving that loss, one third will stay the same as they were prior to the loss and one third will be adversely affected by the loss. The sadness that comes from the disconnection with a person after they have died can deepen the interpersonal connections, resulting in a new sense of meaning in life. The review of the literature notes that the grief

work requirements and their connection to the therapy field suggest that the only way out of a loss is through professional-assisted reflection. However the unending nature of ambiguity, and the lack of socially-sanctioned avenues to ritualise that loss might suggest that the conventional view of grieving cannot be applied in this instance. Here the exploration of grief work within ambiguous loss is the beginning of a foundation of understanding that, without a definitive loss, the grief work completed post-disappearance may not be applicable.

## **2. Theories specific to ambiguous loss**

Boss (1999) provided the foundation work for the understanding of the impact of being left behind when a person is missing. She identified in her work she identifies the similarities in the ambiguity of loss for experiences of adoption, political separation, chronic illness (where the person remains physically present but psychologically absent) as well as the experience of a missing person where there is “leaving without goodbye” (Boss, 1999, p. 26). The impact of the disappearance of a person, both for short and long periods of time, is distressing and confusing. The work of Clark (2006), Wayland (2007), Glasscock (2011) and Boss (2002) demonstrates that, in the sense of not knowing, people cannot apply the “customary markers of life or death, so a person's distress is never validated” (Boss, 2002, p. 39). When the loss cannot be validated or accepted, the need to address the ambiguity of missing, as distinct from traditional bereavement responses as noted in the section above, is necessary (Boss, 2007).

Janoff-Bulman (1989) explored the theoretical assumptions that stem from a traumatic event in which the experience of ambiguous loss can also be included here. As the trauma of the imagined loss, where elements of mnemonic theory (Ruben, Berntsen & Johansen, 2008) may be relevant, the propensity for multiple storylines being made available to families when they have to imagine what might have happened from the time the person vanished are worthy of further exploration. This model, where elements of PTSD indicate that it is the memory of the negative event, not the event itself that creates the trauma, is relevant to the field of ambiguous loss given the recollections of the left behind are often imagined due to the absence of correct information if the person has not returned.

Janoff-Bulman (1989) identified that the assumptions individuals make about the world are “learned and confirmed by the experience of many years” (p. 114). Therefore, it can be stated that the impact and meaning of an ambiguous loss shapes the view of the world in which these individuals are now forced to inhabit. The shattering of these assumptions that life provides solutions to these types of losses, as similar to the shattered worldview presented by Walsh (2007)– allows for those who live with trauma to explore new ways in which they interact with the world and their perceptions of this ‘new world’ post-missing. The application of this literature to the broader understandings relevant to this study suggest that the merging of the understanding of imagined trauma with the shaping of the left behinds’ world post-missing is necessary. That the capacity to, as Boss states, ‘sit with’ the ambiguity of the loss rests not only on

the loss itself, but the manner in which the person was lost and the ideas of resolution and recovery.

### *Analysing the literature on ambiguous loss*

Ambiguous loss, where those left behind “forever be waiting – their grief frozen in place” (Boss 2002, p. 40) is the response ascribed to those waiting for news post-disappearance. The ambiguous loss of a missing person is only transiently mentioned within bereavement literature and omits any exploration of the complications implicit with this form of loss. The inclusion of ambiguous loss is added as a way to indicate that this type of loss exists, yet only guides the reader to understand that there is limited knowledge of its impact.

Roos (2002) identified the perpetual limbo experienced by families of missing servicemen in a context of shifting conversations, where outward reflections of grief are not merely standard reactions but a continuum of chronic, and sometimes perplexing, limbo that shifts to final acceptance. Grief theorist Worden (2008), in his handbook for practitioners in exploring grief counselling and therapy, notes the ambiguity of loss. His explorations of this loss that sits outside the realms of what is traditionally known when a loss is endured is referred to as the “awkward position not knowing whether to hold out hope or give in to grief” (Worden, 2008, p. 62). In applying this definitive exploration of unresolved loss, the implications for understanding in a context of missing suggest that the response of those left behind would be both complex and confusing in living the ‘both/and’ (Boss, 1999) concept.

Shifting focus to other theorists, the idea of disenfranchised grief, as noted by Doka (2002), includes the term ‘ambiguous loss’ in reference to people living with life threatening illnesses in understanding new life is created post-diagnosis. These individuals are pulled between “hope and hopelessness” (Doka, 2002, p. 397) as they manage to let go of the life they had and the engagement with the new life. Similarly, Rando’s (2000) exploration of anticipatory mourning has some connections to the ways in which people may prepare for the eventuality of the missing person’s absence and/or death as they await news regarding their return. However, in developing a nationwide counselling framework, Wayland (2007) found that families whose missing person had been missing for extended periods doubted that their experience of loss was a ‘dress rehearsal’ for their eventual grief when remains were located. Here, the grief associated with ambiguity was not similar to that related to bereavement. Parallels can be drawn by the inclusion of this type of grief, and its positioning on the periphery of conversations in the grief field, as potentially being akin to the experiences those with lived experience report in the community’s conceptualisation of the experiences of their loss. Bearing in mind that the period of time where the person is missing and not yet located, and the assertion that experiences of loss, albeit ambiguous, are located within this experience, further exploration of the role of anticipatory mourning in the area of ambiguous loss would be recommended.

### ***The Australian experience of ambiguous loss***

In “*Australian Families of Missing People: Narrating Their Lived Experience*”, Glassock’s (2011) doctoral research identified that the disappearance of a missing person and their potential return leaves a mark on the psychological wellbeing of people left behind. Prior to this experience, to ‘go missing’ was a possible loss that may not have been necessarily included in the list of potential or predicted losses to be endured in a person’s lifetime. Placing additional emphasis on the work of Janoff-Bulman (1989), in the conceptualisation of shattered assumptions, Glassock (2011) suggested that missing then becomes part of the family’s loss experiences and their broader view of the world.

Glassock (2011), in using a narrative inquiry method, explored the lived experience of families of people missing for extended periods. A social constructivist framework focused on a traumatic loss and grief perspective looking at the events that led to the disappearance of a missing person and the ways in which this experience shaped the responses of the participants. Glassock (2011) found that there was a “uniqueness of the loss experience of these families” (p. xiii). However, the type of loss encountered by families of missing people was not consistent with the methods of support provided by those conducting grief work. The emphasis on acceptance of the traumatic experience was inhibited by the inclusion of the ambiguity that accompanied having someone missing. Glassock (2011) highlighted that there was a need for new models of therapeutic intervention that acknowledged the type of loss experienced by the families he interviewed. He noted ‘the words closure,

acceptance and resolution along with the term grief work have virtually disappeared or have been used in a different way in the current grief lexicon. However it was not until 1999 that Boss used the term ambiguous loss to more accurately describe the experience of families of missing persons' (p.36) . The proposed theoretical framework of intervention required enhanced skills for professionals in their support and understanding of people who access assistance when a person is missing.

Changes to the assumptive world, such as the experience of having someone missing, forced individuals into a previously unknown space, which Glasscock (2011) described as 'searching within' versus 'searching without'. To have someone missing created both public and private battles as the person left behind attempted to reason with the ambiguity. The theoretical trends of exploring this 'space in between', or the liminal space (Jones, Zagacki and Lewis, 2007; and Kelly, 2008), are paralleled to the experiences of ambiguous loss. Here, a complex layer of searching "shaped the individual circumstances of the individual" (Glasscock, 2011, p. 155) demonstrating that, while searching the physical environment for the lost person, the individual had to also contend with the psychological implications that the loss evoked. Edkins (2011) also explored the challenge of waiting with the need to search the streets (for the missing person), making the process of living with loss an additional complication given the need to focus on both the practical and psychological aspects of having someone missing.

### ***Siblings experience of ambiguous loss***

Clark's doctoral thesis (2006), *Wanting to Hope: The experience of adult siblings of long-term missing people*, explored a proposed framework of support addressing the multi-layered responses of loss as explained by siblings of missing people. The participants' descriptions of their loss were distinct from the loss experienced by other kinship relations. Clark (2006) explored the relational and friendship bonds between the missing person and the sibling, as well as the disconnection siblings experienced when not viewed as the primary grievers (a position typically given to the parents or partner of the missing person). Clark (2007) asserted that siblings were rarely seen as being separate from the family group, as with the traumatic loss of a young person exploring parent reactions versus adolescent siblings (see, Lohan & Murphy 2001) where minimal coverage by way of research is provided to explore the differing grief reactions that may be drawn within and between family members.

Drawing on the constructs of connectedness, where the participants wanting to hope and locate coping strategies without deliberate intention, the research explored the shifting concepts of hope that accompanied the journey of a person being missing long-term. The concept of 'deliberate intention', explored further in Clark's work (2007, 2012), identified that siblings described substantial connection to the person who was missing, perceived by those within the study as having a different connection than between the parent and the child. The study went on to state that this unintentional hierarchy created around differential response to loss (both the physical disconnection and the emotional

disconnection) led to feelings of disenfranchisement within families when speaking about loss.

In this way, new explorations regarding hope alongside ambiguous loss were identified (see also Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003). Clark (2006) found a differentiation of losses – where ambiguity is included within the experience – suggesting that a lack of acknowledgement of the loss comes with the uncertainty about whether or not the missing person will return. Consequently, an individual does not travel along a continuum between having knowledge of the loss and then exploring their reaction to it when a loss is unresolved. Similar to Boss (1999), this therapeutic model identified how ambiguous loss existed along a continuum of experience stretching from disappearance to seeking new ways to survive the loss with the inclusion of a trajectory of hope. Further, hope held multiple meanings as the time from when the disappearance occurred extended. The elements of this continuum were identified as:

Finding out, emotional reaction, loss, speculation, changed relationships, ways of coping, wanting to know, revised assumptions, secondary grieving and unending not knowing.  
(Clark, 2006, p. vi).

The timeline is fluid and flexible, where impacts were also relevant from external forces, such as the availability of services and professionals who understood ‘not knowing’. The lack of certainty at the beginning phase (post-disappearance) or as Clark (2007) terms it, ‘finding out’, suggests that the reaction to loss is inhibited by the open-ended nature and a lack of permanence as to the finality of the loss. Clark’s (2006) research highlights that losses involving the disappearance of a missing person by their very nature, do not have

prescribed outcomes. As a result, the ways in which people left behind respond to the loss make it difficult to foresee, manage, or support hope at every interval while the person remains missing.

Von Suhr (2003) articulated the presence of hope in his exploration on the impact on siblings when a child was missing. The research study focused on the ways in which waiting for news of the missing person exhibited multiple oscillations between hopefulness and hopelessness. The presence of hope, and its definitive existence in the experience of the left behind, was connected to a sense of accepting the ambiguity of the loss. This acceptance related to the not knowing rather than accepting that the “loved one is lost forever” (Von Suhr, 2003, p. 113). Von Suhr (2003) went on to explore that hope, in contrast to negative emotions such as guilt, hopelessness, and anger, limited the person’s capacity to develop coping strategies to live with the loss. Here, without hope, families could assist in “the formation of dysfunctional stress management strategies” (Boss, 1999 cited in Von Suhr 2003, p. 118)

A recent undergraduate thesis project by MacBride (2013) also reviewed the experience of siblings of missing people using a focus group methodology that revealed siblings who were left behind felt compelled to “fly the flag” (p. 122) for their missing brother or sister by coordinating the physical aspects of a search as well as the emotional support of parents or children left behind. Where “siblings recognise parent suffering but also their own” (MacBride, 2013, p. 11), the study uncovered that the inclusion of ambiguity in their experience of loss demonstrated an additional layer than the self-reporting of observing other

family members. The complex elements of the sibling relationship, as also noted by Clark (2006), led to the disenfranchisement of the sibling's grief where:

Disenfranchised grief can affect a sibling's hope, for if hope is taken away from siblings through the disenfranchisement felt as a result of lack of acknowledgment by service providers, police and the coroners, siblings are left with an unclear understanding of their ambiguous loss (p. 141)

### ***Responding to ambiguous loss***

Boss' (1999) landmark publication *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief* defines ambiguous loss as a type of loss where the person is "physically absent but psychologically present" (p. 2), with an accompanying uncertainty as to whether the loss will be final. Boss' work was the beginning of a conversation in grief work about the possibility of living with the notion that a person can be both here and gone. Here, loss can exist in the space in between a person's presence and absence. The literature highlights the additional layer of ambiguity that accompanies such a loss that may create difficulty in knowing with certainty that a loss has definitively occurred or that it will endure.

Boss' career-long explorations of ambiguous loss underpin a framework utilised by both those with lived experience of loss, as well as the professionals engaged in supportive interventions. This framework emphasises the multitude of reactions brought by the ambiguity of the loss. In refining the initial explorations of ambiguity, Boss has explored the differing impacts of loss through political intervention, migration, disasters such as those that took place

on September 11, 2001, and the unresolved losses of caring for someone with dementia. Boss (2007) noted that the goal of responding to an ambiguous loss was to identify ways in which the ambiguity can be tolerated, where people can master hope as a strategy to allow them to exist in the space between knowing and not knowing. This space, and the left behinds' capacity to tolerate it, is focused upon the need to move between knowing what has happened and not knowing the finer details of the loss. In later work, Boss (2010) explored the notion that ambiguous loss is qualitatively different from "ordinary loss, death" (p. 140), deconstructing a myth of closure due to the lack of resolution – that the goal for those left behind to seek acknowledgment that the loss has occurred is the key to attaining closure on certain elements of the loss. Melnick and Roos (2007) argue that the concept of closure has invaded the social discourse surrounding response to loss where, in the case of ambiguous loss, its inclusion is not a required element or the "purpose of grieving" (p. 12); adjustment to life post-loss is not dependent on completing elements of grief reactions. Boss (2006) stated that the fluid processes allow people the capacity to become accustomed to living with the unknown. Six stages – 1) finding meaning, 2) tempering mastery, 3) reconstructing identity, 4) normalising ambivalence, 5) revising attachment, and 6) discovering hope – "create guidelines, not prescriptions for resiliency nor normalcy in the face of a complicated loss" (Boss, 2006, p. 179). In *Six guidelines for resilience in ambiguous loss*, Boss and Yeats (2014) revisited these concepts as a way for grief therapists and support workers to intervene to "ease the pain of ambiguous loss" (p. 67).

Within the framework of ambiguous loss, the inclusion of the concept of ‘both/and thinking’ (Boss, 2010) focuses upon the stress-reducing tactic of acknowledging that the person who is lost can be both here and gone. In this way, paradoxical thinking can introduce, as explained by Boss, capacity to see the ambiguity as “a natural condition” (p. 13). This prompting of individuals, and the professionals supporting them, to focus on ambiguity as being distinct from non-linear stages of their grief – where acceptance surrounding the lack of finality and the lack of rituals offered within the community – is noted. In Boss’ most recent work (see Boss and Yeats, 2014), the comparison of two similar losses – one where a spouse dies following a stroke and another where a partner lives with the psychological loss of her partner post-stroke – conceptualises the non-linear understandings significant to the ambiguous loss framework, even within a missing persons construct:

Mary’s loss was clear. Her grieving began as normally expected – after the death of a loved one. For Ruth, with ambiguous loss, her grieving began years before her husband actually died. This too was normal. In such cases, the therapeutic goal shifts to focus on resiliency and strength to withstand ongoing loss and sadness (p. 65).

In understanding that the loss may not be validated or accepted, agencies that specifically address the ambiguity of missing, as distinct from the services that can be offered by bereavement services, are necessary. In countries outside Australia, there also remains a dearth of professionals working together to address unresolved loss. American service providers appear to have focused on the supportive interventions for families where a child is missing (Greif and Bowers, 2007). However, the support needs of families where an adult is missing are not addressed by either state-based or federal agencies. The United

Kingdom has a not-for-profit organisation, Missing People UK that provides layered support to families via search enquiries, media assistance and a collection of trained volunteers with lived experience in missing to provide helpline-based support.

Wayland (2006) identified five distinct themes for working with families of missing people, which was developed further in *Supporting Those Who are Left Behind: A guide for healthcare professionals* (2007):

1. An exploration of reanimation or continued bond to the missing person;
2. Creation of a space for rituals for the missing that did not concede that the individual would not return;
3. The trauma timeline which emerged from Boss' (1999) exploration of seeking new ways of understanding the complexity of responses to an ambiguous loss by searching for previous coping strategies that individuals had employed across their lifetime;
4. A protected place – engaging individuals during counselling sessions with strategies in which they could explore the trauma of the missing whilst finding ways to live their lives alongside the experience of ambiguity; and,
5. Opportunities for growth in terms of individuals being able to seek new learnings about their capacity to seek mastery over the unresolved nature of an ambiguous loss.

These five themes were drawn from a perspective of identifying how professionals could engage with families of missing people to provide support relevant to their experience of loss. These themes were then developed further into a framework for health professionals in responding to unresolved loss (Wayland 2007). Similar to Boss, the themes identified ways in which individuals could enact mastery over the ambiguous nature of their loss by engaging in their own rituals that allowed them to hold onto hope and not commit to public declarations as to whether or not they believed the missing person would return. Further to Boss (1999, 2007), the framework also provides a fluid and flexible guide for therapists to present strategies to families that can be worked on in collaboration throughout the long-term experience of missing. Here, the trajectory of hope was present within the five themes that were non-linear and could be engaged with independently across the period of time in which the person was missing.

The four theoretical explorations provided by Boss (1999, 2007), Clark (2006), Wayland (2007), and Glasscock (2011) engaged in ways that individuals can predict or seek to understand the methods of mastering the ambiguity of the loss they are experiencing. The lack of finality and the unpredictability of missing not only make the provision of support challenging, but also impact the social or subjective constructions of hope. The basis of much of the qualitative research into the lived experience of having a person missing engages in social constructivist theory and explores the way in which people navigate ways to survive their loss by understanding how they respond, what they require for the

future and the assumptions now made about the ‘new’ world that surrounds them.

The literature that labels and then seeks to understand ambiguous or unresolved loss, applies the same premise with the inclusion of uncertainty. This uncertainty taints the left behinds’ worldview, as Boss (1999) notes, as being traumatic for any individual, irrespective of how long that person is absent or whether they return. This experience of failure to seek a resolution will change a person’s core worldview. The perception of the world and society’s “high value on solutions” (Boss, 2010, p. 141) is compounded by not being able to locate the missing person, irrespective of what attempts are made to bring the person home. In order to manage the ambiguity – or, as Boss (2007) suggests, tolerating or tempering our mastery of it – becomes the new worldview that families of missing people must comprehend.

When a sudden loss occurs, that loss will have implications for how a person rebuilds a life without their missing person being present. Given the lack of finality and the inclusion of the unknown, the experience of an ambiguous loss relating to a missing person is different to sudden and traumatic loss. Consequently, an exploration of a possible theoretical framework (in which to understand experiences of hope and unresolved loss) becomes challenged by the difficulties in rebuilding a life where ambiguity exists.

In order for individuals to fully grasp the complexities of the loss they have endured, Seifter Abrams (2001) believed family members needed definitive

information about the lost person to make sense. However, there is no detail, either within this source or others relating to the experience of missing, which identifies exactly what is required for a loss to be complete or how and where such information could be sourced in this context. There appears to be not only ambiguity in the loss but also ambiguity in the elements that are required in order for individuals to comprehend that the loss has occurred. Whilst the literature on non-finite or definitive loss refers to the finality of a visible death, it is unclear if this is what is required for an individual's hope for the loss to be viewed as complete. The literature on the benefit of a body being found, or viewed, as an end result of missing does not exist. However, literature that explores these concepts of viewing post-loss may be applied to the experience of ambiguity. Mowl (2007), in comparing the experiences of relatives who viewed, or did not view the body of a family member after sudden death, notes that there is "a pervading sense of unreality about the death because of not having seen the body" (p. 5) – a study that is further supported by the work of grief theorists Rando (1996) and Worden (2008) in the significance of viewing the body and the emergence of a complicated grief reaction in response to the loss. The application of these studies to the field of ambiguous loss and missing people has not yet been established. The space created by the use of the word 'missing' in lieu of terms that denote finality such as death, or even simply acknowledging the absence as a loss, requires additional exploration. As with the concepts and definition of hope, the role of closure and anticipated toleration of the ambiguity have not been explored from a research perspective.

### *The theoretical assumptions about the liminal space*

Boss (1999), (2007) Glasscock (2011) and Macbride (2013) all identified both the experience of having someone missing and the experience of living in the space between the person going missing and possibly returning – that the experiences of missing were parallel to the experiences of those left behind. The literature noted that within this liminal space – a space where ideas of uncertainty are played out by family members (James, Zagacki and Lewis, 2007) – the potential for the return of the missing person was viewed alongside the idea of them never returning. These complexities were pivotal in shaping ideas in engaging with the research question.

The literature reveals that the ambiguity surrounding the loss of a missing person is difficult to plot over extended periods of time. Doka (2002) identifies an ambiguous or “non death related” (Doka 2002, p. 7) loss as being non-linear, that there is no clear trajectory as to how people may move away from their loss given its unresolved nature. Fulton (2003), in response to Rando’s (2000) exploration of anticipatory mourning, suggests that no loss can be classed as linear – that the responses by the bereaved are varied and uniquely dependent on the relationship with the deceased person. Melnick and Roos (2007) also explore the notion of linearity – that loss has a beginning, middle and end suggests that in missing without an established beginning, the loss of a missing person is open to a multitude of middles or endings, both for the missing and the people searching. Understanding loss in relation to missing people is about embracing the importance of honouring the liminal space. In a circumstance where ambiguity

and uncertainty surround the experience of loss, the connection to hope and hopelessness are of great significance.

Riegal (2003) defines the state of liminality as “an in-between state that demarcates a change in human development” (p. 6) and when assigning a liminal space to the experience of loss – be it death-related or ambiguous – that space can have different meanings for those left behind. The differentiation of losses, when ambiguity is included in this liminal space, suggests that the lack of acknowledgement of the loss comes with the uncertainty as to whether or not the missing person will return. Roos’ (2007) concept of perpetual limbo implies that it is difficult to apply certainty to the uncertain when key pieces of information are not available.

The literature tells us that there is not a linear path that an individual travels when the loss occurs and the accompanying reaction when it remains unresolved. The continuum of missing, as defined by Mitchell et al. (2003), explores the reasons for the disappearance, also explored by Clarke (2006) by plotting it against a trajectory of hope. Glassock (2011) asserts that losses involving the disappearance of a missing person, by their very nature, do not have prescribed outcomes. The outcomes exist, as detailed by Foy (2004), in the left behind being able to ‘accurately advise’ the police of the possible risks faced by the missing person. The literature included within this review highlights research gaps in assessing the way in which people respond to the loss, making it difficult to foresee, manage or support at every interval while the person or family member remains missing.

The literature review identified the term ‘space in between’ (Wayland, 2007), or the liminal space (Kelly, 2008), that is exposed when a person is both here and gone, as noted by Boss (1999). The literature pertaining to liminality offers insight into the way that those with lived experience conceptualise the spiritual or secular space of betwixt and between (Riegal, 2003) when considering life post-disappearance and hopeful return. In this space, a complex intermingling of hopelessness, hopefulness, and learning to tolerate ambiguous loss are observed. Understanding more about existing in this liminal space is incorporated within the aims of the study. The research design seeks to unpack the stories that exist whilst the person is absent, the narratives of hope that exist from the time the person disappears, and the left behinds’ connection with them over time. The goal is to create new understandings for the wider research sector as well as counsellors and support workers in assisting families left behind. Exploring the liminality that accompanies a disappearance provides a conceptual framework relevant to the aims of this study.

There are similarities between the population of those left behind and other experiences of liminality. The impact of a living loss – where the person who will be potentially lost in the future – exists in the space where the left behind reside. For example, Kelly (2008) discusses the liminal space between a diagnosis of AIDS-related dementia and the capacity for carers to survive with the unknown; and Boss (2010) in exploring the experiences of carers and family members supporting a person with dementia. Boss’ (1999; 2010) exploration of this liminality (and what may occur for those where the person is

psychologically absent but physically present) demonstrated that finding ways to explore the space where the liminality exists depends on the tensions within that space, the experiences of the left behind, and the objects that are focused on in terms of acknowledging what has been lost. These can all be viewed alongside the experience of families of missing people.

In response to disasters, Jones and colleagues. (2007) noted that the liminal space existed for families from the moment that the realization occurred that the person was missing to the space where it was acknowledged the missing person was deceased. Extending this definition of space and hope to cases where missing is not related to disasters contends that this space can persist for months or years. In this way, this sense of liminality becomes the new reality. Exploring the research on liminality raises the question: do people continue to reside in this space on an on-going basis? What role does hope play in this space? Or, does this space turn into the ‘new normal’, as explored above in the bereavement literature?

### **3. Understanding the missing persons’ population**

This section explores the incidence of missing people in the Australian community and similar populations further afield. It identifies the ways in which missing people are searched for, the role of professionals in assisting those who search, and the impact of that loss on those people left behind.

The literature located for the review focussed primarily on an exploration of the missing persons’ population – the incidence, purpose and location of

missing people – as the primary focus, with the impact on those left behind as a secondary issue. Whilst the impact of the loss on a missing person requires recognition and exploration of the missing persons’ population the two perspectives – the left behind and the missing – may have very different experiences.

### ***Missing persons in Australia – the scope of the problem***

Australian law enforcement’s definition of a missing person is “someone whose whereabouts is unknown and there are serious concerns for their safety and welfare” (James, et al, 2008, p. 4). Biehal and colleagues (2003) use a broader definition (in the report commissioned by Missing People UK), defining missing as “a break in contact which either the missing person or someone else defines as going missing, and which may be either intentional or unintentional” (p. 2). Biehal et al. (2003) state that ‘missing’, by its very nature is not an easy phenomenon to define – for a person to be ‘missing’, another person must miss them. There is inconsistency in the way in which missing people are defined, with inconsistencies noted internationally and often between national and state- based jurisdictions. Issues of family disconnection, political unrest and other social factors make the capacity to develop a universal definition of a missing person challenging, which raises the question of whether or not this absence of universal understanding impacts on the needs of those left behind.

The experience of people going missing has been documented over the centuries (Glassock, 2011), with the official recorded experiences dating back to

early colonial settlement in Australia. The cultural nuances of people going missing exist in the way we view a disappearance – locally, nationally and internationally. Robertson and Demosthenous (2004), in exploring the incidence of young Aboriginal women missing in NSW, suggest that “existing research on what has been termed the missing persons phenomena has identified that missing persons come from all walks of life in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, educational levels and race” (p. 16). There have been no significant studies undertaken to explore the cultural understandings of people going missing and whether or not these reflections shape the way we might view missing in our local community. Since the introduction of television, as well as the focus on telling the stories of those living with loss, the community has been provided with a glimpse of this experience of loss. Yet, while we may acknowledge that people vanish, our compassion for ambiguity is limited (Doka, 2002). This limitation, according to Boss and Carnes (2012) stems from our

Societal anxiety about loss, clear or ambiguous...we deny death by denying the need to mourn. Our fear of death may ultimately be the fear of ambiguity. It frightens us. We are left to suffer without a clear ending to the story, thus we deny death as well as the need to keep the door open (p. 459).

This media’s goal to share information about missing people being focussed on the details surrounding their absence or the quest for closure through the narratives of the left behinds’ pleas leaves no room for understanding of the liminal space to be developed within the community. The prominent stories, which have garnered community attention in Australia, have potentially shaped understanding that, for some cases, there may be no resolution. Gair and Moloney (2013), who explore missing and adoption through a lens of social

inclusion speak of the sharing of information about missing children where:

Public concern and empathy for parents of missing children is common as unrelated individuals imagine their own distress and trauma should they be forced to face what often is said to be a parent's greatest fear (p. 92).

Perhaps in addition to the facing of fears, these stories may also perpetuate the narrative that the loss may be unending for those left behind – for example, in Australia well known cases of missing children such as the Beaumont children in 1966, Azaria Chamberlain from Ayers Rock (Uluru) in 1981, and Daniel Morcombe in 2003 (whose remains were eventually located in 2011). Increased and intensified public scrutiny (and in some cases hysteria) in relation to the way these stories shift our worldview, and perhaps even push us to seek ideas of who is to blame for the disappearance, has often been the result of the sharing of news about the incidence and impact that missing has on those left behind (Glassock, 2011).

Boss (2002) notes the “not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive defies emotional comprehension” (p. 39). The term ‘desaparacido’ (translation: the disappeared) has entered common vocabulary in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Columbia and, its English translation, in Northern Ireland. The term refers to large numbers of people – including children – systematically abducted due to political unrest and their whereabouts not revealed, sometimes forever. The further atrocities of Kosovo and, more recently, circumstances in Nigeria where large numbers of young women vanished from the community, speaks to similar experiences of the left behind's “right to know” (as noted by

the International Committee of the Red Cross, 2003, p. 18) irrespective of the disappearance being related to civil conflict or individual incidents were a person simply vanishes.

Reports funded by government and non-government agencies across Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have attempted to not only better understand the missing person population but the agencies' roles in providing support to both the missing and the left behind. Missing Persons in Australia (James et al., 2008) estimated that "in 2005–06, approximately 35,000 Australians went missing, which equates to a rate of approximately 1.7 per 1,000 people" (p. 9). Given that ten years prior, 30,000 missing person reports were made in Australia (Henderson and Henderson, 1998), these figures arguably rise each year. However, at present there is no national collection of Australian data to update the statistical understanding of the incidence, impact, and occurrence relating to missing people. Further, there has been no nationwide collection of data since the report by James and colleagues (2008). Research emerging from the UK Geographies of Missing People Project (2013) also begins to extrapolate the complication whereby in order for a person to be 'missing' they must first be classified as "missed, with current understandings of missing highly dependent on those left behind" (Parr and Stevenson, 2013, p. 21). As a result of the lack of updated data collection within Australia, issues relating to why people vanish, how they are located, and prevention factors are not explored from a public health perspective or within a law enforcement framework.

People disappearing in Australia have generally been related to abduction, homicide, suicide and teenage runaway, as well as the disappearance of people experiencing dementia or Alzheimer's-related illnesses and the ambiguity of misadventure (see Glassock, 2011; James et al, 2008; Henderson and Henderson, 1998). The most common risk groups are people younger than 18 years, people with diagnosed mental health concerns (however, diagnostic capabilities are not explored in the literature, raising the notion that this may have been as reported by next-of-kin rather than a mental health professional), and the elderly (James et al, 2008, p. 16). While detailed explorations of these populations have not yet occurred, the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police, instigated a four-year communication strategy in 2008 to highlight the at-risk groups during National Missing Persons Week each year. However, only one year was externally-evaluated by a consultancy firm engaged by the Australian Federal Police in terms of its impact on missing person statistics and community understanding. The results of this analysis noted that during periods of community awareness-raising – such as National Missing Persons Week – location rates increased. However, the reason behind this was not understood, meaning the location could have been prompted by increased publicity or the realisation by the missing person that they were missed.

Prior to the last nationwide study by James and colleagues (2008), Foy (2004) conducted primary research into the dearth of risk assessment tools available to the New South Wales Police Force to assess and prioritise missing persons' reports. The analysis of NSW data attempted to identify characteristics

of individuals who might go missing and remain missing. Key risk groups were similar to other studies – suicide, foul play, and teenage runaway. However, significant factors within these groups needed to be addressed in exploring where the person may have vanished to and what might expedite their return or finding their location. Foy suggested “an empirical approach that unambiguously links the features observed in the missing person's preceding behaviour and psychosocial wellbeing with those of his or her reasons for being missing” (2004, p. 19). The results of the study identified that the individual reporting the person as missing was able to accurately advise the police as to the risk factors attached to that person, which in turn may have assisted in their location. However, the recommendations of Foy’s (2004) study have not been applied routinely in understanding why people are absent. The purpose of these frameworks offer significant capacity for those left behind to share information that might lead to location. However, it can also be asked: what is the purpose of developing risk frameworks if they are not utilised for the purposes of locating people, thus resolving the conflict for the left behind? This research enhanced the understanding of the experience of being left behind in terms of the next-of-kin or family member having expert knowledge as to the needs of the missing person rather than being viewed, as noted by Moore (2011), as a suspect in the disappearance of the person, which was a common narrative shared by families (New South Wales Attorney Generals Department, 2005) in relation to their initial contact with law enforcement.

Further exploration of the work of James and colleagues (2008) demonstrated that the incidence of a missing episode, or repeated episodes (as

certain at-risk groups were likely to go missing more than once), created a flow-on to the understanding of the impact of a disappearance. James and colleagues (2008, p. 72) stated that, if for every person who disappeared 12 others were affected, a large section of the Australian population, at some point in their lifetime, would be affected by an ambiguous loss. The way in which this figure of 12 people being affected was calculated has not been revealed and appears to have initially been proposed in the report *Someone is Missing* (Dadich, 2003), which is no longer in print. The number of people potentially affected, both in the short and long term, is arguably dependent on a myriad of social and relational factors. Exploring the number of people who may be affected does not appear to have provided any new insights into what this impact might look like, nor operationalized any definition of who will be affected.

### ***Limitations in understanding the missed and the left behind***

As examined earlier within this chapter, the definition of what constitutes a missing person is as ambiguous as the loss experienced by those left behind. There are multiple reasons, predictors, and risks associated with the action of going missing. However, there is still little that is known about the reasons people vanish and conversely, why they return, both in Australia and internationally.

As a result, there is a statistical challenge in identifying the depth of the problem of missing persons in an Australian context (see Glassock, 2011). Additional factors of why some are reported and others are not are also of interest. A 2008 campaign to explore the myths of reporting individuals missing

to the police in Australia, conducted by the Australian Federal Police, indicates that there is a misconception about the length of time a person must be missing before the report can be received (where misconceptions that a person must be absent for 24 hours prior to the report being received are not correct). Due to the absence of a uniform method of collecting national missing persons' data, accurate figures cannot be calculated and policy and service delivery needs will not have been addressed. Each of the Australian states and territories are responsible for their own data collection. Further, there is no national Australian database, other than that compiled by the CRIMTRAC database, which uploads daily figures of missing incidences but is not analysed for incidence and significant trends. James and colleagues (2007) recommended that an enhanced database to enable "more effective sharing of missing persons information across jurisdictions" (p. xviii) was necessary. Yet, the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre within the Australian Federal Police is not currently progressing a database.

In addition to national statistical data, there is also a lack of understanding around why people return following being missing. The Geographies of Missing People Project (Parr and Stevenson, 2013) being run in the UK found that no organisation represents those who return after being missing. Parr and Stevenson (2013) further argued that no insights into the issues facing this population were provided when law enforcement was the only vehicle interpreting results around missing and returned individuals. The research identified public health issues surrounding the reasons why people go missing. This was a distinct shift in focus from the traditional law enforcement perspective where missing is viewed in

relation to the physicality of the missing person rather than their desire to be away.

Conversely, insights from North America, namely from agencies established to work alongside law enforcement, appeared to focus more specifically on populations within the missing persons sphere, such as children or where there had been evidence of criminality. There are also differences in the ways in which data around missing adults and children are collected. Data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) identified the occurrences of children who were missing whereas data relating to missing adults via the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NAMus) online database – a centralised repository of missing persons’ records – was not routinely collected. Cases with no criminal implications were potentially not being collected, which skewed the capacity to understand the missing persons’ population, and the needs of those left behind. Wayland (2006) noted that there was a significant focus on the wellbeing of children and young people who had vanished, disproportionate to adults who may have vanished as a result of mental health concerns and/or misadventure.

Also requiring consideration is the impact of having someone missing where there is stigma attached to the very reason why they disappeared – family disconnection, mental health, and possible suicide. Here, the action of speaking out, of highlighting that you belong to this group, may perpetuate the stigma already experienced with an ambiguous loss. The risk factors associated with going missing (see James et al., 2007) are rarely profiled in the wider

community. Cases tend to focus on vulnerable children and young people at risk of stranger abduction. Moore (2011) calls this ‘missing white women syndrome’, where the media exhibits a disproportionate number of cases that don’t tell the true story of the missing persons’ population and focus on cases where it is perceived public interest will be greater.

There is also limited understanding of what services and resourcing would be needed to address the continual reports of missing and the psychological impacts on the families and friends waiting for news. At present, New South Wales remains the only state in Australia where government funds are provided to address the support needs of families and friends of missing people. This is done via the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) within the NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice. Family members in other states and territories are directed by law enforcement to bereavement or family therapy services in an attempt to address the impact of missing. Data relating to referral requests or support needs is not currently collected specifically surrounding the significance and impact of crisis and ongoing counselling for those who wait longer term for the outcome of a missing person case.

The cultural beliefs and generational impacts of not being able to resolve a disappearance, the significance of locating a body and then enacting those rituals specific to the family or to religious and spiritual beliefs (Boss, 2002) suggest that the ability to seek closure is limited. In addition, the potential for these atrocities may partially infiltrate our community understandings of missing in other ways – through the generational traumas of those who immigrate to Australia and the ways these larger scale disappearances might

impact on the way we view individual cases. Public engagement in a communal hoping for the potential location of a missing person provides limited insight into the experiences of loss endured over long periods of time, as engagement tends to only occur at the time of the disappearance, or at specific anniversaries relevant to the specific missing person's investigation (Moore, 2011). This limitation relates to both the physical recovery of the missing person and the emotional requirements of those left behind.

#### **4. The theoretical constructs specific to the study**

This section addresses three main theoretical explorations that are identified when the concept of community and missing are examined:

- 1) the absence of community ritual attached to the missing persons experience;
- 2) the stigma of being identified as being part of a group where membership is not welcomed; and,
- 3) the ways in which the media, and its use to search for missing people, might impact on the way the community understands missing or ambiguous loss.

This examination of community raises the question: if the loss is impacted upon by external influences (as noted by Boss, 2007), how does the way in which the community, or the outside world, perceive or interpret this hope for the loss to be finalised?

### *Ritual and the missing person*

When the literature addresses the issue of ‘being’ a family member of a missing person, it also begins to focus on the presence or absence of ritual. Glassock (2006) noted that the funeral is the most common ritual attached to loss. However, in the case of missing people, a funeral is not an appropriate way to acknowledge the loss, regardless of how long they have been gone. The absence of a body, the legal barriers preventing certain requirements as well as the differential grief (Gilbert, 2002) limit the use of common rituals when a person is absent. These understandings, validated by the narrative explorations of Clark (2006) and Glassock (2006) with families, have implications for the rituals that can be enacted to acknowledge the loss, especially if there are currently no designated rituals for people to employ when a person is missing.

In exploring ambiguous loss related to migration, Vargas (2008) investigated the notion that various rituals of connection create public and private spaces for people to acknowledge their loss. Here, ways of speaking to the community to show that a person has suffered a loss might be a way of reconnecting with the physical person or the emotional connection that is no longer here. Vargas (2008) uses examples such as public meetings, cultural events, and even use of social media, as ways to connect with the ambiguities of a loss that isn’t clear. To provide space for the enacting of rituals to ‘speak up’ about disconnection, that sense of ritual – of coming together to acknowledge the loss – might be a way of increasing a sense of connection to both the missing person and to other people living with similar losses.

Vargas (2008) explained that most cultures lack rituals for ambiguous loss and, as such, there is no automatic claim to space where the loss could be publicly validated. Glassock (2011) also connected the absence of ritual to the impact on the holding on to hope. He further explored that, when hoping for a positive outcome, the absence of some families' use of ritual was a way for them to not have to concede that the missing person would not return. Families referred to the use of traditional grief-based ritual as a 'nail in the coffin of hope' (Glassock, 2011, p. 87), where ritual signalled a sense of ending, of finality that families were not open to exploring then. Wayland (2007) found that, for some families, the concept of renaming the ritual to 'a celebration, so far' (p. 13) gave permission to acknowledge the person was not currently here but did not suggest a return was impossible. In a narrative study, NSW Attorney Generals Department (2005) found that participants thought the absence of available, or known, rituals was a reason in itself to not perform them. Without an automatic connection between missing and a way to acknowledge missing, families reported feeling more comforted to not enact a ceremony or service for fear of looking like they believed the missing person was not returning, as discovered by Wayland (2007). It may be that not having a community-based ritual made people reluctant to create new ones given the ambiguity that surrounds the social constructions of how people might respond to such a loss. The experiences of families, or individuals within family groups, to not engage in activities that could be misconstrued as ritual may have forced them to stand alone from the ways in which the 'group' of families of missing people usually respond to their loss.

Exploring these concepts of ritualisation leads to comparison of ritual with other cultures. In *Death, Bereavement and Mourning* (2005) Abramovitch, seeks, via a comparative ethnographic design, to understand what might be the difference between a good death and a bad death. Here, Abramovitch (2005) details how “ceremonies counteract the centrifugal forces of fear, dismay and demoralisation associated with death and reintegration of the shaken groups” morale’ (p. 54). They seek to assert what is at the core of that community – which may differ both within and between different cultures around the world. The review of the literature begins to uncover whether missing could be viewed as a ‘bad death’ – that the imagined trajectory of trauma that the missing person might engage with post-disappearance limits the capacity for the left behind to seek final acceptance or, as Boss notes, where the myth of closure is enacted.

In understanding the motivation behind not performing rituals, Goffman (1963) demonstrated that the use of rituals might increase the stigma of being left behind. Coming together because of the shared experience of a missing family member may increase the stigma or shame of having someone missing. In other ways, the sense of engaging media as a ritual for acknowledging loss may also allow families to connect with other families of missing people quite simply, in the way of identifying that they too belong to this group of the left behind. The outward facing statement that announces to the community that a person is currently experiencing the loss of a person who is missing may be the ritual or sign that announces involvement or membership to that group. This, explored in depth in the following section, is pertinent given that Clark (2006) found siblings of missing people felt guilt at not being able to ‘save’ or prevent the person from

disappearing. Whether this applies to the others related to the missing person is unknown, however, as a result people may feel more isolated than before. In talking openly about a person going missing, families appear forced into a space of making the private public, of admitting inclusion to a group they hadn't anticipated joining, and to live in the liminal space until news is revealed as to the missing person's whereabouts (Boss, 1999). This experience is most evident through the common use of the media to bring attention to the missing person and the search to locate.

### ***Belonging to a group where membership is not welcomed***

People living with the loss of a missing person are a group with common experiences – they are brought together in a space of living with the possibility of loss. The work of services like the Families and Friends of Missing People in NSW, Australia, found that families admitted to not wanting to be members of this group; their membership has been involuntary and, as such, caused by an external factor – the person who is missing. Glassock (2011) explored the additional stresses that many families within this group struggled with in terms of having to engage with law enforcement when they may never before have been in contact with police during their lifetime or had only limited contact. In responding to having someone missing, people were not able to draw on other common life experiences. As noted in Chapter One, ambiguous loss was not viewed as a typical or expected life occurrence. People did not expect missing to happen to them – their membership to this group was only realised through the action of speaking up, naming the fact that they were living with missing, in order to connect with other people who were also members of this 'group'.

Boss (1999), Clark (2007) and Glasscock (2011), in research specific to missing people, note that individuals tend to be referred to in the collective as ‘family members of missing people’. This title, given rather than taken, de-identifies the traits people may have commonly been known for; instead, they are only known then as people experiencing missing. So too, individuals who are missing often become de-identified over time, known only by their missing status and not by the person they had been prior to their disappearance.

Groups established in the US, UK, and in some Australian states have brought people together, each grappling with different aspects of missing. Groups often have minimal membership, with people noting that it is difficult to come together on specific days when they might not want to visit their experience of ‘missing’ at that time. Indeed, many of these groups fail, given they are often led by family members in the midst of their trauma – similar to groups established following bereavement by suicide or homicide. In addition to these challenges, families speak of not wanting to be a part of a group that they had no knowledge of prior to someone going missing in their lives – the group of those left behind. Goffman (1963) parallels this idea to the concept of identity, and the stigma of that identity, within the missing persons’ experience. The challenge in finding ‘the self’ if people are a member of a group that they do not wish to belong to and the challenge of identity management when the stigma of membership defines the person in ways other than they might describe themselves is part of the experience of learning to live with missing. Membership to this group is highlighted within the community not only by the existence of

media reports that refer to the missing person but also name the people who are searching. In this way, the media publicly identifies families as members of this (left behind) group that no one may have wanted to belong to in the first place.

This stigmatisation attached to either inclusion within this group, or a community's normative expectations as to how a family left behind should conduct themselves is at the core of Goffman's application of the stigma of the spoiled identity and its application to this study. What may underline this inclusion to the group of 'families of missing people' might be subject to what Goffman refers to as stereotypical responses, where the notion that hope should be held on to until there is certainty of a return or a resolution may be valid. Understanding who may not belong to this group and how this group is supposed to 'behave' has not yet been explored in a research setting – those who may exist on the periphery of family groups, or those not socially accepted to be speaking on behalf of the experiences of ambiguous loss might indeed not belong – individuals, such as de facto partners, gay or lesbian partners, step-children and step-parents who may not traditionally be viewed as family members. Doka (2002), in exploring disenfranchised grief, illustrates this point in the context of the grief of ex-spouses, where 'the sense of ambiguity' (p. 159) can continue after the death of the partner, where feelings of isolation occur when friends do not enquire about the person's grief around the loss or even when the workplace fails to acknowledge a sense of disenfranchisement. In a context of ambiguous loss, those less than clear lines between the lost person and the person sharing their experiences of being left behind tend to sit with either the parents or the current partner grieving that loss. The outlier

conversations that may surround the experiences of siblings of missing people, de facto partners, children and friends have been excluded from the media and community narrative which thereby involves a very minimal perspective about what ambiguous loss might look like.

Further to the recalibration of identity, the relationship shared with the missing person may also impact upon the identity that the individual left behind assumes post-missing. Prigerson and colleagues (1997) explored the response of traumatic grief in relation to the identity-defining aspects of the relationship with the person who was lost. If the role of carer, parent or partner was lost with the missing person, it may have manifested itself in the desperation attached to finding the person. Further, it may also have limited the person's capacity to view themselves as anything *but* the family member of the missing person.

### ***Interactions between media and the families of missing people***

Technology has allowed people to be increasingly connected to the outside world via print media, the radio, television, and the Internet. The use of media in missing person's investigations has been an on-going strategy by law enforcement as a way to broaden the possibility for the quick location of a missing person. In recent years families have also become media savvy in promoting their own requests for assistance in locating missing people. Given the use of media by families to attempt to locate their missing person, the evaluation of the role of media in the psychological wellbeing of those left behind was considered.

A recent magazine article that I authored (Wayland, 2012) explored the ways in which families of missing people had to develop media engagement skills to create leverage for their case, especially those involving long term missing people. I used an example from a mother of a woman missing for more than two decades who described how the family had to ‘pick and choose’ the times in which they engaged with media outlets to keep the case fresh and to not generate complacency over the publication of their daughter’s image. The challenge in relying on media, as noted by Moore (2011) in her work with families in the US, is that whilst families welcome media, its involvement is primarily selective, dependent on what is considered ‘newsworthy’. Moore describes this two-fold, where stories do not ‘click’ with the media or do not attract community engagement for a variety of reasons – where missing people who do not fit the stereotypical picture of a vulnerable person (young, white, having limited perceived fault in their disappearance) may find themselves without the media spotlight families desperately request.

Social media is also utilised by families of missing people, where they control the sharing of information, taking what might have historically been shared in a private manner now with public reach as well as consequences. Use of social media might be away from the input of law enforcement agencies as those left behind exhaust all available avenues to bring their missing person home. The action of using the media and sharing the image of the missing person may be an evolution of the use of the missing person’s poster shared in community spaces to alert people to the fact that a person’s whereabouts was unknown. Following the September 11 attacks, Jones and colleagues (2007)

found that the missing person's poster was a public performance for families left behind that created a sense of building a community "of curious and sympathetic onlookers" (p. 115). In addition to the action of using a poster to search, the ritual of using the missing person's picture as a way to show the pain of loss may be one of the first visual cues that demonstrates to the community the agony of being left behind (Walsh, 2007).

Panti and Sumiala (2009) note that using the media to demonstrate public mourning is not a new concept. Yet, the action or ritual of remembering the missing person via the media does not act as a way of mourning their loss. In the case of missing people, it may seek to reverse the loss by prompting people to share information to bring them home rather than solely alerting others they are gone. Perhaps in the way that enacting rituals via the media allows the community to restore social order by acknowledging the pain of loss, the publicising of missing people brings the community together to jointly hope for their return, for order to be established with the missing person's location, irrespective of when or if they are found. The ways in which the media is used may be layered – similar to the concepts of hope – linking both the practical need for the return and the acknowledgement of the impact of the loss. A recent high profile Australian investigation is that of the family of Daniel Morcombe, a 13-year-old abducted from Queensland in 2003 and whose remains were later found (in 2011). The family noted that the way they engaged the media allowed them to both remind people that they were still searching for their son's remains as well as repaying the kindness of the community for attempting to support them

through the abduction and continued disappearance of their son (Wayland, 2012).

### **Reframing ambiguous loss through the telling of stories**

The literature raises differing perspectives on the role of engaging media as a way to up-skill the community on ambiguous loss. Von Suhr (2003) suggested that media attention, or the ritual of telling ‘the’ story, may validate the experience of ambiguous loss by creating a space in the community where there may not have been one before. This space may offer the opportunity for people (not just those intimately connected to the missing person) to speak openly about what has happened. Being validated may keep people from being frozen to the time that the loss occurred by creating opportunities to have more social contact and community support. This can all be provided by media input. On the opposite spectrum, Wayland (2007) argued that continuing to speak about the time that the person disappeared potentially created a sense of ‘stuckness’ or frozenness (see Boss, 1999) because of the continual reliving and re-traumatising of the experience of loss. The action of speaking to the media forces people to revisit the trauma of the disappearance with minimal research to support that speaking about the missing person will bring the missing person home, where for some the story stays the same while everyone else may move on.

Kaplan (2005), in establishing the role of the media in publicising traumatic events – of which missing in some circumstances can be included – shaped a

community's ideology about how that "event was to be perceived" (p. 13). The media may be the only connection for individuals in a community to have an eyewitness account of the details of what occurred in a case where a person has gone missing. The eyewitness event may be strengthened by the inclusion of those left behind, which is often prompted to plea to the community for their missing person's return.

As a result, a public versus private exploration accompanies the decision to use the media. In making a plea about the safe return of the missing person, private details of that missing person have to be shared. If data from the Australian Institute of Criminology (James et al., 2008) is an example, then details such as mental health status may need to be named and shared. Yet, the impact on family members between what remains private and what should be distributed to ensure that the missing person is located is not known. During National Missing Persons Week 2012, the sibling of a missing man who had been diagnosed with depression prior to vanishing a year earlier, spoke about the complexity in deciding how much needed to be shared in order to bring the brother home (Wayland, 2011). This included: decisions about images that could be used, statements regarding his medical needs, and concerns for what psychological state he might be in. In the end, the family decided to keep some details private. If media is the only opportunity for families of missing people to speak openly about their loss, what is the impact of having to edit the public explorations because of the private pain of what that revealing might entail?

The literature exploring the ways in which information is shared in the community may raise more questions than it satisfies. If the overall goal is to focus on the location of the missing person, how can the telling of the story create opportunities for people to explore their own loss? Glassock argued that speaking to the community about missing through the media only serves to publicise the details of the missing person: “they do not see the cost to those families” (2011, p. 120). There is currently no literature on this challenge about the benefit of speaking up about the hope for the return of the missing person or the loss as a way of validating the experience of ambiguity.

### **Conceptualising the research project**

The review of the literature and the theories developed within the realm of ambiguous loss and missing people notes that: first, there is loss; then, there is ambiguity; and then, there is the personal exploration as to what it may mean to be left behind (Boss, 2007). This exploration not only relates to the impact of the loss but to the connection to the missing person and the social constructions present about the ways in which hope should be engaged with or defined.

Glassock (2012) asserted that using a grief work framework to approach the gathering and analysis of data relevant to the experience of ambiguous loss “does not provide a sufficient theoretical framework on which to base this [missing persons] study” (p. 45). In exploring the literature relevant to bereavement in comparison to ambiguous loss, the grief work framework extends from the premise that the loss is complete – with the physical relationship severed. Freud (1917) speaks of the work of mourning, noting that

the role of the person grieving was to review and express the full range of emotion where, as interpreted by Bonanno and Kaltmann (1991), “they were able to detach themselves” (p. 718). Grief theorists, prior to the last twenty years, focussed on the concept of grief and on work as the “major theoretical construct to explain how people cope with bereavement” (Stroebe, 2001, p. 855). What Stroebe terms as a grief work hypothesis asserts that “it is necessary to bring the reality of loss into awareness to avoid complications in the course of grief” (p. 855) irrespective of the movement within the field since this time. Bonanno (2004, 2005, 2009) and Bonanno and Kaltmann (1999) explore arguments around conceptualising, analysing, avoiding or even embracing the loss, meaning that the missing component does not allow for these theoretical frameworks to be incorporated.

The grief and bereavement literature reviewed for this study asserts that the engagement with the loss occurs from the moment that the loss is confirmed or realised. The additional layer of ambiguity and the social constructions around how those left behind should ‘hold on to hope’ do not allow for a start point to be identified. As stated within the exploration of bereavement literature, without a definitive loss, the grief work completed post-disappearance is not applicable to the study of ambiguous loss.

This study extends Glasscock’s (2011) reflections, where understandings of grief and bereavement provide scope in approaching the lived experienced, without assuming the experiences are parallel. The element of ambiguity changes the trajectory of the loss endured. The need for more detailed work on the impact

of missing requires application of the landmark work of Boss (1999) – one that stands ambiguous loss aside from the concepts of grief. The theories of ambiguous loss, the assumptive world (in relation to traumatic loss), and the ways in which hope has been explored from a grief and loss perspective provide a foundation from which this study has grown. There are ever-changing reactions and differing degrees of hope for those left behind when a person remains missing. The lens in which the literature was reviewed, and the theoretical framework conceptualised, has confirmed both the presence of hope, and the way that these individuals engage with the community, are fluid and flexible depending on how much is shared and in what circumstances the person is missing.

The challenge in identifying ways to move forward in understanding the theoretical implications of hope and loss relate to not only the physical and psychological losses when someone is missing, but the two populations whose experiences are noted – the left behind *and* the missing person. Glassock (2011) found that the development of a theoretical framework needed to address both the experience of the individuals who had someone missing and the missing person themselves. Both stories need to be present and acknowledge:

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 person who is missing (Glassock, 2011, xvii).

The emphasis on continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) provides the space between the missing and the left behind to withstand the complexities of the loss, regardless of whether or not the disappearance is

extended. Boss (1999) as well as Klass' (2006) continuing conversations about the topic and the cultural narratives that need to be woven into the individual grief narratives when exploring the role of continued connection to the person who is lost apply to this study where the broadening of our understanding that the simple connection between a person and the person who is missed is not bound by the circumstance of them not being here, but by the status of the investigation, their connection to them prior to them vanishing and the way the community embraces or disenfranchises their loss. Here, hope is attached to the relational bond with the lost person and how this hope is tied in, in some ways, with the need for resolution.

The following chapter speaks further to the complexities of hope in a context of ambiguity by seeking ideas that may have already been researched and how these insights might shape engagement with the participants who chose to contribute to the study. The significant theories of grief that shape the capacity to explore the research question have been reviewed within this chapter. Framing an understanding of ambiguous loss when applied over time to the experiences of the left behind against the significant grief, theorists identify that ambiguous loss cannot be explored from a grief work perspective. Theories of ambiguous loss, of hope and the social constructions of hope and loss that led to the development of the research design, created capacity to review the literature specific to the missing persons' field as a way of beginning to understand hope when loss remains uncertain.

## Chapter Three: A review of hope

*Hope in reality is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man ~ Nietzsche (1878)*

When someone is missing, thoughts of hope are attached to the relational bond to the person who is lost as well to their physical safety and return. Those who search make substantial investment where the return of the physical person is paramount. In Chapter One, the definition of key terms introduced the challenges in defining hope given its inclusion as an innate value of the human condition. In her landmark publication and clinical applications of ambiguous loss, Boss (1999) began to explore how absence is not simply about having someone here and then gone, but of hope for the return and answers if the loss remains unresolved (as noted by Wayland, 2007). There is limited primary research relating to how individuals navigate the experience of hope after being left behind when a person is missing, especially in the longer term. In Boss' (2006) later work on trauma and resilience, the implications of hope looking through a lens of culture, spirituality and the path of time were uncovered. The layers that exist beneath the assertion that an ambiguous loss has occurred are enacted within the results section of this thesis.

In the development of *Supporting those who are left behind* (Wayland, 2007), the inclusion of a trauma timeline (p. 16) was explored in a therapeutic setting. This timeline engaged families and friends left behind in relation to the role of real or imagined trauma triggered by the disappearance of the missing person. The reasoning behind its development was to acknowledge the emotions triggered by the disappearance, with emphasis on mapping the lead up to the loss

as well as family of origin issues impacting on the connection to the person who was no longer here. Examples from families who spent significant time within the mental health care system assisted in the development of this therapeutic tool where the incident of the person vanishing was another trauma in a long history of battles with health care providers as well as the anticipatory mourning for those who had been concerned for an extended period that a person might suicide. The left behind's prediction as to how they might hope for a future that was not marred by on-going trauma was identified via the trauma timeline where notions of looking back to the time prior to the disappearance were included. The clinical application of this timeline has not been progressed given the move from direct service delivery to the research field. It does, however, assist in the way that I conceptualised the research question posed within this study.

The theoretical explorations of ambiguity and hope highlight that to endure loss, an individual's worldview will shift (irrespective of whether or not the person remains missing). The inclusion of loss and ambiguity in a family's rhetoric of real or imagined traumas that might occur during their lifetime was uncovered. It is through this lens that a conceptual framework can be built, where the role of hope and the ways in which the community acknowledge the need for the return of the missing person are highlighted. These frameworks are identified in conjunction with the social constructions of hope within this chapter.

### **Is hope socially and/or subjectively constructed?**

The role of hope, in the context of missing people, is intertwined within broader, existential questions of needing to seek answers in a community where solutions are desirable. It can be argued that hope is subjectively and socially constructed as a way to provide space for people to learn to tolerate the ambiguity that accompanies a missing person's investigation where individuals hope for an outcome. The continued exploration to understand the purpose or role of hope will provide clearer understanding of the ways in which people live in the space created when a person disappears.

This chapter reviews the significance of hope theory in a context of both bereavement and ambiguity. It identifies the conceptualisations of hope developed by listening to the narratives of loss and the potential re-emergence of hope as a sign that a bereavement period is lessening. Hope, as an innate value, may not be socially constructed given its existence within the individual, however, the common narrative shared by families of missing people and the theories derived from the studies conducted with those left behind speak of the merging between the individual response to loss and that of the community surrounding them. Gergin (1985), in the social constructivist movement in the field of psychology, notes that this merging of exogenic –world-centred – thoughts versus endogenic – mind centred – thoughts exist in response to how we react to life events. Viewing the constructs of hope within these two spaces – the exogenic and endogenic – impacts the way that loss is responded to and the capacity, as noted by Boss (1999), to be able to tolerate that ambiguity. The question as to whether hope is socially or subjectively constructed appears to be

a moot point if hope is viewed as an innate value in the human experience. The impact of this ‘mind and world centred’ role of conceptualising hope is significant in understanding the experiences of those left behind when someone is missing.

### ***What is hope theory?***

Snyder et al (1991), an American theorist, notes that hope is a process that allows individuals to attain goals. His distinction between hope on a focussed outcome rather than a standard exclamation that people use when all avenues have been explored (for example, ‘well, all we can do is hope!’) reframed how hope was defined. This goal-directed cognitive process suggests that the action of ‘hoping’ has an end point when the action of hoping achieves the desired outcome. These goals can be viewed as desires (see Snyder and colleagues, 1991), where hopeful thinking leads to pathways –constructive thought that leads the person to their desired outcome.

Hope theorists have also attempted to capture ways in which the concept or value might be measured. The Miller Hope Scale (by Miller & Powers, 1988) and Snyder and colleagues’ Hope scale (1996) (which was then also adapted for children) were developed. The focus of the scales, which Snyder et al. (1991) state should be called a ‘future scale’ when administering, is utilised within nursing and psychotherapy interventions. The scales seek to explore and measure the way that future aspirations about the life of an individual can be attributed to the individual’s levels of hope.

In contrast to these scales, the Beck (1988) Hopelessness scale tested reaction to the future and feelings of loss of motivation and expectation – almost the opposite of the Miller and Snyder scales, yet potentially yielding similar results. On reflection after reviewing these scales, the question of a hope inventory was considered in terms of exploring the participants' narratives through a mixed method application. It was decided, given the lack of explorations that specifically focus on the role of hope in a context of ambiguity, that this emerging field required narratives that could illustrate a foundation for which a potential scale could be built following the study's completion. The literature of Boss (1999) paints the picture of multiple narratives in response to the loss of a missing person. The inclusion of a scale to map these responses might, at this stage within this emerging field, lessen the richness of the results.

There are also more fluid conceptualisations of hope discovered in reviewing the literature that do not attempt to provide a definitive example. Hope researchers such as Nekolachiuk, Jevne and Maguire (1999) and Keen (2000) have shifted away from the concept that to embrace hope is to embrace optimism or hopefulness. Instead, hope is understood as a multidimensional concept that looks at what is occurring in a person's life and their environment. It is a concept that is grounded within the research question that seeks to understand hope from a storytelling narrative at that moment in time for the research participant. By incorporating the work of present day hope theorists, the focus in this review was to explore whether or not hope could have multiple understandings when coupled with ambiguous loss – and if waiting for a resolution required a sense of hopefulness. The contradictions noted within that statement not only relate to the

perceived hopelessness (Flaskas, 2007 – an Australian researcher with a special interest in hope and family therapy) of some situations, but the emerging challenge of what hope may signify. The inclusion of the ambiguous loss response of ‘well at least we have hope’ acknowledged by a number of the participants of this study demonstrate that hope may be all that is left when all possible search investigations are complete. Conversely the inclusion of hope, as noted by Edkins (2011), being attached to the action of sharing news or images soon after the person was lost situate hope in a place where the trauma of the loss has only just occurred and the potential that life might return to ‘normal’ can be achieved. If ambiguous loss suggests the unknown, what does the role of hope play for families in the long-term?

### **Conceptualising hope**

The shift from attempting to define hope and its inclusion as a response to loss was introduced in Chapter Two given, as Nekolaichuk and colleagues (1999) found, that hope had “intangible qualities” (p. 592). The review of the literature illustrates that hope, as a way of understanding the why and the how and the thoughts of the future for those living post-loss, warrants its inclusion in the discourse of bereavement. Snyder (2000) suggested “hope is the glue that holds together the rest of the human condition, as well as the energy that moves us ahead” (p. xxi). From a bereavement perspective, hope was integrated in the narratives of individuals left behind after significant traumatic losses – hope existed in the depths of transient sadness and the way that individuals conceptualised their new worldview with the person no longer being present. Within this review, relevant hope theory is explored from public and private

perspectives, similar to those noted within the literature on ambiguous loss.

Within both perspectives, hope on an individual level was directly related to the hope on a societal level, and hope came and went from the lived experience of people enduring challenging life circumstances.

So how can hope be conceptualised? Over the centuries hope has been explored philosophically. Sophocles viewed the concept of hope as a “human foible that served to stretch out suffering” (Keen, 2000, p. 4). Similarly, Plato chastised those who listened to hope, calling it a ‘foolish counsellor’. These pervasive ideas were opposite to the perception that hope was optimistic; rather, it was an illusion that lacked substance, a false promise of what might be to come. Keen (2000), a Canadian researcher exploring the link between hope and profound change, asserts that in exploring the historical contextual background to hope there were both theological and philosophical explorations that connected understanding between how we viewed hope and how it works. The hermeneutic-phenomenological study, interviewing researchers to understand the inclusion of hope in changing from a destructive lifestyle to a constructive lifestyle, identified hope as a belief system. This system was identified as a belief in, or a relationship with, God, as well as – and perhaps more fitting for this study – about the ways in which history and culture “influence one’s views on hope” (2000, p. 20). Hope and spirituality are key components of the later work of Boss (2006), where she discovers that “hope after ambiguous loss, trusting in God, Allah, or an entity larger than oneself gives comfort to many” (p. 187) – where external forces impact the connection between hope and the physical self.

Prior to the 1960s, Keen (2000) states that hope was explored from a literary perspective as “philosophical and metaphorical in nature” (p. 7). Indeed, one of the earliest recorded explorations of hope was the story of Pandora in Greek mythology, where Zeus attempted to seek revenge on humankind after Prometheus had shared his stolen knowledge of how to make fire with them. Zeus sent Pandora to earth with a box filled with evil creatures and instructions not to open the box. However, Pandora’s curiosity got the better of her and she opened the box, unleashing all of the creatures – greed, fear, malice, envy, and revenge. Only one creature remained in the box – hope. This myth places hope in a context where we can view it either as a blessing or a curse for humanity: is hope an illusion to blind us from the realities of life, or is it humanity’s only salvation? This question is a common thread in understanding present-day tensions about hope’s usefulness and a necessary pondering for this research question.

In comparing historical contexts of hope and the accompanying focus on loss, the questions surrounding the potential to define hope sit primarily with understanding the value of hope. The idea of hope changing over time may also impact the way that this study proceeds, given that previous studies have spoken of a trajectory of hope (Clark, 2006) and the connection between loss and time. The impact of Menninger’s *Academic lecture on Hope* (1959) was that hope was a “basic but elusive ingredient in our daily work” (p. 481) and that its inclusion in responding to people at significant life stages confirms that the role of health care providers was to enhance hope in others. Menninger, an American psychiatrist who delivered the presidential address on hope to the American

Psychiatric Association, “encouraged us to place thinking at the core of hope definition. This was the antithetical view of many people who, at the time, equated hope with emotion” (Elliot 2005, p. 107). Snyder (2000) suggested that hope has perhaps shifted to more goal-orientated concepts in the last fifty years, with positive expectations for the ideals or ambitions that people wish to attain. Herth (2000, 2001) conceptualises hope in a context of goal attainment. However, her additional layered concept (that, like Snyder (2000), seeks to address the cognitive and behavioural dimension of hope) also seeks to understand the contextual dimension of hope. It notes that ideas of connectedness and belonging can significantly guide interventions from healthcare professionals and potentially enhance the quality of life for those seeking to understand hope. It should be noted that Herth’s research focus was in the area of medical illness and interpersonal loss. The essence of these reviews of hope by a number of significant hope theorists and in comparison to the inclusion of hope in the literature on ambiguity demonstrate the friction between naming hope as a reaction to events or a value that exists innately within people. The analysis of the literature demonstrates two issues: 1) that hope exists specific to certain situations, as noted by Eliot (2005) but that 2) Understanding hope also demonstrates that individuals’ engagements with this concept (and more significantly how a person interprets the larger stories about themselves) is realised. Comparing these contrasting views, and also acknowledging the significant impact of hope post-loss, are now explored.

### *Hope in a bereavement context*

Hope may impact on a person's capacity to survive a traumatic loss by allowing them to engage in their possible future. Ong, Edwards, and Bergman (2006) stated that "hope is an important source of resilience in later adulthood: both within and across individuals, hope appears to shape the meaning of daily stressors" (p. 1271). The inclusion of hope in the wish to move forward – an extension of hope – allowed for the possibility that both acceptance of the loss and the passing of time may lessen people's grief. Lester (1995) also suggested that hope is not an isolated or separate experience – it is communal and relational. Here, hope exists in shared experiences with others, sharing the disconnection of the relationship and their thoughts about moving on. In exploring the opposite, the hopelessness of loss, Lester (1995), in seeking the role of hope in pastoral care counselling, spoke of identifying that the despair experienced by an individual is perhaps a private act that is experienced in isolation rather than in a relationship, that people "infected by hopelessness are less likely to have meaningful relationships or a significant community" (p. 96) given that the lack of hope might make them feel less connected.

Ai, Cascio, and Santangelo (2005), in their study investigating the relationship of hope and spirituality in students' post September 11 attacks in New York City, explored hope as a notion not often attached to the crisis or immediate response to individuals experiencing a loss or trauma. The study of student responses hypothesised that "hope and spiritual meaning to be inversely related to the symptom levels of depression and anxiety" (p. 530) in a select group of college students. The study found that there might have been some

positive character strengths in individuals post September 11 and that ideas of hope, spirituality and mental wellness could be seen as a result of living through a traumatic period. What was evident in literature on alternate disasters was a focus on the restoration of basic amenities and immediate needs of individuals; there was little exploration of hope when so much remained uncertain. The months following a significant traumatic event found that ideas of hope eventually emerged in the participant's language. The challenge of introducing the concept of hope to those who may present as lacking in hope (rather than the value-laden concept of being hopeless) may be a professional challenge for individuals providing supportive interventions. It may appear insensitive, in the face of what people have endured, to focus on what people might be hopeful of for the future. The timeliness of hope, and the role of hope in understanding a person's capacity to respond to their loss, is "important to assess in its relation to mental health" (Ai et al, 2005, p. 524). Hope may be a sign of how a person is functioning in relation to their loss, where they sit in relation to the crisis versus long-term responses to loss, and their use of hope in the context of surviving a significant life event. Along a continuum of loss, the experience of hope suggests that focusing on what the outcomes may be (for the life of the person left behind) is a concept that can also be attached to the experience of having someone missing.

Hope was also explored as a response or a reaction to an event or trauma where ideas of time and future ways of coping might be realised, where the response, commonly viewed as an emotional engagement with the loss, might differ from a reactive experience where individuals actively engage with the

ideas of moving forwards, of hoping. The bereavement literature that identified hope did not explore hope in the sense of it being a concrete belief and that for some bereaved persons, “the death of a loved one is also a death of the future” (Chow, 2010, p. 333). Instead, and similar to that in missing persons’ literature, it had multiple pathways: hope was an indicator that a person was beginning to survive their loss by being hopeful for the future (Snyder, 2000). Despite these assertions, the literature did not articulate how these hopeful motivations occurred. Cutcliffe (1998), in a case study analysis of the relationship between complicated bereavement process and the presence or influence of hope, noted that, “whilst the theories indicate implicitly the re-emergence of hope in the bereft individual as a result of the counselling, there is a dearth of specific reference to how this inspiration occurs” (1998, p. 754). As a bereavement therapist, Cutcliffe concludes that the re-emergence of hope in the bereft is linked with a completed bereavement process – that the existence of hopefulness is “bound to a complicated bereavement process” (p. 760) The inspiration for the inclusion of hope in the narratives of those left behind post bereavement, not post missing, depends on a number of undiscovered factors that warrant further investigation.

In his later work Cutcliffe (2004) asserted that there was a link between the concept of hope, as defined by being attached to thoughts of the future, where death was “one of the most profound losses” (p. 15) a person could experience and that ideas of moving forwards could be impacted by the disconnection of the bond with the person. Notions as to how a person might manage the future clouded with ideas of being without that person and that hope existed in the

space where this loss was realised and accepted. Harvey, Carlson, Huff, and Green (2001), in *Meaning Reconstruction and the experience of loss*, contended that “the value of remembering and translation of memory into stories in dealing with the spectrum of life’s hardships and dilemmas” (p. 232), where the theme in reviewing the literature on loss embraced the concept of storytelling as a way to socially construct processes in grieving and adapting to that loss.

Cutcliffe’s (1998, 2004) articulation of hope, similar to Neimeyer and colleagues (2002), looks at relational bonds between the person who is here and the person who is gone. However, as with ideas of hope being a goal-oriented, theoretical framework of connectedness, Cutcliffe maintains that bonds to the lost person can be enhanced by hope, which in turn assists with complicated bereavement reactions, being that “they consider that there is hope; that the future is not hopeless” (Cutcliffe, 1998, p. 607) through ideas of connecting to the person who is lost. The assertion that hope, in this setting, focuses on the action of moving forward – onwards from loss – as a way to engage with the future, steps away from the idea of hope being a construct that appears when uncertainty is overwhelming.

The role of hope in the process of loss is linked in the literature by reference to “re-emergence” (noted in Cutcliffe, 2004; Ai et al., 2005) at some point following the loss or death of a person close to the individual. Cutcliffe (2004) discussed the possibility that a re-emergence of hope may signal the end to a complicated grieving process. In reviewing this concept of hope and its emergence, grief theorists noted that the role of hope and its multi-layers defined

how some key aspects of hope may be included in the loss experience as: hope for a change in situation (Cutcliffe, 1998, 2004); hope as a way of responding to the possible future that lay ahead for the individual (Neimeyer, 2010); and, hope for the individual's worldview to return to a normative, non-static experience (Worden, 2008). Here, hope in a bereavement context identifies the differences between what hope *is* and what it may *signal* (for individuals and groups experiencing trauma and loss, and those tasked with caring for them). Cutcliffe (2004) identified hope as an individual concept that is multidimensional and future-oriented, emphasising that it is “not static, it's dynamic” (p. 2) where, despite its inclusion as a goal-orientated focus, its meaning may change. In a continuation of multidimensional experience, hope becomes a positive outlook that “fuels energies and investment to rebuild lives, revise dreams, renew attachments and create positive legacies to pass on to future generations” (Walsh, 2007, p. 213). Using the introduction of hope as a sign of an individual's investment in the future (which epitomises the original definitional complexities of hope noted within this review), the person is able to demonstrate the capacity to move on from the loss and begin living again – a concept of hope theory not relevant to the experience of ambiguous loss.

Chan, Sha, Leung, and Gilbert (2011) warn against the risk of using hope too soon as a way of connecting with bereaved and traumatised individuals. The most common narrative of those sharing their experiences in responding to a traumatic loss is a corresponding “loss of sense and faith” (2011, p. 52). Following a major earthquake in Southern China, Chan and colleagues identified that people needed to “adapt to the chaos and rebuild their hopes and dreams as

well as their livelihood as soon as possible” (2011, p. 52). However, no exploration is provided, either in research and review of current trends, on where and when hope should be included. At what stage should people be provided a space to explore their hope and what signals might practitioners look for in introducing hope into the counselling space?

Gaps in the research remain about where hope sits across a continuum of responses to loss – its multiple meanings and multiple uses. Within the literature on hope and loss, the sense of moving forward can be viewed as a movement away from the trauma of the suddenness of the loss and a focus on the strategies for ways to continue to live with the loss that has occurred. Cutcliffe’s (2004) definition of hope as being fluid and non-static may then allow for an individual, experiencing the loss, to interpret hope as flexible – choosing how it can be employed when responding to a significant life event. Hope and recovery from the trauma appear to be intrinsically linked by hope theory. The disconnection between these understandings and the research question is how the concept of recovery appears absent from the narrative of ambiguity, given the uncertainty of resolution.

### ***Hope and ambiguity***

Hope and ambiguous loss, where the loss is something other than as a result of a missing person, has been included within this review to provide a robust examination of hope from an unresolved perspective. Hope is a continuous thread throughout the literature when loss is explored – the previous section attests to this. Canadian researchers Duggleby, Williams, Wright and Bollinger

(2009), in exploring hope for those living with dementia and their caregivers, note that discovered hope was a “complex construct”. The constructivist grounded theory study of 16 participants concluded that the main concern for participants was “fading hope – that the participants leaned on their hope every day to keep providing caregiving and to not give up, and found, at times, that their hope wasn’t as strong and was fading: ‘But then it [hope] fades away’” (p. 517). The hope that existed within this living loss, where ambiguity as to how the disease would progress and the capacity for the carers to keep moving forwards, showed that hope changed and that fear accompanied that shift.

Australian public health researcher Perlesz (1999), in studying the complex responses to trauma and the role of bearing witness for those in a therapeutic position, notes that hope can co-exist with despair in places where ambiguity surrounds, such as following a traumatic brain injury. The “yearning for what had been lost” (p. 14) can be observed, but the inclusion of hope and despair together speaks to the “magnitude of the tragedy along with the hope for the positives that can emerge through suffering” (p. 14). The similarities in context noted between these observations and the connections with those families of missing people related to ideas of the trauma of what has occurred and connected to existing in the two spaces at once – in hope and despair, in the past and the future, with thoughts of the person who is missing.

One of the challenges in exploring the literature was the attempt to grasp what role hope plays, raising the question ‘what are individuals hoping for?’ Flaskas (2007) identified, through reflective praxis, the visions of possibility that

hope, and in turn hopelessness, affords those enduring difficult times. In this space, where the responses co-exist, significant losses, such as those that are ambiguous by nature, can also be applied. The assertion by Snyder (2000) that hope and hopelessness may be separate cannot be applied to the experience of missing given that the conceptualisations that hope is fluid (see Clark, 2007 and Flaskas, 2007).

As with Perlesz (1999), Flaskas (2007) asserts that the themes of hope and hopelessness are challenged by the fact that they are not “in inverse proportion” (p. 189), where this revelation is applied to a case example of a young person’s self-harm behaviours and the resulting engagement with hope for the parents left behind. “The parent/s often alternate between powerless distress and anger, and the beginning blank despair of anticipatory grief” (p. 189) and that hope and hopelessness cycle between these two reactions for both the young person and the parents on the periphery of the behaviour. The work of Boss, (1999) Clark (2006) and Glassock (2011) all go on to emphasise that, to exist in a space where missing lives, the ever-moving action between hopefulness and hopelessness may be intrinsically linked, where both can be enacted at the same time.

Unpacking these co-constructions begins to explore the idea that hope is not merely a construct or a way of thinking but a “world of meaning” (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002, p. 239) that provides layers of learning for people to engage with in life and in living with an ambiguous loss.

In exploring resilience and ambiguous loss in a context of hope, Seifter Abrams (2001) suggested hope was a tool to enacting resilience through its use

as a coping mechanism and in turn identified that individuals are able to adapt to crisis and adversity by making meaning from their experiences that engage with thoughts of the ‘may be’ outcomes as a result of their loss. Boss (1999) suggested that, with the experience of an ambiguous loss, meaning making and challenges to an individual’s worldview appear to remain similar to those experiencing more definitive types of losses – losses where the outcomes are known. There is a tie-in of hope into these concepts of meaning-making that requires further exploration around how hope is introduced, whether or not it is an implicit function of ambiguity, and if it acts as a coping mechanism for those facing uncertain loss.

Hope is noted as a common reaction in times of ambiguity in the work of Boss and Seifert Abrams. However, as with Glasscock’s (2011) exploration of searching within (as explained as searching inside or within a person’s emotional responses) as well as the practical searching (outside, the external search), hope has yet to be explored from a multitude of layers and accompanying meaning. This raises the question as to whether or not the inclusion of hope can be an outward sign of moving onwards or merely just a logical inclusion when faced with missing – a concept this study seeks to respond to. Similar trends to those noted within the missing persons’ literature, namely that the purpose and nature of hope are not universally defined in relation to loss but that hope as a *response* to loss, is most certainly present.

*Has hope been specifically explored in response to someone missing?*

Hope is a constant thread in the literature reviewed of the narrative reflections of the families of missing people yet, as with the research on hope and bereavement, the function and role of hope as a response has not been investigated. The very nature of a person disappearing is closely aligned with hope: hopeful explorations about the potential return, the engagement with ideas of the sense of not knowing being resolved, or for the situation to return to life pre-loss. However, the literature focus is twofold: on one hand there is limited hope related to the individual's thoughts of the future or investment in the self, and on the other, that hope is primarily centred upon the return of the individual who is missing. As noted in the opening sections of this chapter, hope is an ongoing, flexible process where the concepts are revised while the person is missing. The review of the significant studies (see Clarke, 2006; Wayland, 2007; Boss, 1999, 2002; Jones et al., 2007) centred on missing and ambiguity found that some had to live alongside the thoughts of the person who was missing, with the hope that the future may reveal new information.

Clarke (2007) explored a trajectory of hope in relation to ambiguous losses, as detailed in Chapter Two. This model supports Cutcliffe's (2004) notion of a non-static state of hope where losses are not as clear-cut as those referenced in bereavement literature. In Clark's trajectory, the initial stages of hope relied on the safe, physical location of the missing person, which over time led to an acceptance of the missing state where the hope focused on the location of the sibling "so they might be put to rest" (2007, p. 180). Parallel to these concepts, hope was also about the left behind person's capacity to reach a

state where they had “peace of mind” (Clarke, 2007, p. 18) in the midst of the ongoing loss that was perpetuated by the person’s missing status. It should also be noted that Clarke identified that, regardless of the type of loss, “hope provides a certain order and direction that undergirds individuals as they test reality” (2007, p. 18).

Biehal and colleagues (2003) argued a continuum of missing, where hope is plotted against the experience depending on the status of the investigation, the time since disappearance, and the general approach of the person left behind to finding ways to survive their loss. Here, hope tied in to the internal exploration of the left behind’s worldview and their strategies to exist between the person being here and the person possibly returning, where hope became a proactive experience, not just a passive exploration of their response to loss.

Waring (2001) found that families of missing people all reflected upon their hope in terms of being hopeful, hopeless, having false hope, and holding out for hope of answers and outcomes. Glasscock (2011, p. 46) articulated that families “who vacillated between hope and despair in their search for the missing person could act out the elements of the dual process model without using the researcher’s language”. Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) dual process model highlighted the way in which people oscillate between acknowledging the loss of a close connection with thoughts of how their own lives might move forward. The inclusion of hope may be a concept that is moveable depending on the thoughts about the loss and the strategies employed to survive that loss.

Glassock (2011) went on to explore the juxtaposition of hopelessness and hopefulness. Similar to the one explored by Flaskas (2007), missing impacted on a person's worldview and their need to make meaning despite everything around the person potentially being hopeless. The way in which people attempted to remain connected to the missing person was often closely aligned with the holding on to hope or the letting go of it, depending on what was happening with the investigation. The internal and external struggle of hope intertwined between the practicalities of the investigation and the battle to remain optimistic. This makes a conversation on hope a vital component of the lived experience of the left behind. Hope also plays a significant role in providing motivation to continue to search in the hope of locating the missing person.

### ***Hope and the physical search***

The experience of families of missing people is often likened to a metaphorical rollercoaster ride of highs and lows, depending on the status of the case, the media, or even an individual's own reflections about what may have happened to the missing person. Glassock (2011) and Wayland (2007) assert that families regularly visit the psychological spaces between hope and despair as they await news, alongside the need to continue their life and move forward. Ideas noted earlier relating to media explorations may also impact on this flexibility of engagement, where hope appears to exist in a liminal space between the person being both here and gone.

Hope has both practical and psychological implications for those who wait. For example, the actions of searching and hoping for an outcome can impact the

day-to-day life of those left behind as well as their emotional wellbeing.

Glasscock (2011) identified that the very nature of searching, of looking for the missing person, implied that families must place hope on the possibility of an outcome. The other practical components in the physicality of the hope demonstrated by families are the turning to the community and the media to invite them to also hope for the missing person's return.

Hope is not just a personal engagement: this review reveals that part of the problematic inclusion of hope in the missing persons' concept may be that, in sharing ideas of hope, the notion of hope no longer just resonates with the left behind, it becomes a community concept. The review noted that placing posters in community meeting places, talking to journalists and conducting media interviews all identify the mutual hope and expectation placed on the safe return of the missing person.

Disasters such as the multiple traumas and reports of missing people following the September 11, 2001 attacks in United States epitomised the role of hope in the holding on to what may be possible in terms of the location of an individual. Edkins (2011) reviewed the multiple posters created by people searching for individuals missing in New York. The collection of images were described as "multiple bundles of hope" (Edkins, 2011, p. 72) – these images made a connection between the person who was lost and the hope for them to be located. Ai and colleagues explored the presence and absence of hope as a way for people to survive their loss, where hope was "the close cognate of optimism" (2005, p. 526). Optimism or hope only rose sometime after the event, where

people could begin to “realise one’s desired expectations” (p. 526), namely that the missing person was found alive initially, and then perhaps physical remains returned if the situation extends.

Jones and colleagues (2007) and Edkins (2011) both explored the use of public appeals following the September 11 attacks. Jones et al. (2007) explored the use of the missing person’s poster and image as a “subjunctive voice of photography which creates an “as if” space of possibility, hope” (p. 108). This drew attention, to what Jones et al., 2007 described as “curious onlookers” to engage in an opportunity to believe that in the liminal space between the person last being seen and possibly confirmed as being dead, to the image portrayed of the collective hope for a positive outcome. Edkins (2011) noted that the use of missing persons’ posters post-September 11 were “perhaps an appeal for something to fill that gap and a beginning of a narrative of death” – that the search and hope for the return of the missing person was embedded in the physical aspects of the search, that the action of hanging missing persons’ posters, willing the community to share news of a positive outcome, was tinged with the hope of those left behind. Recent research findings exploring the experience of returned missing people have explored the concept of “geographical imagination” (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013). The researchers concluded that the action of ‘asking where?’ was a persistent and invasive process enacted by those left behind and that those imaginations “can relate to the pragmatic process of search and police liaison, but also can lead families to revise why the absence occurred and for what purpose” (Parr and Stevenson, 2013, p. 13). Hope for answers related to the reasons for the disappearance

appeared to be noted alongside the physical yearning for the person's whereabouts to be revealed

***If someone is missing, does hope always exist?***

Boss argued that “people need hope despite ambiguous loss” (2010, p145). Hope allows for opportunities for self-discovery. This was also explored by Wayland (2007) in terms of posttraumatic growth of those left behind following a disappearance, termed “opportunities for growth”, heavily inspired by the work of Neimeyer and colleagues (2006) and meaning-making post loss, where individuals seek to use their lived experience to effect change for themselves – with a focus on future orientation. For some families there is also a sense that, even if they cannot change their situation, they may have the capacity to change the experience for someone else. This can create a sense of purpose and meaning, however, if this “proactive response is to the detriment of a person’s wellbeing, then this should be explored in the counselling room” (Wayland, 2007, p. 23). Boss (2010) went on to state that “becoming more spiritual helps” (p. 145) as it allowed the individual to focus less on the internal agony of the loss and more on a hopeful outlook in terms of moving forwards with one’s life.

The literature on spirituality and ambiguous loss was reviewed. In addition, the narrative explorations by Glassock (2011) and the NSW Attorney General’s Department (2005) found that ambiguity and spirituality are linked. However, for some, their notions of a higher power were vacated along with the disappearance of the individual. Glassock (2011) noted that “their world is shattered, and this raises all kinds of existential concerns, not the least of them is where spirituality

fits within their world” (p. 131). Making the links between hope and spirituality, requiring additional exploration as to its role, what might challenge a person’s engagement with a higher power post-missing and the social constructions between loss and religiosity?

Other research focused on different types of ambiguous loss (such as chronic illness or dementia-related illnesses) where hope was seen as a tool that individuals could “lean on” (Duggleby et al., 2009, p. 520) in order to survive their loss. As with Duggleby and colleagues, Bland and Tarlington (2002), exploring the meaning of hope for family members of people with a mental illness noted, through in-depth interviews with 16 participants, that hope had multiple definitions as a response to the complex layers of the ambiguous loss of a person with a mental health diagnosis – that the importance of hope should not be understated. Therefore, hope may become a safety net, a place that provides a space to think about positive outcomes. Hope offers something for people to hold on to as a way to live *through* the loss – a way to enact some personal mastery to cope with the ambiguity, as noted by Boss (2007).

The term hope, as a concept, was located throughout all of the specific missing persons’ literature. Whilst the term hope was not always explicitly defined (as in Boss 2010, Edkins 2011), the way that hope was assumed to exist in the process of waiting for the return of the missing person can be seen as hope being a logical emotion attached to the action of having someone missing. The inclusion of the concept of hope did not differentiate between positive hope and false hope, as noted by Nekolaichuk and colleagues (1999). The term false hope,

meaning an attachment to an idea that on the balance of probabilities may not eventuate, can also be connected to the concept introduced earlier as “fading hope” (Duggleby et al, 2009), where the emergence of hope in earlier stages of conceptualising the loss become less viable, less prominent in the lives of those left behind or anticipating mourning. In exploring the role of hope in trauma counselling, Edey and Jevne (2003) noted that professionals may be reluctant to introduce hope in a context of loss for fear that it “may raise false hope, so many people have unrealistic hope” (p. 47). The construction of hope with its possibility of being both positive and detrimental suggests that concern for false hope limits the inclusion of hope in a therapeutic conversation. It labels what hope may signify without the individual/client making these choices themselves. Edey and colleagues stated that:

Unrealistically high levels of hopefulness or unjustifiable hopefulness can be detrimental to the healing process, but does not suggest that we should intervene by trying to crush unrealistic hope (2003, p. 48).

The literature, while not specific on ambiguous loss, identified that, in setting aside the fear of false hope, more detailed discussion about the role of hope in living with trauma can be achieved. However, the analysis of the literature also did note that, irrespective of the falsity of hope or the shifting of hope over time, hope did reconcile as being a way of unifying the missing’s “desire to maintain hope that the person will return” (Waring, 2001, p. 12). There is no literature available on individuals who may not be hoping for the person’s return. The predominant narratives, that if missing exists hope must be attached, have not yet been explored. The notion of whether or not enacting hope was a suggested or automatic response to ambiguous loss has also not yet been

explored. Those who did attempt to define hope, identified it as a reaction by individuals and a notion or thought that people focused on – either logically or illogically – that gave no certainty to what was ahead. Hogben (2006) explained that hope and worry “engage the future in an extended or suspended present” (p. 333). This may suggest that, by the very action of *hoping*, families of missing people delay the exploration of the reality of the situation – the reality that the missing person may not return.

### ***Hope and liminality***

If, as the literature suggests, hope exists in the liminal space, then, following on from the research on lived experience, how are families supported to live in the space between the person being here and gone? Clark (2006) and Glasscock (2011) both speak of the importance of acknowledging the experience of fluctuating uncertainty in this space between disappearance and resolution. What may also be relevant to individuals are the other experiences that can also co-exist in this space – the hopefulness and hopelessness, the rise and fall of possibility tied in with the expectation of location, and the impact of the potential forewarning of death.

Fulton noted the forewarning of death (2003) in his exploration of Rando’s (2000) theory of anticipatory mourning. He surmised that people could prepare better for the eventuality of loss if they have notice that the loss may occur ahead of time. If much of the literature on missing focuses on location (which Newiss (2011) examined in understanding fatal disappearances), then the possibility of

exploring death in this space could also be a possibility. The only literature that fails to support this concept explored by me (2007), where families expressed a sentiment that “missing is not a dress rehearsal for grief” (p. 25). For these families, referred to within this Government funded report, the period of mourning happened from the moment the body was located, not prior; having someone missing did not pre-empt the space where mourning could be enacted. The holding on to hope for a resolution, even in cases where this appeared highly unlikely, prevented the families from engaging in activities that might be attached to grief following bereavement.

It may be that the conceptualisation of the liminal space for families of missing people is the space between missing and location. As a result, the layers and impact of what occurs in between those spaces and the oscillation of hopefulness and hopelessness needs further attention. The aims of the study focus upon gathering the stories of hope for families of missing people and then engaging in a reflexive praxis within the spaces that hope emerged following the loss of a missing person.

### ***Does the literature tell us what hope is not?***

As noted in this review, the literature on hope is limited to the action of stating that it is present and fluid (Clark, 2006). In reviewing the possibilities of what the literature may define hope as, the author also explored what hope may *not* be.

In contrast to the bereavement literature that links “the re-emergence of hope...to a person’s movement towards a completed bereavement reaction” (Cutcliffe, 1998, p. 754), hope may not signify that a family member of a missing person is managing their loss. It does not appear to signal that people are reaching a space of acceptance that a loss has occurred purely because of the ambiguous or unresolved nature that missing evokes. Hope sits amongst the experience of ambiguity, not as a response to the acceptance of the loss, but a response to the actual loss occurring. In exploring missing and the experience of hope, hope was argued to perpetuate a sense of “stuckness” (Wayland 2007, p. 9). Boss (2006) argued that “cognition is blocked by the ambiguity and lack of information, decisions are put on hold, and coping and grieving processes are frozen” (p. 12) when a person remains missing. Here, hope was not a signal of movement as it appeared to be a by-product of being stuck or frozen to a space where there were no answers and no indication as to how long a person would remain in the space of not knowing. Hope allowed people to deal in the imagined outcomes of their loss. While hope may be a natural reaction to someone being lost, Worden (2008) emphasised the natural reaction may create an inability to “give in to grief” (p. 62).

Hope was also identified in the very way that individuals referred to the person during the time in which they were missing. The narratives of the lived experience speak clearly about the action of holding on to hope, but also speak about the missing person in different ways than noted in bereavement literature. Edkins (2011) noted the confusion of tenses in speaking of the missing conveys the recognition of hope and the limiting of “speculation about likely outcomes

altered” (p. 91). The hope for a good outcome suggested that families of missing people speak of the missing person as if they are still present, as if they are still alive. While the media and the reflective narratives identified in the review of the research (especially by Boss, 1999, 2002 and Clark, 2006) imply the desire to hold on to hope, there is little research into the concept that the giving up or extinguishing of hope was a public declaration that the left behind had conceded that the missing person would not be returning. The sense of speaking up, as well as holding onto hope, was noted in both positive and negative ways in the literature reviewed.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The review of the literature identified the incidence of people reported missing, the predisposing factors that led to a disappearance, the experience of being left behind, and the impact of living with an ambiguous loss. Hope was intrinsically linked to the experience of ambiguous loss by the very inclusion of missing. The division between the hope for the physical return was not observed in conjunction with the hope for the return of the relational bond with the missing person.

Grief and loss research explored how hopefulness and hopelessness have been conceptualised in coping with bereavement. Without the additional challenges of the lack of resolution that comes with a missing person’s investigation, the context of hope, as viewed through a grief perspective, was not necessarily directly applicable to the field of missing people. Hope was related

more to the personal journey of living with loss, rather than its attachment to the person who is absent.

The additional layer of community response to missing and the inclusion of a potential societal need to hold on to hope also demonstrated ways in which ambiguous loss may be less disenfranchised than originally identified through the work of Doka (2002) and Boss (1999, 2007, 2010) – that the community and the media are willing to discuss that loss exists when missing occurs, but the long-term impacts of that loss and its complex inability to reach a stage of acceptance are not understood. In seeing the media as a reflection of community understanding – and in its provision of a platform to openly acknowledge loss by seeking answers – ambiguous loss may be verified through the action of speaking up.

However, there was a tendency within previous research (both related to missing and to loss) to refer to hope but then not establish the meaning of the term by way of its relevance to having someone missing. These studies did not indicate whether hope was either useful or not useful in surviving an ambiguous loss – hope was merely indicated to be present. This failure to articulate what people may be hoping *for* remains one of the primary gaps in the current knowledge about the coping strategies of living with the loss of a missing person. This idea, linked in with the research regarding hope and missing persons, needs to be explored further. Is hope a tool for survival? Further, as with hope and despair, can hope and missing both be present? And, if they are

present, can the experience of hope and hoping be a negative sensation for those left behind?

This study will explore, in greater detail, the trajectory of hope as experienced by families of missing people: what people are hoping for, how they explore hope in living with their loss, and the fluid concepts of hope as already identified in the work of Clark (2006) and Glasscock (2011). The role of hope may be tied to the need to find answers for those situations in society where no answers can be sought. In these circumstances, hope could be socially constructed as a way to allow people to sit with the ambiguity that accompanies a missing person investigation.

The disconnection of the word hopeless as an antonym of hope has been established within this review. The continued exploration of hope in understanding the lived experience of families of missing people may provide clearer understanding of the ways in which people live with an ambiguous loss – a goal achieved by this study in its exploration of hope as a tool to map the experience of loss long term, without the grief work assumptions of finality. The following chapter situates the researcher firmly within the study by exploring how this exploration of hope was prompted by reflexive praxis, as explored in Chapter 1, and the continual curiosity surrounding long-term missing people and the action of hoping for their return.

## Chapter Four: Shifting focus from practitioner to researcher

*At times this weighs heavily upon me, yet my frustration is tempered by the words of the poet Rainer Marie Rilke who says, 'Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart'. Such patience, however, is hard to acquire when the questions keep coming. What did happen to Tony?*

Brian Jones, brother to Tony – Searching for Tony (1998)

In preparing for my role as a researcher, a significant shift was required in the way I engaged and responded to participants. The opening chapter of this thesis reflects upon my career as a practicing social worker and the experience gained in working with individuals and families, supporting them through the complexity of emotional reactions that accompany significant loss. Initially in the child protection field, then in grief-work with families of children with life limiting disabilities, in the crisis response area of domestic violence and then, in the last decade, with people living with the loss of a missing person. Given the lack of support agencies available in Australia, my professional identity as a counsellor in the missing persons sector preceded me when beginning this study. Working in a service where at times I was the only practitioner, as well as my significant media profile in offering expert opinion on the lived experience of being left behind, many families of missing people have connected with me at some point in time. Challenging my dual role as both counsellor and administrator of organisations tasked with responding to people in the midst of an ambiguous loss, I approached my research with a backstory of experience about what I perceived to be the short-term and long-term experience of waiting and of hope. It was important I honoured those reflections, whilst still listening out for the narratives of ambiguity not yet

known to me.

The story used in the opening chapter speaks of the confusion when I first began in the position of counsellor for families and friends of missing people. The stories woven within Boss' (1999) book *Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief* and then the accompanying reflections from the work of Waring (2001), *It's the hope that hurts*, connected with my own understandings of loss from a familial and community context. I have always been drawn to the experiences of loss – growing up in Australia in the 1980s meant that the stories of lost children dotted my understandings of missing, given the emergence of media attention in reporting crime. In my growing-up years, the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain was a popular topic of conversation between both my parents – with their own theories of what may have happened on the night she disappeared from a Northern Territory campsite. Their understandings (from afar) of the potential hierarchy of grief experienced by both the lost child's parents sparked my own interest in the concept of being left behind. From an interpersonal perspective, the experience of having two family members absent from my own family – one for the long term and one for a short crisis period – gave me the lived experience concepts explained to me by Boss, as well as the potential to seek out ways to manage the 'truths' from my own stories in comparison to the stories told to me in a professional context. The work of Boss (1999, 2002, 2006, 2010) became my go-to stories of professional guidance: they reminded me to listen to the stories of my own life and the way this may unintentionally shape my view of others, that in order to support people living

with ambiguity I had to firstly acknowledge my own battle with ‘not knowing’. This is an ongoing reflective process.

Coles (1989) reminds that “the people that come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. We have to remember what we hear is their story” (p. 7). As a narrative therapist, my willingness to encourage people in the sharing of their stories has been a necessity. I found that, early in my years in the missing persons sector, the absence of the person and the complete focus on the *missing* component of that person impacted the stories that were told. The reanimation (Wayland, 2007) of the individual into the counselling space by inviting the person to “say hello again” (White and Epstein, 1990) to the person who was lost created significant shifts in a client’s capacity to understand how they might live with the unknown: when people were unsure of the finality of their loss and how they might continue on with minimal answers.

The goal of this story telling was always to speak of the person as a whole entity rather than the finite aspect of their physical absence. This created a shift in the person’s conceptualisation of their loss – being encouraged by Dr Geoffrey Glassock, my clinical supervisor at the time, to invite the family to bring a picture of the person (one not used to publicly identify them as missing are anecdotally viewed differently by families, given their continual exposure to them in the media and in print). Encouraging families to speak of the person who was lost, not the aspects of the investigation conducted to bring about their return, removing the focus on ‘missing’.

Many of these stories told to me by families were difficult explorations of challenges with mental health care professionals, of previous episodes of going missing or of lost opportunities to connect prior to an abduction or misadventure. That sense of ‘if only I knew it was the last time’ was replayed repeatedly in the counselling space. In the decade of working and then writing (Wayland, 2007) about the experiences of ambiguous loss, the continual references to hope and despair visited many of the conversations I had with those left behind. It was this story, of a woman learning to live with the complex reaction to her mother vanishing when she was three years old that made me ponder the changing nature of hope and the perceived dominant narrative of the media around this need to hold on to hope, at all costs. That the sense of hope had shifted over the last three decades, these reflections and shared learning challenged the development of the research design, further discussed in Chapter Five.

My definition of hope has changed from ‘hope of a reunion, to hope of information, which finally became hope of resolution’ (NSW Attorney General’s Department, 2005, p. 12)

### **So how do I utilise this narrative ‘knowing’?**

The narrative inquiry approach was applied by listening out for information “dependent on the context of the teller and the listener” (Hunter, 2010, p. 44) and an assertion that more than one truth could be discovered by understanding the lived experience of hope. Given the changing nature of the lives of the left behind, and the impact of the ‘other’ (being the missing person and their whereabouts), the stories told related to only a moment in time. Time that told

stories where, for now, the person had not returned and thoughts to the future were ambivalent. The social constructivist approach utilised for the study contends that there isn't one 'truth' but that narratives "co-constructed between the participant and the researcher in a particular social, cultural and historical context" (p. 44) would need to be accepted by the researcher. The merging of what was known and what was shared would assist in drawing themes to provide answers to the research question.

Moving towards a non-therapeutic co-construction research framework removed me from my safe and comfortable experience within the counselling space. It required me to rethink my role as researcher, urging me to explore the ways that I would engage with participants without the safety net of a therapeutic response. Where the potential for new understandings (or, as stated above, 'multiple truths') provided a reflective practice that deeply engaged with the research question, analysing what hope might signify for the left behind. The shift required me to honour the stories shared by my participants without suggesting or believing that I had heard many variations of similar stories before, from the hundreds of other families I had had access to throughout my career. This was not an easy task. However, as the interviews proceeded the opportunity to listen out for the rich narratives that I may have validated in the counselling room became opportunities for me to be curious, to delve further to get to the core of what role hope played or did not play.

Minichello, & Kottler (2009) suggest that one of the "distinguishing features of qualitative journeys is that the researcher must listen carefully, attentively, and

analytically to the experiences that are described” (p. 37). Challenging the depth of those stories by being open to this new analytical journey was the potential as a researcher to engage with the idea that with each new story shared there would be the possibility of a new discovery. The goal of such reflexivity was to identify what information was known as well as how this information was known (Etherington, 2004). Reminders of stories past, of personal reflections on the complexity of missing, reminded me to position myself as a researcher with an enquiring mind, ensuring that I had not decided in advance that I had heard all the conceptualisations of hope previously.

The following chapter provides a detailed framework of the way in which the study was conducted – the methodological basis for engaging with the 26 participants of the study. The short exploration within this chapter is to be viewed as a reflection upon my own preparation for the collection and then analysis of data – the opportunity to view hope from a position away from the counselling space and to open myself up to stories of hope not yet told.

## Chapter Five: Conducting the study

*... and maybe by imagining these futures we can make them real, and maybe not,  
but either way we just imagine them*  
John Green (2008)

In asking, ‘what do the stories of hope tell us about the experiences for families of missing people?’ a methodology that provided flexibility as well as privacy to generate the sharing of narratives of lived experience was required. In this methodological space the researcher and the participant can explore the potential layers of hope experienced when living with the disappearance of a family member. Exploration of the methodological processes used and the emergence of data from engagement include the use of participant narratives throughout this chapter. Participant narratives are italicised.

The literature review noted that hope existed as a result of the absence of an individual – in the hopefulness of the search (Newiss, 2011) for the hopeful return of the family member (Glassock, 2012) and in the restoration or learning of ways to tolerate the ambiguity (Boss, 2006). A sense of a hopeful future, where moving forwards and the uncertainty of loss can co-exist. I conducted the study by immersing myself within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, a space where the multiperspectival process that brings together the personal, social and interactional environments specific to the participants alongside supporting the participant in the telling and retelling of their stories. A sense of ‘being and doing’ within this space, exemplified by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), enhanced the action of seeking out the public narratives that participants

shared and challenging them to reveal those ones that may have remained private.

Current research reveals limited understanding of the changing nature of stories in a missing persons context. The literature review confirms a trajectory of experiences following a disappearance. However, these are viewed from a stationary standpoint – a suggestion that the continued experience of waiting and hoping will be complex given the reduced opportunity to seek answers or attain closure. Longitudinal studies that map ambiguous loss and the longer-term wellbeing of individuals have not yet been conducted (relating both to the flexibility of hope and the voices of those who are lost.) This study's question of hope was framed through a lens of anticipation – that the new stories shared would reveal multiple perspectives on the understanding of ambiguous loss and incorporate private and public narratives. In this way, this research study aims to articulate the complexity of responses as being both diverse and profound when a person is missing long-term.

Given these aims, a qualitative research methodology was deemed most appropriate. Its use focussed upon the uncovering of new storylines amongst the lived experience of having a family member missing. The gathering of these alternate storylines has been detailed within the research design component of this chapter as well as sampling methods and recruitment information that demonstrates the goal of developing this methodological framework that tests the analysis of these, both between researcher and participant and from participant to participant. Additional exploration is provided in terms of the use

of emerging technologies available to the researcher and how the use of the online space provided people with the option of sharing their stories in a one-on-one or group- based format.

Positioning myself as a researcher, given my long-term association with the Australian Missing Person's Sector, was described in the previous chapter. This shift of identity from 'practitioner' to 'researcher' enhanced the capacity to engage with families who had not yet spoken about their experience of loss. In analysing the themes in the proceeding chapters, the assertion of many was that engaging in a counselling relationship post-loss was not helpful in developing ways to tolerate ambiguity. Those who participated shared that the impetus for involvement in the study was to share their insights with others in similar situations rather than seeking assistance for themselves. I reflected early on in the analysis process that this collection of participants would not have been accessible to me if I had been engaged in a therapeutic relationship. This was a source of excitement in relation to the untapped reflections that I may be privy to.

The work of Bonanno (2009), as noted in Chapter Two, suggests that the needs of those living with grief and the low engagement in traditional support-seeking behaviours such as visiting a therapist or support group may have skewed the perception of what is required post-loss. In the preparation to undertake data collection it was important to consider the validity of Bonanno's study and the potential uncovering of a new understanding (for myself) of a lived experience not seen when approaching contact from a therapeutic standpoint.

Playing a role in the unfolding of the participants' stories provided the opportunity to extend on knowledge already gained working alongside families in a counselling setting. In identifying new complexities not yet learned, additional layers of hope and ambiguity were realised.

### **Purpose**

Stories were gathered with the goal of understanding the individual and societal constructions of hope. Participants were able to acknowledge the presence, absence, as well moveability of hope when living with an ambiguous loss. In reviewing the available literature it can be said that the understandings of loss and ambiguity are predominantly focussed on tangible aspects of search and support for those left behind within a framework of policy development. Here hope exists in the focussed resolution of the investigations. This study seeks to give voice to the inclusion of hope from a narrative perspective given its persistent inclusion in the review of the literature.

Previous chapters have focussed on an understanding of the significant theories proposed as well as the literature relevant to the topic. The literature identifies a trajectory of hope (Clark, 2006), where thoughts of a return or a resolution ebb and flow as time moved forwards (or information about the investigation is shared or revealed). Studies seeking to understand the lived experience of having a family member missing have indicated the presence of hope in addition to the external influences of community attitudes, the media and the absence of ritual (Glasscock, 2011). Biehal, Mitchell, and Wade (2003) note that absence exists along a continuum where the disappearance can be intentional

versus unintentional, defined as being that some choose to leave and others have the choice made on their behalf. Clark (2006) explored the engagement of siblings in the family experience of loss when a brother or sister was absent. Where thoughts of their hope for the missing person are reflectively mapped from when a person first vanishes and as the loss continues to be unresolved. These concepts shaped the development of a methodology relevant to the research question by seeking to understand if such a continuum existed in relation to hope and ambiguity.

The literature review detailed within Chapter Three sought explanation and deconstruction of what hope may signify, its use in living with uncertainty, and its role in the potential resilience of those with lived experience. Viewing hope through the stories of those left behind, and using a methodology reliant upon multiple platforms of engagement (as discussed further within this chapter), the participants' experiences were viewed from interpersonal, social, and cultural perspectives (Minichello, Aroni & Hays, 2008). This methodological approach created layered insight into the long-term experiences of an ambiguous loss from a standpoint of what hope might mean from an individual and community-based perspective.

The introduction and theoretical framework identified in Chapter Two reinforce the significance of this study in exploring the complexities of responses when a person remains missing. As a result, while minimal service-based and governmental reports exist, there remains little scholarly understanding around unresolved loss, as evidenced by the few peer-reviewed articles currently

published. There has been significant investment in the identification of ambiguous loss through various research studies, but there is little to no evidence that these studies have been tested in an environment where families of missing people could benefit from their application. The literature review identified that the predominant studies relevant to the lived experience of families of missing people have either looked at the family response (Glasscock, 2011, and Boss, 1999 & 2007), sibling responses (Von Suhr, 2003 & Clark, 2006), or the needs of service providers in providing therapeutic interventions from a Government perspective (Wayland, 2007). Exploration of hope exclusively framed within a context of ambiguous loss has not yet been conducted.

During a person's existence, life-altering traumas are expected – for example, the death of a loved one, chronic or sudden illness – yet experiences of ambiguous loss sit outside this expected realm (Boss, 1999). As noted in Chapter Two, and throughout the literature review, there have been limited qualitative studies exploring ambiguous loss in a context of having someone missing. The interactions between the left behind and their relationship with hope is noted in research, the media, and anecdotally in understanding what it may mean to have someone missing. Yet other than its inclusion, the ways hope has been conceptualised are not yet understood.

Hope is a legitimate and complex reaction to the experience of ambiguous loss. Hope-laden narratives exist in the personal reflections of the left behind (as noted by NSW AGD, 2005), and the community perceptions of what is expected when awaiting news of the fate of a missing person. Chapters Two and Three

reinforce that the social construction of ‘hoping’ as an automatic response to ambiguity needs to be challenged. This study emphasises the internal world that exists for people living with ambiguous loss and how hope (through its presence and potential wavering) can challenge the way the community understands the lived experience of being left behind.

**Choice of methodology – can hope be studied given its intangible qualities?**

*Use of qualitative research methods*

A qualitative framework is appropriate for research exploring a social or human problem (Creswell 1998), where light is shed on an issue by understanding its complexity through a whole-of-world analytical approach. The research question necessitates a methodology grounded in fluidity and flexibility. As no one had previously asked people what the story of their engagement with hope might have been (within the context of ambiguous absence) I was unable to predetermine what would emerge from these conversations. Here, a research design that provided space for changing conversations and developing narratives made the choice of a qualitative design necessary. Further, studies within a qualitative frame are centred upon the formation of meaning and interpretation (Liamputtong 2011); in this study, this approach would allow for the researcher to build on ideas of hope during multiple engagements with the participants. The role of the researcher inside the space – where researcher/participant engagement impacted on the ways stories might have been told – was focussed on identifying the public and private narratives of hope and loss. By understanding the social and subjective

constructions that may accompany the narratives of loss, the process of gathering data was a way to attach meaning to the lived experience shared. In this attachment of meaning, the goal was to explore the process of hope and how to capture the ways individuals conceptualised their experiences post-loss.

Studies exploring ambiguous loss and missing (Clark, 2006, Glasscock 2011, MacBride, 2013) have predominantly used a qualitative methodological approach. These approaches, as is common in emerging research fields, have followed a similar trajectory, where data have been collected via in-depth interviews or focus group format followed by a thematic or content analysis producing results that cannot be generalised. However, this study sought to extend these previous research findings by bringing together ideas of hope and ambiguous loss as a stepping-stone to explore ideas of surviving long-term when someone is missing. This extension allowed me to view the impact of the community and the narratives of needing to hold on to hope when a resolution is out of reach in addition to seeking out individual lived experience.

### ***Narrative Inquiry Framework***

Narrative inquiry is an “invitation to enter into a lively and productive discussion of how stories are always steeped in gaps and silences and surprises” (Leggo, 2011, p. 8). The likelihood for new and exciting layers to emerge, from engagement with participants across various communication platforms, valued the potential outcomes of what would be unearthed by using a narrative inquiry framework.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contend that the use of a narrative inquiry framework is the “best way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). In this context, it is useful in prompting reflections on lived experience in the present moment, in addition to how the loss has been experienced longer-term. Previous studies by Glassock (2011) and Clark (2006) have researched lived experiences of ambiguity rather than specific constructs within those (ambiguous) responses. In exploring the lived experience through the re-telling of the stories that accompany the loss of long-term missing, the researcher is invited into the space where previously unheard insights and knowledge are gained. The researcher and the participant can immerse themselves in the kaleidoscope of responses and experiences of loss that may have not yet been understood. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) exploration of direction within narrative inquiry, explored further in the phase one reflection of the methodology, support the invitation into this space, where the choice to focus on hope allows me the opportunity to “experience an experience” (p. 50) as a way to move the four ways described in the text – inward, outward, and backward and forward. As such, looking to the past and the future in conceptualising ideas of hope, seeking to understand the environment and community that surrounds people and finally the public and private perspectives of the liminal space.

The decision to engage in a qualitative study, emphasising narrative inquiry as the method to collect and then analyse data, was enhanced by multiple platforms of communication – face-to-face interactions, phone- and Skype-based interviews, and then engagement via an online platform with a collective group of participants. Inquiries were “composed around a particular wonder, a

research puzzle” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 124) – the narrative of loss when a person was faced with the complexity of a family member who was missing – as a way to excavate concepts of hope and the paths these responses evoked. This narrative inquiry framework asked that participants look back in order to uncover the ways they continued to move forward and find ways to survive the ambiguous loss of a family member.

The participants noted that they had rarely had the opportunity to tell their story outside of narrow, agenda driven space. These spaces – such as those occupied by law enforcement or in grabs to the media – prioritise the sharing of the investigation rather than the pain of ambiguity. Viewing their story from their experience, then moving outwards, was recalled as feeling a sense of not having to speak in a certain way, with barriers detailing how much of their story was to be shared. This narrative inquiry approach strengthens the research methodology in providing scope for individuals to tell authentic stories away from the focus of law enforcement or media publicity; the potential to understand the multi-layered existence of hope was created.

In the exploration of the authentic self in storytelling, Byrne-Armstrong, Higgs, and Horsfall (2001) share that the aim of narrative inquiry was not to find “one generalizable truth but to sing up many truths [or] narratives” (2001, p.286). Current research within the missing persons sector – both in Australia and internationally – oscillates between quantitative data exploring the number of people reported as absent (James, Anderson & Putt, 2008) and the experiences of locating them. Research exploring the lived experiences have included hope

only as a descriptor: *It's the Hope that Hurts* (Waring, 2001), *A Glimmer of Hope* (NSW AGD, 2005), and the media-based narratives that individuals might hold on to hope at all costs (Edkins, 2011). These studies provided the impetus for the use of a narrative inquiry framework to deconstruct these ideas of hope that sit alongside the narratives of loss when the community speaks of individuals being missing. In using this approach, participants construct their own realities about their experiences of hope both over time, in relation to the input of their community, and in relation to their own narratives about the ways in which they have survived their loss, to capture as much data as possible (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants' stories, shared across multiple platforms that were engaged and moderated by the researcher, allowed for the potential identification of the truths around both the public and private conceptions of hope.

Through a series of prompts, the participants explored the concepts of hope that may or may not be present in their experiences of being left behind. In posing the research question there was no assumption that hope had to exist. The content and pace of the interviews had a detectable yet unintentional pace noted when immersing myself in the data during the transcription phase. The pace moved from the introduction to the researcher and the research topic, ideas around the story of the missing person and then a reflection on the narratives of their lived experience with a significant focus on any ideas of hope noted by the participant. The prompts were not rigid: they focussed upon waiting for avenues to engage in ideas of hope, avenues only prompted by the participants' responses. Prompts were open-ended, asking simply: 'Tell me about after your

missing person vanished?’ ‘I’m curious, what might get in the way of hope?’ and ‘Hope over time, what did it look like?’ Polkinghorne (1988) suggests that, in the linking of events through narrative knowing, one seeks to “understand person, action and autobiography” (1998, p. 111). In turn, this allowed me to ask: ‘What is your story of hope as a family member of a missing person?’ irrespective of the way the person was lost and the information possible for them to come home.

Participants were approached in a way that assured them I wanted to hear the narratives of their lives in a context of understanding their experiences around having someone missing – Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that, in using a narrative inquiry framework, the researcher allows the participant to organise their experiences through the sharing of the layers that come with loss. By valuing the varied responses as a reflection of the richness of their own life experiences, the participant could be prompted to view the stories in parallel to the socially or subjectively constructed ideas surrounding the discourse of ‘needing to hold on to hope’. The research design allowed for a narrative inquiry focus across mixed engagement – face-to-face, loosely structured, in-depth interviews (as noted by Kvale, 2006) in addition to Skype and phone interviews that deepened with awareness following each engagement as I stopped and reflected on the insights shared from each interaction. Details as to how the study was conducted are explored further within the research design component of this chapter.

## **Storytelling and liminality**

Fulford (1999) shares that when we engage in storytelling, we “attempt to deal with, and at least partly contain, the terrifyingly haphazard quality of life” (p. 14). Here, emphasis on the telling of stories to elicit deeper understanding of the inclusion of hope in a context of ambiguous loss was used as a way to invite people to share their journey. I positioned myself in this liminal space created by the uncertainty of a resolution, posing the research question, surrounding the missing person being both here and gone (Boss, 1999). The research question was framed between what was hoped for, and potentially absent in a hope-filled narrative, in the story of their missing person.

As noted by Maple and Edwards (2009), the process of understanding and locating narrative voices in the research is reliant upon “an interactive, engaging, one-step forward, two steps back kind of journey” (p. 33) and that the flexibility to engage in these loss narratives was due to my previous role as allied health professional. As a researcher, I demonstrated my own ease to the participants with the shifting of narratives about the potential that the missing person might not return. This sense of knowing gave me confidence in gathering data. The focus on storytelling existed in the two phases of layered explorations. First, storytelling in conversation with the participants during the in-depth interviews and second, and more so, in the virtual focus group (abbreviated as VFG) as participants encouraged storytelling between and with each other. Macpherson (2008) found that, in exploring grief reactions with health care professionals, the role of storytelling in a focus group setting was not to assist people to ‘deal’ with their loss, but to benefit from the shared experience. Sharing stories in this way

became a method of making meaning from the uniqueness as well as collective experiences of that loss.

The socio-narratology of people's lives brought me to the research question in the first instance. Frank (2010) emphasises that "stories animate human life that is their work" (p. 3). By asking people within this project to tell their stories of hope, the aim was to stir the sense of uncertainty experienced by families, to shed light on the experience of hope as a way of seeing "what was real" (Frank, 2010, p. 72). This enabled me to be curious and construct meaning around what might happen when a person is missing. A person who is lost for now but perhaps not lost forever.

## **Research design**

### ***Ethics and use of professional sources***

Human Ethics Approval for this study was granted by the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2013 (Approval number HE13-143) for a twelve-month period. An additional extension for a six-month period was provided to cover any potential requirements to re-contact participants during the write-up phase of the study.

Ethics Approval is attached as Appendix A.

## ***Recruitment***

The invitation to participate was shared broadly – I did not specifically target individuals to engage them in participation in the study. Details of the study were circulated across traditional and non-traditional media portals (including social media) with engagement with participants occurring once *they* instigated contact. Given my previous therapeutic role as counsellor within the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, and then Project Officer with the Australian Federal Police, there were also ethical considerations relating to the recruitment process to ensure that participants did not feel obliged or coerced to take part in the study. Using the foundations of ethical practice explored by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), I explored the potential harm for involvement in the study prior to recruitment (see next section) and then again with each of the participants during the initial phases of contact. By speaking through the aims of the study and listening out for exclusion criteria, ethical considerations became paramount as a way to ensure participants' best interests. In addition to this, when participants contact waned (observed within the virtual focus group) I made contact with the individual to discover if the reason for their absence (if they wished to share) was/was not related to any unintentional harm as a result of being a part of the study.

Each decision surrounding the methodological process was viewed from an ethical standpoint, especially in the process of recruitment. The information sheet (in-depth interviews and virtual focus group) and consent forms for the study (see Appendices D and E) identified support-seeking options for those

participants wanting to be involved in the study, additionally reinforced to those who did not meet the inclusion criteria for the study.

In addition to engaging the assistance of law enforcement and government-funded support agencies, social media collectives were also contacted (such as Facebook pages and call-to-action groups). Those within or on the periphery of the missing persons sector were also contacted: the Missing Persons Advocacy Network; Australian Missing Persons Register; Walking Feat Inc.; SANE Australia; and, Not Alone. In addition, I connected with Missing Persons UK – a London-based charity supporting families and asked them to share details of the study with their Australian-based clients.

Further, links to the study were shared via Facebook and Twitter with the hashtag ‘#missingpersons to engage individuals who may no longer have been associated with law enforcement given the duration of their case or if they were not the next-of-kin. The reasoning behind this was that Clark (2006) emphasised, in research exploring the lived experience of siblings of missing people, participants shared that they were not privy to information about the investigation, given they were not the contact person noted by law enforcement. The use of social media as a tool to disseminate information quickly and to large numbers of individuals was a primary factor in using this as a recruitment tool, given the perceived use of social media by families in their efforts to locate people. Social media platforms, via my own social media pages as well as those administrated by the University of New England, shared details of the study. To

ensure confidentiality, potential participants were then directed to a closed site for gathering of additional information.

My own interaction (in a professional capacity) with media outlets outside the scope of the project also became part of the recruitment process. During the recruitment phase I was invited to participate in the filming of an episode of *Insight*, an Australian documentary-style television program aimed at exploring the impact of being left behind when someone was missing. The overarching theme of the program focused on the perceived lack of clarity surrounding investigative procedures and people's concerns about the way the community conceptualised their loss from a search-based perspective. Following the filming there was a chance to meet and speak to the families who had chosen to take part in the program. Many were distressed primarily by the action of speaking up, surrounded by like-minded individuals who were all travelling a same path, just at different intersections. The filming, alongside my extensive clinical background in responding to ambiguous loss in the counselling room, shaped my ideas for this study. Here, with these people, it was confirmed that the strands that extended from naming a person as missing extended much further beyond the practicalities of the search. In this way, the idea of a person being "here and gone" (Boss, 1999, p. 9) connected the way the community, the individual left behind, and the missing person viewed that loss. The filming took place a day after my return from presenting at the International Conference on Missing Persons, in Portsmouth (UK). This merging together of the research world and the lived experience narrative heightened my awareness of the potential richness this study might produce, and set the pace and tone for the ways that I

approached the participants of the study. It confirmed that stories provide the opportunity to reveal new threads of understanding when the notion of hope was included, given its inclusion in every missing person's experience.

In addition to this filming and during National Missing Persons Week (August 2013), I was a guest on a number of national radio programs exploring the research topic and the broader reflections on the experience of being left behind. Participants were encouraged to contact me at the end of these programs if interested in involvement. Information about the study was circulated via an Honours student, supervised by me, who conducted a study into the experience of loss for siblings of missing people in May 2013. The individuals who had been part of the Honours study had agreed, during the recruitment phase, to be notified of any further studies relevant to the experience of having someone missing. An email notifying them about the recruitment phase of this study was sent by the primary researcher (MacBride, 2013).

The recruitment process sought to provide the study with a "multiplicity of voices, both for the participants and the researcher...to live and tell many stories" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 147). Consequently, new complexities could be gleaned in the gathering of data on hope and ambiguous loss, irrespective of the amount of times a person may have shared their story before. Table 1 notes the referral methods for the participants included in the study, demonstrating that apart from one participant all were referred by services established by families of missing people, for families of missing

people. The reason for limited uptake from those services publicly funded to assist in investigations or to provide counselling support is unknown.

Table 1

Dissemination Outlet Type	Recruitment Responses and Inclusion		
	In-depth Interview	Virtual Focus Group	Excluded
Academic Portal (Social Media)	0	6	3
Government (including Police)	0	0	0
Media (including social media)	2	2	0
Not-for-profit	5	12	3
Not Provided	0	0	1
Referral from other participant	1	1	0

Table 1 Referral Methods

### *Selection of participants*

The research question sought to explore, validate and dissect concepts of hope. Theoretically, the goal in selection of participants was the richness of the stories, to embrace the idea of storytelling as a way to unlock some of the complexities around the experience of someone being missing to “remind us that we have to live with complicated truths” (Frank, 2010, p. 5).

Henderson and Henderson (1998) suggest that for each person missing, 12 others will be adversely impacted by that loss. A later report by James et al (2007) also notes that, as an estimate, 35,000 missing person reports are received in Australia each year; however, previous studies have demonstrated some challenges in locating people willing to share their stories. In this way, the potential for large numbers of participants was unknown given the sensitive topic of the research. In identifying ways to

engage potential participants (and being mindful that establishing rapport began before the actual interviews, as noted by Minichello and colleagues, 2004), the process was three-fold:

- 1) Identifying individuals who had experienced the loss of a missing person, where the absence had been reported to a law enforcement agency;
- 2) Identifying individuals who were then interested in sharing their stories of hope whilst that person continued to be missing; and,
- 3) Gaining the trust of the participants from the initial phase of recruitment.

In Chapter Two, the literature exploring the lived experience notes that the capacity to explore ambiguous loss along a continuum of responses has required that, in order to gain a better understanding of how a participant's experience/story of hope changes, the person must have been missing for some time. This – in addition to data that indicates the majority of people reported missing return within one month of their disappearance (James et al, 2008) – led to the decision that participant inclusion was based upon the missing person being classified as long-term missing (i.e., longer than six months).

In determining participant selection criteria, the researcher was guided by the previous research designs utilised by Clark (2006) and Glassock (2011) in understanding the lived experience of ambiguous loss. Further, Minichello and colleagues (2009) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) allowed me to identify that

non-probability purposive sampling was the most effective method of recruitment to the study.

Participants were chosen because they met pre-established criteria: they were family members of missing people who had been absent for longer than six months, residing in Australia. Residence was included for the purposes of being able to connect participants with known support services should their involvement be traumatising (as required by ethical research guidelines). Utilising purposive sampling and selecting a non-probability method to locate individuals with specialist knowledge of the experience of ambiguous loss allowed for the location of individuals willing to share their stories. I also recruited individuals using correspondence between the participants of the first half of the study and their willingness to share the details of the study with other families of missing people known to them (especially those in large family groups who had someone missing). Recruiting multiple family members from within the one familial group was addressed prior to, and during, the recruitment phase – use of multiple family members was not discouraged. More, it became exciting to be able to explore multiple truths within the stories of the same missing person from different people known to them. The recruitment of multiple family members (either with their involvement known or unknown to each other) created the possibility of understanding how these, as Reczak (2014) asserts, lives are linked and intertwined.

Working in a therapeutic capacity with families of missing people and responding to the multiple narratives of various family members confirmed for

me that each engaged with the process of grief differently. Reviewing the work of Boss (2002) in understanding family boundary ambiguity “defined as knowing who is in and who is out of one’s family” (p. 95) challenged the way that I viewed the impact of the psychological as well as physical presence of an individual and the way a family functioned in response to loss. My own curiosity about the potential results from people separate as well as linked to each other in their commonality of belonging to this group of ‘families of missing people’ governed the way that the inclusion criteria was developed, allowing members from the same family to be a part of the study the opportunity to tell their story in a group or in isolation. Issues of privacy (in the development of the research design) and the opportunity for people to use pseudonyms are explored further within this chapter as a way to manage the inclusion of family members who did not feel comfortable in sharing with each other that they were taking part in the study.

There were other factors unique to a missing person experience that did not affect inclusion. These included: the circumstances and reasons behind the missing person’s absence; the longevity of the case; or, the potential for a matter to be resolved either in a justice setting (for those cases where criminality was involved) or for the missing person to be found/returned. However, even within this inclusiveness, the issue of families of missing people potentially being a ‘hidden’ population (as noted in the earlier sections relating to Goffman, 1963) impacted the ways in which the study was publicised during the recruitment phase. It was important to share details with agencies that may have had contact with family members at specific intervals while a person was missing – namely,

law enforcement and counselling services. However, it also had to be acknowledged that some families may not visibly identify themselves as part of this specific population; here, social media and services on the periphery of the sector became necessary.

Recruitment for participants was conducted during two time periods: June/July 2013 and August 2013. The two periods allowed for staggered recruitment of participants for the in-depth interviews, with an additional sweep for participants for the virtual focus group undertaken in October and November 2013. A timeline of engagement is shown below.

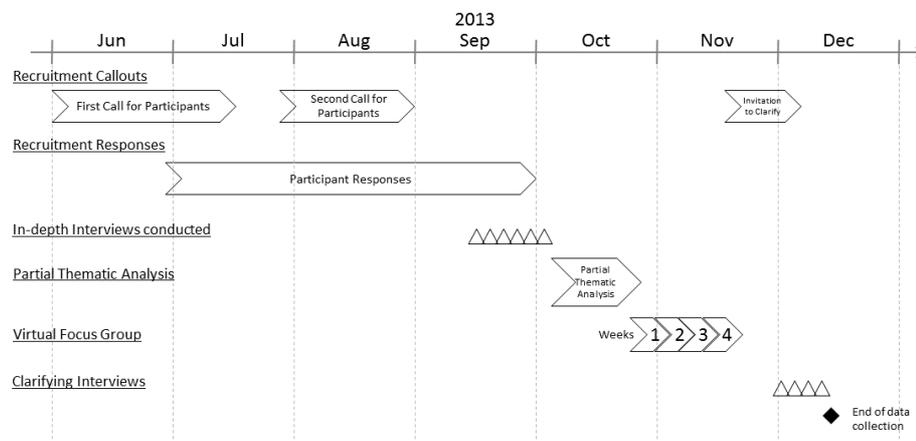


Figure 1 Research Timeline

To locate potential participants for the study, a media release/information flyer was disseminated (see Appendix B). The release was sent to all available media outlets in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland via the University of New England’s publicity office and captured radio, television, and print media. The flyer indicated that potential participants had to be older than 18 years of age and be able to contact the

researcher either by telephone or via email to discuss involvement in the study.

In conjunction with this, the same flyer was disseminated to the New South Wales, Victorian, and Queensland Police Missing Persons Units, as well as the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit within the Department of Justice and Attorney General New South Wales. I met with a representative of each of the agencies in person, via phone, or email to (re)establish rapport with those in contact with families left behind when a person was missing. Yet, given their different focus on intervention with family members, the space in between the work of law enforcement agencies and therapeutic services does not entirely connect with the goals of a qualitative, narrative-based research study. Engaging agencies with these different responsibilities was a challenge in terms of gaining buy-in about the merits of the study. By engaging with services and reinforcing my trustworthiness (the importance as noted by Horn, 1997) given my previous affiliation working for a Commonwealth Policing agency, I was able to engage the services in multiple ways. In identifying the aims of the study, the potential of its outcomes to transform services' understandings of families left behind and enhance directives for future work with this client group was demonstrated. It was anticipated that by connecting with services the number of participants who volunteered to take part in the study would be increased.

### ***Participants***

In addition to rapport building and information dissemination with key agencies, I also contacted organisations and social media platforms that may not

be engaged with law enforcement agencies. Previous studies by Clark (2006), Glasscock (2011) and MacBride (2013) demonstrated that following the initial focus on the investigation, the continuing relationship between the next of kin and law enforcement was minimised for some families left behind. In exploring siblings' stories in order to better inform Police response, Clark (2012) found that families expressed concern about the "adequacy of the police response and continued to feel disillusioned and disappointed that the police didn't do enough searching at the time" (p. 37). Sourcing participants from referrals other than law enforcement offered increased scope for a more diverse group of individuals with varying experiences of someone going missing.

Highlighting the needs of participants, given that many had not yet told their personal narratives of loss, was a priority. In honouring the participants' desires to share, the need to protect the "personal and intimate details of their lives" (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 26) was guided by an understanding that in sharing we all become vulnerable. Taking from my expertise gained as a counsellor in the field of missing persons, I took a sensitive approach to the participants' sharing and involvement with the study, which was reliant only on what the participant wished, or did not wish, to do.

The only exclusion criteria noted in the ethics application for this study was in relation to the inclusion of children and young people younger than 18 years of age. Given the methodological processes of a narrative framework, the study required a level of maturity and engagement in exploring the ideas of hope along a continuum relating to how long a loved one had been missing. For that

reason, any individuals younger than 18 years were not invited to participate in the study.

During the first phase of recruitment, 23 potential participants made contact to express interest in the study. All contact was made via email or in the form of a comment on my website ([www.sarahwayland.com.au/research](http://www.sarahwayland.com.au/research)). The use of moderated comments on this site allowed for me to receive messages that were not visible via the site. Organisations or community groups not affiliated with law enforcement agencies or government services referred all participants. The majority of the participants made contact via social media through the shared posts of privately run missing persons pages on Facebook. During this two-week phase individuals were asked to express whether they wished to be part of the in-depth interviews or the virtual focus group to be held at a later date.

Two individuals were automatically excluded. One did not meet the criteria of a missing person's case (stating they were curious about the incidence of missing); the other had been a missing person, keen to share insight into the alternate experience of loss. Both were contacted individually and thanked for their interest; information as to why they were unsuitable for the study was shared, and details of follow-up support services were provided. The first participant's information was destroyed electronically, given the correspondence was via email. The second potential participant requested that their details be retained in the event that future studies involving the narratives of returned missing people was conducted.

A second wave of recruitment commenced once the first wave was confirmed. Participation was confirmed once I had made contact with the interested individuals and verified that they met the criteria: a family member of a missing person, based within Australia, and willing to be a part of the study. During this second phase, 12 potential research participants made contact indicating interest in being part of a virtual focus group. Again, all of the participants were recruited via social media. Five individuals were automatically excluded due to the length of time the person had been missing (their cases were classified as short-term as their person had been absent for less than six months); one individual was not aware of any person she had known who had gone missing but expressed an interest in wanting to understand more of the lived experience of those left behind.

After a total of 36 individuals made contact to express an interest in participating, and allowing for the fact that not all interested people chose to take part, the study had a final sample of 19 people. Each had a family member classified as being missing long-term (previously defined by James et al., 2008). The participants were located across the three sites identified in the study – New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland – as these areas represent the greatest proportion of missing persons reports made to Australian state and territory police forces. See Table 2 for a tabulated overview of the participants involved in Phases One and Two of the study.

It should be noted that the decision was made with the research team that participant snapshots would not be included in this thesis. Sharing facets or descriptors of the person (in addition to details about their missing persons’

investigation) could impact the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals who chose to be a part of the study. The longer a person is missing the greater the chance that the media will be used to share information to locate that person. Stories such as those involving the family of Daniel Morcombe, missing for eight years in Queensland, suggest that families can be viewed as community spokespeople or media personalities through the continual use of their image. The potential for readers to connect the stories with those who have a media profile in the community led to the decision to limit the use of descriptors. Vignettes relating to shared stories of hope and descriptors of their engagement with hope over long periods of time have been used as a way of sharing participants' input. However, the stories told within this space are not indicative of the whole story surrounding the disappearance of a family member. The goal was to honour the request for privacy in sharing the data as well as the ethical considerations in participants remaining anonymous.

Given the uncertain nature of the stories shared and the length of time since disappearance, it was conceded that it would be impossible to gather the whole story of a participant's experience of being a family member of a missing person. The way the story is told, the timeliness of the sharing and the focus of the study provided only reflections at that moment in time. Just as Parr and Stephenson (2013) note that, in the sharing of one of their interview narratives – on the experience of going missing and returning – the “paper cannot tell the whole of Sophie's story because it's ongoing, like an interesting tale, Sophie's is being repeated, we hope in multiple mediums and to multiple audiences where it will have different affects and moving force” (p. 2). The sharing of these stories only

tells one part of the families' lived experience, its meaning may be interpreted differently by each reader that happens upon it.

Exploring participant's narratives, without emphasis on the quantitative data detailing the type of missing person's investigation, can only be speculative. Foy (2004) in her doctoral study noted that when a next of kin notifies an authority of a vulnerable persons absence the reasons for absence can only be projected by what is 'known' from the family member. The reason for the absence cannot be verified without the location or input of the missing person. These speculative reasons have been noted in Table 2 as decreased mental health (MH) and misadventure (MA) which includes potential homicide matters. Participants were unlikely to offer definitive reasons such as suspected suicide; these assertions have been grouped as concerns regarding mental health.

Table 2

Participant Pseudonym	Relationship to missing person	Year went missing	Type of case	Age at disappearance	Engagement
red01	sister	2005	MH	26	Phase 2
orange02	brother	1996	MA	33	Phase 2
NID4	mother	2005	MH	26	Phase 1 & 3
blue03	mother	1990	MA	23	Phase 2 & 3
bronze12	sister	1989	MA	28	Phase 2
pink04	father	1990	MA	26	Phase 2 & 3
purple05	sister	1993	MA	27	Phase 2
green06	sister	2011	MH	24	Phase 2
NID3	partner	2012	MH	48	Phase 1
white14	sister-in-law	2006	MA	39	Phase 2
NID5	brother	1990	MA	23	Phase 1
NID6	daughter	2011	MA	52	Phase 1 & 3
aqua07	daughter	2011	MA	52	Phase 2
gold08	father	2003	MH	23	Phase 2 & 3
NID1	mother	2003	MH	23	Phase 1
silver09	aunt	2001	MA	19	Phase 2
cyan13	daughter	1975	UK	19	Phase 2 & 3
yellow10	mother	2011	MH	24	Phase 2 & 3
lilac11	sister	2011	MH	24	Phase 2 & 3

Table 2 Participant involvement in the three phases of the study

**Key:**

*Code:*

*[Colour#] – Pseudonyms were attributed to members of the Virtual Focus*

*Group*

*NID – Narrative in depth interview (participants 1-6)*

*MH – Missing due to mental health concerns (as reported by next of kin)*

*MA – Missing due to misadventure – including suspected homicide*

*UK – Unknown. Participant did not wish to share potential reason for missing.*

***Engagement:***

*Phase 1 – Narrative in depth interview*

*Phase 2 – Virtual Focus Group (VFG)*

*Phase 3 – Invitation to clarify involvement in the study*

***The data collection process***

Despite the use of multiple engagement platforms, the goal of data collection was to replicate similar interview styles with each participant. This was achieved. Each interview began with a similar stance: an introduction to the study and the researcher, a clarification of the participant's voluntary involvement in the study, and then an invitation to share their story about their person who was missing. Some opening statements were created to invite reflections of hope. From there, the pace of the interview was guided by the insights shared by the participants. These reflections were then coupled with gentle probing for additional detail focusing on the features of hope that sat amongst the experience of loss. The research question was not asked explicitly to each participant: for many it was woven through the narratives of the conversations with the participants. (See interview guide – Appendix C).

The primary aim of each of the interviews was to map hope since the person vanished and to uncover significant emotional insights in reaction to the missing person's investigation and the participant's life lived alongside their loss. The

interview model, as developed from Riessman (2008), became an exploration by “two active participants who jointly construct narrative and meaning” (p. 23). Within this construction, the pace and flow of the interview settled into a pattern where the researcher requested the participant to tell their story. Once ideas of hope began to materialise (or conversations about hope being absent materialised), questions about hope’s existence, its potential to change, the participants’ connections to the ideas and journeys of hope – by way of looking back – were asked. The goal here was to co-create an understanding of hope through the action of asking layered questions. I purposely limited the opportunities to recount the details of the disappearance – a trajectory that many stories of people left behind, when speaking of their missing person, take. In doing this, the participant’s focus was centred upon themselves rather than being focused on the story of the person who was no longer here.

The depth and richness of the interviews was observed to shift depending on a number of factors. These included: the length of time since the disappearance, the participants’ willingness or capacity to delve into detailed layers of their relationships with hope and the missing person, and the status of the investigation at the time of their involvement with the study.

Acknowledgement that the stories could change as the study progressed were accepted by both myself as the researcher and the participants. Each of the methods of engagement will be detailed in the next section – face-to-face as well as Skype-based in-depth interviews, a virtual focus group, and then the final phase where individuals were invited to clarify their involvement or provide feedback about the study.

### ***Phase One: In-depth interviews via multiple methods of engagement***

Gilbert (2002) advises researchers that the process of gathering data is not “the equivalent of videotapes of a life experience, they are more like a continually evolving sketchbook of memories and left experiences” (p. 225). The interview, and the enquiring nature of the researcher, sought to fully explore – at that moment in time – the experience of hope following the disappearance of a missing person. The focus of the interviews was grounded in the opportunity for participants to relay their story without judgement but with gentle clarification about the stories they chose to tell. The interviews were structured using broad, open-ended questions. Here, Kvale (2006) likens the role of the qualitative interview as a form of dialogue to “efficiently obtain a disclosure of the interview subjects’ world” (p. 481). Through this disclosure, engagement with the research question can be found. The researcher’s use of open-ended questions and prompts focused on the person’s reflections on how they might live long term with ambiguity and the hope that might accompany these experiences. A recursive model of asking questions (see Minichello et al., 2008) was used throughout the interviews, which allowed space for the researcher to take the role of enquirer and embrace the “natural flow of the conversation to direct it” (p. 88). It also provided the chance for experiences and “information from previous interview sessions” (Minichello, et al., 2008, p. 88) to guide and shape the way the researcher engaged with the participant.

Given the breadth of definition attached to hope (as noted within the literature reviewed in Chapter Two), it was anticipated that more than one

interview would be required to explore the role of hope in the experience of ambiguous loss in detail. Face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded using a Dictaphone; Skype-based interviews utilised the software program Audio Hijack Pro (with a Dictaphone as back-up). Following each interview, reflexive notes were recorded by me to assist in developing an emerging picture of the role of hope as shared by each of the individuals in the study. These notes also assisted in the preliminary thematic analysis conducted after Phase One of the study. The reflections, included in the previous chapter on positioning self as researcher, speak to the process of separating from ‘counsellor’ to ‘enquirer’, allowing for these reflections to challenge any urges to engage as anyone other than ‘enquirer’.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of being out in the field as “walking in the midst of stories” (p. 50). The three-dimensional narrative space includes concepts of time, place, and the personal, alongside the social aspects of collecting data. These perceptions were explored in each of the interviews conducted for this study. During the first interaction with the participants, the focus was on seeking consent, sharing information about the purpose and aims of the study, and then confirming involvement with these concepts. In doing so, the researcher gave precedence to a participant’s personal preference for how and where the interviews took place. Participants were offered their choice of platform to engage with the researcher – their home, their workplace, over the phone, via Skype, or via a computer-mediated interaction of asynchronous conversation (VFG). In using choice of interaction, the capacity to share rich and engaging stories might be heightened through the participant directing the

manner and place of how they would share their story. In general, interviews took between 50 and 90 minutes, with each of the interviews ending at the request of the participants, who gave social cues in terms of slowing down their capacity or willingness to continue sharing or ending the conversation.

The myriad of ways that the participants engaged with this study appear to be a reflection of the complexity of responses that came with the simple question asked of each participant: ‘Tell me about hope when someone is missing?’ The first phase of the study involved the slow, meticulous and intimate process of sitting with people as they told their story to a small audience – only to me. The first wave of interested participants, who initially contacted me asking to be a part of the study, became the five in-depth interviews that provided space for the researcher to begin to unfold a narrative around the stories of loss that they had each endured and continued to live with. None of the participants had a story where a resolution had been reached in relation to the location of the missing person, either alive or in their death. As each interview was completed, new threads of enquiry were developed and new insights into the ideas of hope and loss took shape.

The participants – a married heterosexual couple, two women, and a man – also chose to interact in different ways. In the first, via a Skype conversation, the couple moved within and away from the screen telling me of their individual and collective engagements with hope. They took turns talking to me, separately speaking of when their thoughts of hope connected, given their son had been gone for more than a decade at the time of our conversation. The next

participant was earlier on in the process of learning to live with, and master, the ambiguity borne from the loss of her partner. The conversation took place a few months prior to the first anniversary of his disappearance. Post-analysis, it was noted that some of the stories of hope were specific only to her, as other participants were able to gauge changing levels of hope as subsequent anniversaries passed. She chose to participate over the phone, after work one evening when her teenage daughter was out of the house. Her interview blended together the rawness that emerged from what she described as '*the early days*', and the current sensation of beginning to find her feet by learning to live alongside the loss through focusing on herself and her daughter. The next participant, a mum of a son missing for many years, chose to be involved face-to-face, on the front porch of her home. The connection was made by sitting in the sun reflecting on ideas of mindfulness, resilience, and the hope that she would be ready and able to support her son when he might one day decide to walk down the road to check if she was still waiting for him. This was the only story that evoked a significant emotional response from me, where the pain of the story stayed with me long after the interview was complete, and threads of sadness were embedded within understandings of hope and loss. The final participant was a man wanting to talk about the loss of his sister more than a quarter of a century ago, for the very first time. The interview ran over time until the battery on his phone began to signal it was running low indicating that it was time to finish up, a sign that he took as an opportunity to finish the conversation. He had been keen to speak about existing in two spaces – the world he inhabited when his sister had been here, and the strange realisation that more time had passed since she was gone. The threads within this sensation of a “new normal”

(Bonanno, 2009), about ideas of life changing without the inclusion of his sister, were prompted by watching this new world emerge alone.

The momentum of the interviews provided insight into the flow of hope where the gradual uncovering of complementary themes of hope when someone is missing were discovered. The five participants' reflections became the basis for short articles and ideas shared with the next participants of the study – the VFG. The unstructured, recursive method of interviewing using simple narrative prompts, coupled with the participant being able to suggest time for breaks and cups of tea, led to the unearthing of content that allowed me to build upon an understanding and respect for hope when someone is missing, following each interview.

### **Face-to-face interviews**

Opdenakker (2006) identifies that one of the benefits of face-to-face interactions is synchronous engagement based upon social cues. The offering of this form of interaction to the research participants was based on an assertion that, in identifying sensitive research topics (Gilbert 2002), some participants might choose to tell their story in their own, comfortable environments. In conducting face-to-face interviews, often in the participant's home, the researcher's safety was paramount. Safety issues were addressed in the ethics application (see Appendix A) and ensured the communication of the location of the interview with both supervisors prior to attending the participant's home.

## **Skype-based interviews**

To combat geographical and time limitations, the study participants were also offered the use of Skype-based interactions as a space for engagement. In-depth communication online is a relatively new phenomenon for research engagement. The capacity to build rapport and flexible interaction via a computer-based mediation has been explored comprehensively (Mann & Stewart, 2000 and, more recently, Walker, 2013). Whilst there are proponents for and against the medium in generating rich and engaged content, the potential to include participants who may not have been able or willing to participate face-to-face was seen as a benefit. Issues of setting aside more time for rapport building, given the potential disconnected nature of online engagement, was required and potential concerns about the technology inhibiting flow was also noted in the development of the research design noted earlier in this chapter.

Two participants chose to engage with me via Skype. I found that the anticipated issues relating to building rapport did not occur: each of the interviews conducted on Skype were engaging and warm, with the potential for both the researcher and the participants to jointly share a cup of tea in the safety and comfort of their own surroundings. Care was taken at the end of the session to ensure that participants had access to support services should they wish to seek help as a result of the sharing of their stories.

Given the sample size utilised within this study the impact of location and method of interview on participant responses could not be generalised. The focus of researcher enquiry was to establish rapport and generate space for the

sharing of stories with those in Phase one of the study, irrespective of the location of the participant and the researcher. Reflecting on the potential to create this space the prior contact with the participant in previous roles in the missing persons sector enhanced the success of the interview however the researcher's identity as a person who had worked with ambiguous loss for an extended period also assisted in connecting with unknown participants.

### **Phone interviews**

Meho (2006) notes that the use of face-to-face and telephone interviews can provide a medium that has the capacity to “foster interaction and feedback to permit people to communicate with many kinds of cues, using multiple senses” (p. 1289). While my preference for the first phase of individual participant interviews was face-to-face, providing the most comfortable medium to participants was the priority.

In choosing phone-based interviews, many participants selected times in the evening, after work, or once children had been settled for the night. As noted by Opdenakker (2006), rapport was established through moments of non-research specific conversation during the first phase of the interview – a significant opportunity to establish rapport quickly.

Only one potential participant initially chose phone-based engagement but twice failed to be available at the allocated time scheduled. They then requested not to be involved with the study due to a change in the circumstances of their missing person's investigation.

## **Preliminary thematic analysis**

Following the first wave of interviews – by phone, Skype, and face-to-face – the researcher paused the data collection to review the results already provided by the rich and detailed stories shared by the initial participants. The process of pausing before the second phase of the research to conduct preliminary thematic analysis provided those taking part in the VFG to respond to the initial questions posed by the researcher, as well as to reflect on topics gathered in Phase One.

The preliminary thematic analysis involved the transcription of the in-depth interviews – alongside listening to the recordings to seek out the themes or nuances in the responses. The goal at this stage was not to complete the analysis of the data provided by the first wave of participants, but to note the themes shared as a way of grouping the responses to present to the VFG participants. In listening back to the recordings, the responses were grouped into four distinct areas:

- a) Holding on to hope
- b) Barriers to hope
- c) Community responses to hope and;
- d) Hope changing over time.

In addition to noting the themes, participants' narratives were incorporated and developed into a format that allowed for the VFG participants to review each theme weekly, reflect on the narratives provided by the participants and then

engage in deeper discussion about how similar or dissimilar their experience may have been.

Leggo (2008) identifies ways in which a narrative inquiry method can be used as a step-by-step process to understanding more within the stories that are shared. In thematising shared narratives, the researcher must focus on a theme and then spell out the parts of the story that relate to the theme (Leggo, 2008). In drawing down the stories of hope and despair, and of engagement with the community around different complexities of hope, I was able to identify the four themes listed above. The blog-style posts identifying the four themes are found in Chapter Six.

### ***Phase Two: Virtual Focus Group – A computer-mediated engagement***

The geographic boundaries attached to the collection of qualitative data can be limiting for both the researcher and the potential participants. Turney and Pocknee (2005), in conducting focus group interviews using the Internet, suggest that this method has the potential to provide enhanced access to individuals, both synchronously and asynchronously.

Fourteen family members, who had lived with the loss of a missing person for a period extending more than three years, chose to take part in the second phase of the research study – the VFG. Over the four-week period the participants logged into the site 88 times, leaving 70 comments (see Figure 2). Asynchronously, they explored the concepts of hope derived from the Phase One analysis. Site engagement showed that weeks one and three of the VFG

yielded the greatest participation from the group members, with the two prompts developed from the preliminary thematic analysis: ‘Tell me the story of hope in relation to your missing person?’ and ‘What dents your hope?’ As before, these two prompts created higher levels of interaction between the researcher and the participant than the other two weeks where ideas of hope enablers and hope in the community were explored.

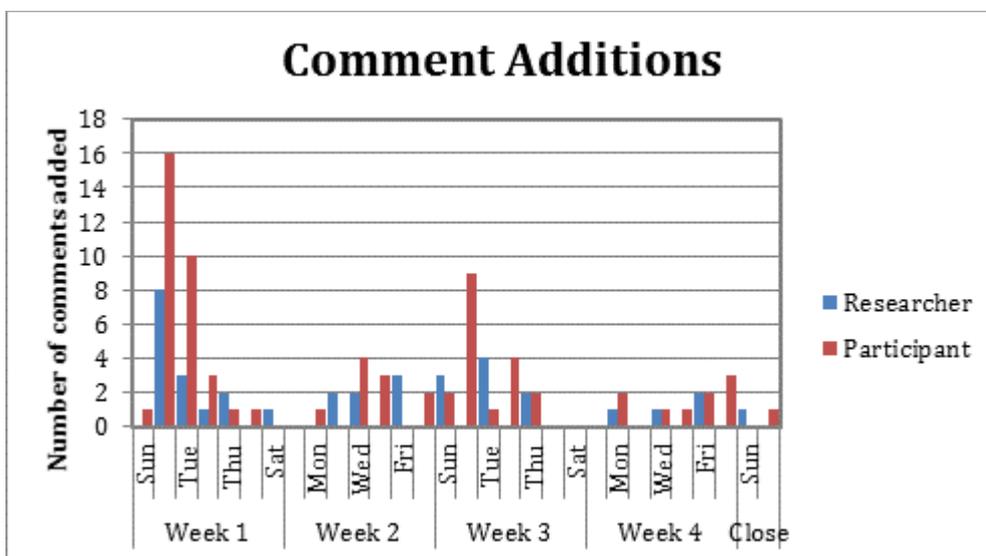


Figure 2 Comment Additions

From a technology perspective, I chose to use a system utilised by universities worldwide – the online learning platform Moodle. Moodle is an open-source course management system that allows a pre-selected community to learn/discuss issues, often within a pre-determined period of time. The group, using this system, was developed to the specifications of the study by adding participants, including the option for pseudonyms and the capacity for participants to be notified via email when new posts were uploaded. In addition, participants were contacted when comments were made in relation to their engagement. Strong moderation of the group (see Turney and Pocknee, 2005)

was also encouraged as a way of enhancing active engagement with the platform and identifying any concerns for the wellbeing of the participants. Online focus group rules were applied, notifying participants that posts or comments that revealed information about a potential criminal act, racial or anti-social behaviour would not be tolerated. At no time during the study did I have to delete or moderate any of the comments. Taking advantage of well-established privacy settings and ensuring anonymity allowed for the group to be formed and then facilitated effectively.

The engagement was extensive, both in the complexities of the stories of loss and the ways that the participants engaged with each other. The VFG was a mix of men and women and their relationship with the missing person was also diverse – sisters, brothers, children, parents, and partners. They all shared ideas about the way they navigated the path that missing had placed them upon. Online focus group rules applied, as noted within this chapter, where the researcher played the role of moderator and facilitator. Interestingly, the participants engaged more often directly with the researcher than with each other, post week one. Engagement data demonstrated that, on average, participants logged on for 24 minutes each time throughout the duration of the 4-week group, primarily during the early evening (post business hours). Most time was spent adding additional responses to others rather than a primary response to the original post.

The use of a virtual focus group for this particular study was incorporated for two reasons. First, individuals could be provided access to the focus group at

a time of their choosing. Second, data could be collected privately without the participant having to reveal themselves face-to-face to the researcher or to other participants. As uncovered from the literature review, and the first phase of the data collection, the importance of public versus private narratives and the choice for when and how people articulate their lived experience of hope could not be underestimated. The inclusion of a virtual focus group, with the use of pseudonyms, allowed the participants to engage in private, faceless discussions. It was interesting to explore if this increased capacity for privacy increased the potential for more layers of stories to be revealed in comparison to Phase One participants.

In Phase One (the interviews) and Phase Two (VFG), participants could choose their pseudonyms. Colour-based pseudonyms were allocated to those who did not seek to provide an alternate name but requested anonymity. As noted by Maple and Edwards (2009), the importance of assigning pseudonyms was attached to the sensitive nature of the study. In Phase One, participants were given the chance to provide alternate names for both themselves and their missing person as a mark of respect. In Phase Two, participants were told of their assigned pseudonyms and invited to change them to a name of their choice – or to provide their real name if they chose to do so. One-third of the participants chose to reveal their own names while the others retained the colour-based pseudonyms I provided when establishing the VFG platform. At no stage did the participants indicate why they retained the pseudonym or why they were amended.

The participants were aware that they had all been selected for involvement in the study based upon a shared relationship – being family members of a missing person. It was anticipated that this shared interest, or shared understanding of lived and perceived experience, might enhance the way that they engaged with each other and expressed private views, thus providing scope to understand better the role of hope through the telling of their stories.

The VFG was hosted over a four-week period during August and September 2013. Participants were invited to share as much or as little of themselves as they felt comfortable at the beginning of the group. Figure 3 shows a screenshot of the group, highlighting options for people to comment, view, and engage with the researcher and other participants.

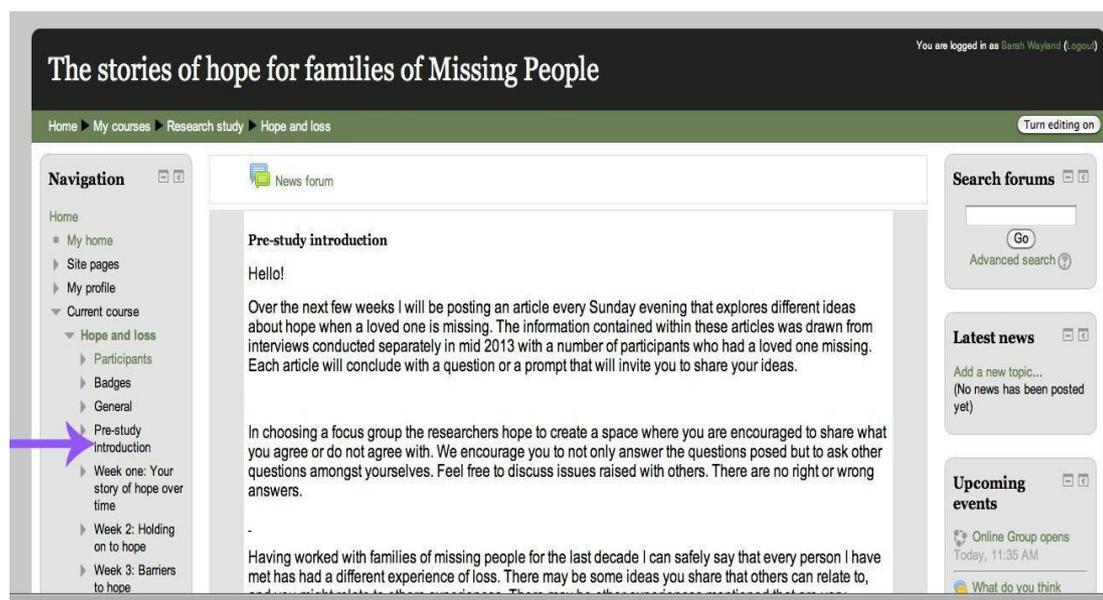


Figure 3 Virtual Focus Group Site Screenshot

Information was provided for participants, including: tips to navigate the site with IT troubleshooting information; information about support services, given the moderator would not be online at all times; and, details as to how to delete posts should the participant wish to do so. I assumed the role of moderator within the group and participants were aware of this. I would submit a weekly post each Sunday evening and then invite engagement with the post across that week – commenting and sharing reflections to generate contribution. At times I engaged in some reflexive practices by asking participants additional questions to clarify their responses and engage them in deeper analysis of the answers they presented. As per traditional methods of focus group creation, it was decided that the group needed to comprise of a number that was “small enough to share insights but large enough to allow for diversity of views” (Turney et al, 2005, p. 36). The group comprised 21 members.

Part of the focus of presenting the themes identified during the preliminary thematic analysis stage was to use the weekly posts as a form of blog-based interactions – as an alternate form of narrative genre for individuals to tell their stories. The members of the virtual focus group were aware that the themes presented to them were developed as part of engagement with the earlier contingent of participants. The posts were grouped thematically in a storytelling format as a way to weave the complexity of the responses from the first range of participants in an accessible way. These posts or short articles were then used as a way to engage the second round of participants to encourage them to share their reflections –ranging from agreeing with the first group’s ideas to creating new layers of understanding in response to engaging with the stories of others.

The posting format of the VFG was similar to a blog, where a statement or story was shared in a 600-800-word format that allowed for people to opt in and out of the site, to read the reflection, and then comment if they chose to do so. Blogs have only recently been viewed as potential sources of data collection and analysis (Jones & Alony, 2008). Using a private blog site (where a password or access login is required) is not the traditional form utilised in establishing online focus groups. However, presenting written explorations – with detailed examples of Phase One participants’ thoughts and ideas within the posts – allowed me to engage with this second phase of data collection in two ways. First, it provided a space for people to share their own story; and second, it tested the analysed themes presented by the first group as a way of further developing the thematic analysis component of the study. With initial high levels of engagement in the first two weeks, participant engagement on the site over the four-week period waned, with only minimal interaction by the end. While some issues, namely those who felt their experiences of ambiguity were different to other members of the group, given the way in which their person vanished, were noted by participants in the third phase of data collection with the ‘Invitation to clarify’ participants. Some also spoke of a feeling of disconnection from the study exacerbated by the online space and the rush to take the opportunity to share their story within first two weeks, leaving little to explore in the last two weeks. Further details regarding engagement and connection with the methodology are explored within the next chapter entitled ‘living and hoping.’

Table 3 provides an overview of the online engagement, interaction with other participants, and the gradual decline of the Moodle-based virtual focus group over the four-week period:

Table 3

Week	Action			Participant Engagement
	Login	View	Add	
Week 1	62	147	47	0.32
Participant	41	101	32	
Researcher	21	46	15	
Week 2	25	64	17	0.20
Participant	17	50	10	
Researcher	8	14	7	
Week 3	25	88	27	0.31
Participant	16	59	18	
Researcher	9	29	9	
Week 4	21	51	10	0.16
Participant	14	38	6	
Researcher	7	13	4	

Table 3 Virtual Focus Group Engagement

**Key:**

*Login: User logged into the Virtual Focus Group*

*View: Participant viewed a blog post or another participant's reply*

*Add: Participant added a reply to either a blog post or another participant's reply*

*Engagement: Ratio of Adds to Views*

By the final week of the study, engagement had waned and individuals began to reflect privately via email to the researcher that perhaps some weeks were more challenging than others in living with their loss. For some, the action of sitting and 'typing the sadness' was more confronting than the idea of speaking it. There were also the beginnings of ideas from some participants that

it was impossible to ‘*lump together*’ various types of missing person’s scenarios. Here, their differences became more pronounced than their similarities; these ideas will be explored further within the next chapter.

### ***Phase Three: Invitation to clarify***

At the end of the in-depth interviews and VFG, some additional threads remained unaddressed. An invitation was extended to each of the participants, via email, to clarify any of their reflections directly with the researcher either by phone, Skype, or email. The research was designed with the potential for all participants, across the three phases of data collection, to be invited to clarify their story or to share their experience of involvement. Gilbert (2002) asserts that within this methodological frame, in addition to the telling of stories, the researcher must also be open to the possibility that the story can change, “sometimes dramatically, and sometimes incrementally” (p. 225). It was anticipated that one interaction, where rapport had to be built and a narrative of loss woven, might not be long enough to yield all of the necessary detail that would assist in exploring the research question. The purpose of seeking clarification was two-fold: 1) to continue the conversation with individuals (as a way of identifying that time and place for interviews sometimes isn’t conducive when exploring traumatic concepts); and 2) to capture new learnings that individuals developed during post-interview reflection. Larson (1997) states that “entering people’s lives and representing their stories is far more complex than many assume...we will have to value clarifying and interpreting the meaning of stories as much as we value gathering them” (p. 468). Inviting people back into the space to capture different stories on different days was focussed on gathering

as much rich data as possible.

Eight individuals chose to take part in Phase 3, the 'Invitation to clarify' component of the study. These were grouped in two sections. One as post-data collection interviews, where 3 participants – all originating from the VFG, took part, post data collection. Two noted that their wish to clarify was borne from the missing person's investigation being ambivalent during the time of the group (where the potential for new details of the investigation were present, thus taking their focus away from being able to reflect on the research question). These participants noted that they retracted from the group concerned – that they were not wholly engaged with the process. The other chose to share their individual insights, away from the group, wanting to speak for the first time about living with the loss of a missing person. These members, of Phase 3 of the study, had other family members within the group and were concerned that their alternate views about lived experience may create some ambiguity amongst the family. These three interviews took the same form as the original in-depth interviews, with additional reflective questions about the role of their involvement in the study and their potential new ideas about hope. The impact of participation and the way participants now conceptualised their lived experience of hope and ambiguous loss from Phase One and Two were useful introductions to the in-depth interviews with these participants.

Following transcription of the data collection phase (expanded in detail in the following section), two issues remained unexplored: one of spirituality, and one of counselling support. The transcription revealed that almost half of the

participants referred to the connections between hope and these concepts. However, probing questions were overlooked and the potential for this to be a dominant theme was noted. Meaning that layered exploration of these topics was not conducted. On reflection, the questions were not posed for two reasons: the research focus sat elsewhere during the interviews; and the references to counselling and support were embedded in other hope concepts that the researcher focused on.

Noticing the inclusion of these concepts transiently throughout the interviews suggested that further clarification would be advantageous. All participants were sent an email (see Appendix F). Given the sensitivity of the interviews and the willingness of the participants in sharing their public and private conceptualisations of hope, the final contact was an opportunity to express gratitude and reiterate the support options available should any person wish to utilise them. The participants were asked to reflect via return email about the issues noted; the email also indicated that their response, or lack thereof, would not be an issue for me, or for the study and its outcomes. Seven participants (two of whom engaged in post data collection interviews) chose to recontact via email sharing insights in to the two questions posed and their final thoughts about involvement of the study.

### ***Transcription***

The first step of analysis was the transcription of the interviews. Given the inclusion of a preliminary thematic analysis within the data collection phase, the first role of the researcher, post-Phase One of the study, was to become

immersed in the recordings. From there, time was set aside to reflect upon the field notes and transcripts from the interviews as a way of identifying emerging themes. Taking the time to listen to the interviews repeatedly allowed the researcher to critique their own position within the three-dimensional narrative space, to listen out for the ideas not noticed within real time while the interviews were being conducted, and incorporate personal notes within the transcription – all necessary in order to begin to analyse the findings.

Minichello et al (2009) reminds us that “conversations are never neat and tidy with one person stopping speaking when it’s another’s turn” (p. 118). In transcribing the interviews, and incorporating the narratives shared within the VFG, the transcriptions only told part of the story of the researcher’s understanding of the research question. The focus of then mapping these conversations to explore new themes became the second focus of the study, a method of revealing and learning new concepts.

I completed the transcription of the interviews despite the investment of time, given the ratio of speaking versus transcribing. The process of complete immersion back into the interviews and the broader conceptualisations uncovered by the study provided the opportunity to reflect on the complexity of the research question and the themes slowly emerging from each of the participants.

Transcription of Phase Two of the study – the VFG – was significantly easier given the “immediate availability of rich codified data” (Jones and Alony, 2008, p. 440) that accompanies the use of computer-mediated platforms where

participants engage with each other in the online space. Rather than simply transferring this data to a spreadsheet, significant reading and re-reading of the information was completed to ensure the detail was not overlooked. The last phase of transcription – the ‘Invitation to clarify’ interviews and the email responses provided the final opportunities to reflect and explore the themes noted within this rich and complex study.

The VFG transcripts were downloaded and stored securely using a password-based software system. The Moodle site was also disabled, ensuring that participants could no longer add comments. The three transcripts – in-depth interview, VFG and ‘Invitation to clarify’ interviews were merged, forming a complete picture of the length and breadth of shared experiences exploring the impact of missing on the concepts of hope. The analysis phase of the study has been detailed below, including the method of thematic analysis that began to shape the results of the study.

### *Analysing the shared stories*

The research interviews were conducted over a five-month period between July and December 2013, with the final transcription concluding in February 2014. Analysis occurred at various intervals following each interview, and then a preliminary thematic analysis of the outcomes of the interactions with Phase One participants in preparation for the VFG. From there, there were regular and then sporadic passes of the data to explore the themes shared by, and the connections between, the questions asked and the responses provided by participants. On reflection, the time frames were quite short in comparison to other studies with

similar research designs and there was sometimes minimal opportunity to sit and reflect on the outcomes of some interviews before beginning another. The benefit of multiple methods of engagement for participants was that it allowed for the researcher to interact with participants in various ways – sometimes lessening the engagement when computer-based mediations were employed. In analysing the data, it was apparent that richness was not lost in using this method.

Polkinghorne's (1988) description of analysis in a narrative inquiry framework underpinned the researcher's work in all three phases of data collection: "the goal of analysis is to uncover common themes or plots in the data" (p. 177). In sitting, looking, and engaging with the transcripts, the recordings, and the researcher's own notes, the emerging themes began to take shape. This provided me with a clearer depth of knowledge about the limitations and the complexities of the original research question. The emergence of understanding that hope was not merely a response or a reaction to loss – that its existence was prompted by the participant's capacity to reason with their ambiguity, to speak openly about the changing nature of hope and the assertion that hope was not useful – reminded me repeatedly to step away from the idea that perhaps I could define what hope 'means.'

The focus of engagement with participants highlighted the need to be both malleable and open to the perceived versus lived experience of the participants. Therefore, in the analysis phase the potential to shift with the narratives, given the different methods used to extract the data, provided the fluidity and flexibility in the ways in which the analysis of the data took place. Wells (2011)

notes that, in understanding the application behind narrative analysis, researchers must first “look through language rather than at language” (p. 3). Therefore, in exploring the meanings within the stories shared, I had to sit amongst the words within those stories. In this way, listening while transcribing, as well as listening alone to the recordings, allowed for new insights to be gathered about the pace and the content of the interviews and even the notations of emotion at different intervals during our discussions.

Thematic narrative analysis provided the frame for this approach. The literature on this form of analysis fails to present a list of ‘rules’ that can be applied to the researcher’s learnings, but instead asks that attention be paid to “‘what’ is said, rather than “how”, “to whom”, or “what purposes”” (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). The first task of the analysis was to transfer the complete transcript (as one singular document) – from Phases One to Three – to a spreadsheet to view the data line by line. Reading through the entire transcript multiple times allowed a sense of existing alongside the data and for the pattern and occurrence of themes to begin to be realised. Once familiarity with the transcripts was achieved, some initial key phrases were noted. These were initially, and perhaps amateurishly, named ‘lovely words’. They became the ideas from the participants, noted by me, that resonated deeply – either on reflection from the interviews or in reading the words again. The task of thematically identifying the key premises of the data was initially all-consuming. Taking time to reflect on the words that connected with me as both researcher and a member of the community allowed me to see the merit in conducting the interviews, providing a pathway to begin the more detailed analysis. Separate to these key phrases, I

began to create fields as each line was explored. At the end of the three-month analysis, the data was divided between seven key areas:

- 1) Preliminary thematic analysis – concepts noted;
- 2) Complete transcribe thematic analysis – concepts noted;
- 3) Pace/content of interview – to map the flow;
- 4) Descriptors of hope;
- 5) Ideas for the future;
- 6) Researcher notes;
- 7) ‘Lovely words’.

Within each of the fields, drop-down concepts were noted. The process of taking the first order themes and then applying logical analysis of the meanings of the texts, in a subjective manner, provided clarity from my perspective as researcher. The goal in identifying the themes within the data was to demonstrate rigor in recognising what was said and what was understood. Koch (1994) suggests that, in the action of interpreting the research, a trail of evidence is required. By noting the higher order themes such as those identified in the preliminary thematic analysis of hope being present, hope waning and hope merging between these two states (see Chapter Six), the credibility and trustworthiness of the process was confirmed. Originally, all themes were identified and then, once the data had been “pawed” through (as described by Sandelowski, 1995), themes were then mapped on a whiteboard in consultation with the research team and then grouped for similarity and complexity. Presenting themes generated from the first pass of the data in supervision with

two of my three supervisors (MM and KM), some concepts of continuums of hope were noted, where the content and pace of the interviews provided opportunities for narratives to be shared that explored different ways that the research question was answered by participants. Taking these themes, and then mapping them across a trajectory of hope (Clark, 2006), the beginnings of the results and subsequent analysis began to take shape. The return to the concept of ‘lovely words’ also provided an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on the complexity of the stories shared by the participants as a way of exploring the changing nature of hope and possible future directives noted in the final chapter of this thesis.

Areas of interest, or those where possible additional investigation or conceptualisation might assist, were also noted. Each of the interviews was summarised separately and then the group transcripts were viewed in their entirety. The goal was not to complete a content analysis of the data but (as noted by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) “to sense and take note of potential themes in the raw data” (p. 86). During this phase of analysis – with the use of my research team – predominant themes were identified. However, analysis was not confined to those discovered in the preliminary thematic analysis. The analysis became a combination of the themes noted post-Phase One in addition to new or richer themes presented within Phase Two. These observations of potential continuums – as noted above – developed by categorising and deconstructing participant narratives, were plotted in a linear style. For example, participants who identified hope as a factor in enhancing their capacity for resilience as opposed to those who defined hope as pain, as a reaction that

provided minimal assurance in the pursuit of learning to live with uncertainty. These observations provided scope for the research team in understanding the fluid nature of hope. They challenged the social constructions noted in earlier research studies that hope merely existed alongside the experience of ambiguous loss. The analysis uncovered meaning and clarity in developing the results of the study.

Riessman (2008) notes that, in attending to the data the “objective is to generate inductively a set of stable concepts that can be used to theorize across cases” (p. 74). This means that, in exploring the outcomes of this study, the focus was not on the individual’s responses to the experience of loss, but the themes noted across and between the participants alongside their engagement, and in some cases disconnection with hope, over extended periods. Setting aside prescribed notions of what I had previously understood hope to be (and my interest in the media discourse attributed to the ‘expected’ experience of being left behind) was the goal of immersing myself in the data during the analysis phase. Questioning the narratives, conceptualising difference between family members, identifying the capacity for those living with ambiguity for multiple years and the notions of hope becoming less about the missing person and more about the participants’ life post-loss was enhanced.

### **Summary**

On reflection, the choice of methodology and the development of research design centred upon ideas of liminality – where space between the person being here and gone is punctuated by expressions of hope when someone is missing.

The objective behind the choice of methodology was to create a space where I could hear the voices of the participants by hearing their stories. Leggo (2008) argues “narrative inquiry is an on-going process of understanding how we invest space and chronology with significance” (p. 15). In this case, the exploration of the research methodology, and its capacity to shape the researcher’s potential to gather, interpret and analyse stories, was invested heavily in the decision of the participants to name their experiences and begin to explain the journeys that began both from the time the person was missing and even earlier than that (as noted in Chapter Two). In terms of methodological rigour, this chapter has identified the ways in which a gap in the knowledge of hope and ambiguous loss was explored using multiple platforms to engage participants in a narrative framework. Becoming mindful in relation to issues of generalizability and transferability the stories shared by the participants were explored in depth by the research team as well as in the process of inviting participants to Phase 3 where they would identify the potential shifts in their story and the impact of their inclusion in the study. So too, for the participants of the Virtual Focus Group (VFG), was the opportunity provided both to edit and upload comments asynchronously as well as the invitation to take part in Phase 3 of the study.

The narrative framework deconstructs the notion that the private and public explorations of what hope signifies when someone is missing are impacted upon by the social expectations where, upon losing a person, the only option is to hope for their return. The inclusion of a participant who opted out of the process due to the shift in the missing person’s investigation also reinforced the capacity for the narratives of the left behind to dramatically shift. That, in circumstances

where the person is found, or returns, or a new line of enquiry emerges, the stories shift and that their essence is only ever temporarily situated. The ambiguity makes the narratives vulnerable.

The following chapters explore the lived experience of hope (Chapter Six), unresolved loss by noting the results and subsequent analysis of the data (Chapter Seven) and then a concluding chapter (Chapter Eight) that outlines future research and intervention directives. The concluding chapter identifies: the ways in which hope has been spoken of; hope's dual role, being both encouraging and defeating in its capacity to discover new ways to live with an ambiguous loss; and experiences where the public assertions of holding on to hope was not entirely possible or useful for those who chose to share their stories within this study.

## Chapter Six – Living in the space in between

*The only way I can put it is that I have good hope that I can continue to lead a (hopefully) fruitful life. Is it always easy? No. – Brother of a woman missing for 23 years.*

The interpretation of results is grounded in the stories of loss shared by parents, siblings, and children of missing people who participated in this study. The following chapters identify the relationship between the data and the way that data was interpreted. The participants structured their response in a way that mapped hope following the disappearance of their family member, where hope existed in the early days following the disappearance and then shifted over time, dependent on individual and community-influenced factors. These chapters do not provide a space to retell their stories, but to sit amongst them – to analyse, explore, and attempt to understand the hope experience of those living with an ambiguous loss in order to answer the research question: *‘What do the stories of the left behind tell us about hope and the way it is experienced when someone is missing?’*

Jevne and Miller (1999) explain that hope is elusive so, in an attempt to define it, you may miss hope’s role given that “you can’t touch it, but you can definitely feel it. You can’t physically see it by itself but you can carry and hold it” (p. 6). The participants of the study for Phase One and Two were not asked to define hope explicitly. Instead, their descriptors lay in the storytelling aspects of hope’s inclusion in their lives post- ambiguous loss. The focus and flow of the questions centred upon a gradual unfolding of their experiences of loss following the disappearance of their family member, and the ways in which hope might, or

might not, have sat alongside those timeframes. Ideas of hope – of moving close to it and then stepping away – were paced by the ways in which the participants shared their stories and the intersections or significant shifts they noted post-loss that might have impacted upon their relationships with hope.

The narratives speak to the richness of the capacity for each participant to commit to sharing their stories; the narratives are woven together and are presented through the use of illustrative quotes, which are included in lieu of the names and faces of missing people to share and analyse the results of the study. In text, the participant narratives are noted by the use of italics. The narratives support the themes identified rather than the personal details of the person who shared. In text where both the researcher and participant narrative are included, the delineation between roles is noted as [R] for researcher and [P] for participant/s.

The results of the study do not share specific details relating to the missing person. The data was collected, thematically analysed, and then presented in a way that no specific details (that may offer the reader insight into the way the person vanished, the search efforts to locate them, or the current status of the investigation) were profiled. The conversations surrounding missing people in today's community suggest that there is a continual thirst for private details to be made public, where information and images of the missing person are shared and dissected without time to pause and reflect on who was lost (Wayland, 2013). It is simple to read a story, conduct a Google search, and for the details of a family to then be made public. Many high profile missing persons cases are easy to

identify even with very little information, so to protect anonymity, detail has been excluded.

### **Understanding the results**

The focus of this chapter is to begin to illustrate the concept of living within two spaces. One space is punctuated by hopefulness in the telling of the stories of their lost person. In the other space, hope as a *solitary practice* influenced by social constructions of how people ‘should’ manage their grief, especially where thoughts of their loss are unending. The participant narratives speak of hope being silenced from within, when the person’s capacity to *hold on to hope* was misunderstood by the community, leading to a cessation of enquiry about how they were living with their loss. Just as in response to a traumatic loss (Glasscock, 2011), the essence of who the person was often becomes lost to the manner and circumstances around their possible cause of death. Here in this study, the participants spoke of the missing person no longer being viewed in their entirety but defined by the context of them being absent.

The development of richer, more detailed analysis was achieved using an inductive approach seeking to identify new theory emerging from the data. From here, emailing or speaking to those who agreed to follow up interviews gathered the final reflections of the study from Phase Three participants who had previously shared in the two phases prior. This provided the opportunity to reach saturation in the process of theme discovery and the capacity to scrutinise line- by-line the thematic constructs offered by the participants.

The results of Phase One of the study are explored here through the use of descriptive analysis, intertwining the data results and accompanying critical analysis. The narratives transcribed spoke to ideas of hope when someone is missing and, perhaps more broadly, in questioning how it is that we learn to live with the unknown and to tolerate ambiguity in all aspects of life.

### **Preparing for the narrative inquiry interviews**

The preceding chapter describes the unfolding of data collection over a five-month period in 2013. Phase One of the study occurred within the first two months of this period, where six people volunteered to share their perspectives on ambiguous loss. One participant decided not to proceed with the study given the change in status of the investigation into her father's disappearance. Each interview was conducted at least 10 days apart – and before a deliberate one-month delay between Phase One and Two. This action of easing into the data collection provided opportunity for reflexive praxis by situating myself within the questions that had occurred to me over my long history of therapeutic interventions with similar families. These reflections grounded the interviews with purpose – for both the participants and myself – by building on the known literature and providing a space for new insights to be established.

Given the specific inclusion criteria required for involvement in the study, there was an opportunity for the participants to limit the sharing of the finer details of the traumatic incident that occurred when the person vanished. The idea that the story of the disappearance might reveal itself within the questions posed around hopefulness and diminished hope allowed for these important

clarifiers to be told without the continual focus on the practical details that tend to be associated with the sharing of narratives when a person is a family member of a missing person.

### **Phase One outcomes: can you define hope?**

The participants shared that hope was not merely an emotion that can be defined, but an innate value that exists within each of us. Hope was seen as being influenced by the person we are, the experiences we endure, and the circumstances we find ourselves in. The participants all described hope in different ways – some with clarity and others in a muddled confusion, depending on their ideas of their future, the length of time the person was absent and their thoughts of and about the missing person.

What emerged from the first thematic analysis conducted post Phase One interviews was the creation of a tiered schema of hope (see Figure 4), where participant reflections moved from ideas of being hope-full to hope-less, punctuated by a space where the two ideas weaved together. This weaving was dependent on what was happening within the investigation, how long it had been since the person vanished, and the person's capacity to sit with (or tolerate) the idea that, irrespective of their actions, they could not bring the missing person home. Taking these concepts and then testing their validity enhanced the value of the research topic as it could be meaningfully interpreted against two groups of individuals using two different methods of data collection.

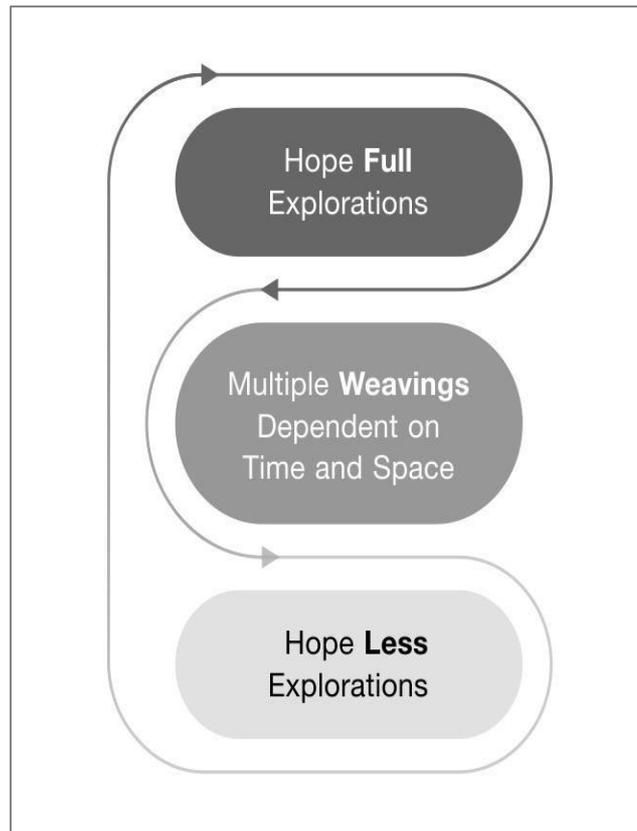


Figure 4 The tiered schema of hope

Naming the concepts shared within Figure 4 in this early stage of the chapter, given that they emerged prior to Phase Two of the study, provides the reader with an introduction to the complexity in the value of hope – a complexity that exists prior to it being excavated and explored within the rich narrative provided by and then amongst the participants of the VFG. The themes, supported by illustrative quotes from all of the participants, confirm that hope does not merely exist when someone is missing – it is a moveable hypothesis that shifts as the missing person’s investigation alters and changes.

In this tiered space, shifting ideas of hope overlapped and engaged with each other. The first tier – hope-full explorations – is not to be confused with hopeful or positive statements. These statements are ones where the participants

demonstrated, through sharing the story, a self-described capacity to use hope in a meaningful way – to understand their own experiences of loss and the way they were surviving in spite of them. To illustrate this for example, one mother said:

*I look back [at the time before her son vanished when she was raising him] with a different lens. I can reflect that everything I did was with good intention.*  
Mother of a son missing for nine years.

On the opposite end were statements where hope was lacking (identified as the third tier in Figure 4). Again, these were not hopeless statements, but ones where the person's engagement with ideas of hope provided little respite from the person's capacity to enact mastery over their life. This lack of mastery sat amidst the ambiguity, usually relating to the lack of information about the missing person's whereabouts or frustrations about the law enforcement response to the investigation. An example of this hope-less narration, one brother said:

*The rollercoaster ride takes you on an anticipation of hope that there is going to be a breakthrough, but then it doesn't and you have to get off that coaster. They are the black dog days.*  
Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

The third tier is the key feature of the first thematic analysis of Phase One responses that allows the movement between Tier 1 and Tier 3. The space where multiple weavings occur were seen within conversations where the participant spoke almost of the “both/and” concept noted by Boss (1999), where people existed in two spaces at the same time, a liminal space created by hope shifting.

The participants confirmed that a dual process of hope existed – one in which the multiple weaving concept brought together periods of hopefulness alongside a tenuous connection with hope – where ambiguity existed within that space, yet that space became the new normal for those left behind – a space in between, as exemplified by the following statement by a partner of a missing man.

*It's exhausting all the time. It just goes round and round in your head. I try to carry on; I hope not to be this emotional forever.*  
de facto partner of a man missing for almost one year.

### **Deconstructing the tiered schema of hope**

Ryan and Bernard (2010) assert that “at the core of qualitative data analysis is the task of discovering themes” and that these themes will at times be “fuzzy constructs” (p. 86). The purpose of the first thematic analysis during the first data collection phase was to explore the emergent themes provided by Phase One participants as a way to ensure that my own trajectory of hope was consistent with what I was being told. This first thematic analysis was completed by transcription of the interviews and then grouping together, roughly, the themes that emerged. The larger scale themes were intentionally noted with an expectation that they would emerge in the transcripts following Phase Two and Three of the data collection (as noted in the previous chapter) and the layers of hope would be identified. The methods used to thematically analyse the data involved what Sandelowski (1995) termed as “pawing” through the texts and marking the emergent themes and significant notations with different coloured pens. Taking these notations and then underlining key phrases, not necessarily because the themes were immediately clear, but that they made some sense

despite that sense not yet being clear. Additional electronic cutting and sorting of the transcripts, as noted in the methodology chapter, then occurred (as detailed in Chapter Seven) once all of the data collection was complete.

The analysis of the themes noted within this first thematic analysis is detailed in the three sections below. The inclusion of illustrative quotes to reinforce the emergent themes via analysis provides a springboard to the testing of ideas with Phase Two participants as detailed in Chapter Seven.

### ***Being hope-full***

*We always clung onto the hope that they were alive and would be a part of our lives again. Alleged sightings brought more hope that they would be found.*  
Sister-in-law of a missing person absent for nine years.

Irrespective of the time since disappearance, each of the participants was able to articulate ways that the inclusion of hope provided strength and emotional support as they awaited news. For some, these feelings diminished over time; for others, they remained long after the loss occurred. The idea that hope was attached to the participants' bond to the missing person has been explored further within this, and the proceeding chapter. These two concepts of reaction to loss and bond to the missing person are linked in the sense that to give up on hope was to give up on the person who was no longer here. The descriptors used to explain the action of holding on to hope when someone is missing provide insight into the experience of being hope-full. Phrases like *holding on*, *clinging to*, and *hanging out for* were used to express the action of

hope and its inclusion in the experience of loss. Participants spoke of *good hope* where hope was an action that allowed them to be active in response to their loss:

*... to lead a hopefully good and fruitful life, and I certainly look to that. Is it always easy? No, I'm a lucky bloke. I have a lovely wife and well, we have a great little girl and that's obviously, well it sounds clichéd, that's very much what you align yourself more with and that generates hope because you are looking at your [children] growing up.*

Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

Others in Phase One of the study chose to view hope and its benefits as a way for them to select a path that they might continue on for the duration of the period of *not knowing*. In exploring what they were hoping for, they were also able to visualise the ways in which other family members used hope as a tool:

*It ebbs and flows, that's why I don't like talking about it to people who don't know (about the complexity of having someone missing). Family are fine, because we know home. You can't be happy all the time. You have to come to terms with that. To be content, to be fulfilled.*

Mother of a son missing for 10 years.

The stories demonstrated that a focus on, or gratitude for, what the participant had in their lives in spite of the losses endured, provided the impetus for a hopeful life as people continued on after the loss of their missing person. Participants spoke of the dual challenges that existed with handing over control of the investigation to an external force, often the police but in some circumstances to the Coroner's Court. In the action of handing over responsibility, they also handed over their personal/intimate ideas of hope, as most of the efforts were removed from their control and subsumed by an organisation or individual. Yet, being unable to predict when or if these sightings or developments in the case would continue to occur provided challenges for

how much hope they could legitimately hold on to and for how long this hope sustained them.

### *Multiple weavings of hope*

*It's a seesaw and you just have to embrace it.*  
Mother of a son missing for 8 years.

The space in between the two concepts of hope-full and hope-less showed the changing nature of hope, as well as ideas regarding resolution. There was a sense that the idea of weaving the two together was a coping strategy. All of the participants spoke of the awareness that they had to be flexible with ideas about the return of the missing person. For them, to live in one space perpetually, where they either believed a return would not occur or were hopeful that one would eventuate, did not correspond with the unresolved nature of loss that accompanies a missing person's investigation, as one mother of a son missing for 10 years shared:

*I think there are two paths of hope. You have different hope in the beginning – it's a sharper hope isn't it? Though it does come back to who you are – I mean if you're a pessimist you're not going to attach a lot to hope are you? If you're an optimistic person then yeah, I think that hope is within your life and you'll channel it in different areas. Like a twig; there are different branches of hope – it's a much softer hope for the future isn't it? It's a very poignant sharp hope when someone goes missing.*  
Mother of a son missing for 10 years.

The multiple weavings of hope also unearthed a concept where participants referred to a sensation of balancing, or colloquially 'hedging their bets' on hope. At times, during a reflection on hope, the opportunity to come to a conclusion surrounding a particular statement – be it hope-full or hope-less – created a shift

and the participant would offer an alternate view that changed the focus entirely. Some of these reflections were focused on simply not knowing what the missing person's intentions were:

[R]: *It sounds like hope is a big confusing storm going around and around?*

[P]: *It is, it is. Deep down something tells me to go out and search for him all the time, but then I ask 'is this fair for him, for me?' My friends said if you bring him back, it's like caging a lion. Why go out and find him?*

[R]: *Does that confuse your hope of wanting to bring him home when maybe he has the right to decide what he wants to do?*

[P]: *God yes, it really mucks with your head sometimes, really badly.*

De facto partner of a man missing for almost one year.

These unexpected outcomes from the participant narrative developed an accompanying layer of curiosity carried forwards to Phase Two and the role of a sequential mixed method approach where I was then able to "...compensate for the blind spots that often eventuate from a single approach and strengthened the overall research process" (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 322.) Taking the learnings from the first phase and then testing these in narrative format with the second phase participants allowed me to explore the key concepts shared about hope as well as the outlier conversations. The social responsibility of asking previously unasked questions was a key factor in my slow and methodical approach to engaging participants. Questions about those who stated that 'hope was pain' and the focus on whether or not those left behind should be attempting to seek the return of a person who may not wish to return were addressed. The researcher did not underestimate checking in with participants about the focus of the interviews and

their level of comfortableness in speaking openly about what might be taboo topics.

In saying this, the shifting nature of hope that led to the ideas of multiple weavings was shown to be dependent on time: participants had to step away from the consummate focus in the early days that the case would be resolved – spaces where they believed there were no other alternatives possible within their experiences but for the missing person to return. Those participants in Phase One where the person had been absent for more than a decade all shared knowledge of this capacity to externalise the processes of hope – where they could witness the *ebb and flow* of their engagement on a positive outcome and the shifting and settling of anticipation that this would end one day.

### ***Hope-less interspersed with trepidation***

The tone of the interviews during Phase One became noticeably quiet, despondent reflections when stories of hope turned to ideas of losing, or *denting* hope. Participants turned away from the researcher during face-to-face meetings, looked away from the screen when using Skype, or spoke softly over the phone. The concepts of hope-less narratives was not introduced in opposition to those shared about renewed hope, but more so the emotional toll that participants admitted was rarely spoken of in the community – about the exhaustion attached to the action of hoping:

*It's pain basically. I think that now that hope for me is pain, you know when someone first goes missing that all you have [is hope]. One is disbelief and then hope they will turn up and great belief they will.*

Mother of a young man missing for 10 years

Participants spoke of the inclusion of the media to assist them in sharing news about their missing person and its role in this sensation of being on a rollercoaster. However, the focus on the belief that the missing person would be found, or closure would be achieved, made the action of speaking about silenced hope both disenfranchised and confusing. The participants noted that if their hope waned, those around them did not invite these conversations. Conversely, if their hope strengthened people would seek to remind them that they need to be *realistic and just move on*. The participants shared a sense of raised hope creating a *hope hangover*, where anticipation would peak and then time was required to recover from the emotional assault of thinking that answers might be forthcoming. This brought attention to the participants' capacity to remain resilient and protect themselves from the elation of a positive outcome. One participant, shared how his insight into his own response to losing his sister:

*You look to wrap hope around stakes in the ground, trees whatever you want to call it. Hope is like a piece of cling wrap that you wrap around {those trees}. That's how you hold it all together. The one aspect of me, that I still think is 'Am I doing exactly what I should be doing?' for my own happiness but then part of it (his journey of hope) is influenced by 'am I doing enough to acknowledge what happened to my sister?' when everyone tells me you have to move on, you have to move on.*

Brother of a sister missing for 23 years.

The action of silencing hope did not sit solely with the person who was left behind; it wasn't a solitary act that they alone instigated. Some participants

spoke of what it felt like when others silenced their hope before they were ready for that to happen:

*Friends and family supported hope for his return in the early days but were also quick to discourage it over time when they perceived that time had moved on and so should I and my family.*  
Mother of a son missing for 8 years.

The experiences of hope and loss were noted in the light and shade of their descriptions. Further, the limitations of the study (in seeking an understanding of experiences when each experience was unique) did not appear to be a challenge in engaging participants individually. Ideas of difference, and a potential hierarchy of response to ambiguous loss, were only encountered when the participants came together as a group, as explored in the next chapter. The testing of the themes noted here – of being hope-full, hope-less and weaving between these two spaces – with the participants of the VFG yielded more detail that gave additional understanding and depth about the hope journey.

### **Preparing the themes to present to Phase Two participants**

At the end of Phase One of the study and the first thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the development of emergent themes needed to be grouped in a format to present the findings to Phase Two participants. As noted in the previous chapter exploring the research design and application, the use of a blog-style Internet platform built within ‘Moodle’ was chosen. My own use of a personal blog since 2011 to explore the professional and individual challenges associated with being a parent and working within the grief sector provided the impetus to use a relatively new method to engage and prompt discussion

amongst participants. The blog posts, six in total, identified the themes presented above. However, rather than developing them using an academic writing style, the posts were conversational with a call to action at the end of each post. The goal was to generate discussion in response to the post and between each of the participants. Identifying the key themes – firstly that hope existed for each of the participants involved in Phase One of the study and then inviting participants to share stories of hope, exploring tiers one and three of the tiered schema of hope (reframed as hope enablers and hope detractors in the experience of ambiguous loss) and then ideas of the impact of community attitudes towards missing people and the role of the media. The posts (located in Appendix G) detail the prompt shared to begin discussions and then the concluding post that also encouraged those return participants (Phase Three) to close the study. The results and emerging themes of the final two phases of the study are explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter Seven – The shades of hope

*Hope is a constant with me, but a very variable constant and now after 23 years is basically just to know what happened interspersed with occasional bursts of thinking*  
Mother of a daughter missing 23 years.

The thematic analysis of the participant narratives speak of hope shifting over time, where the public and private perceptions of hope noted in the space between thoughts of the missing person and hope for the self, was also exacerbated by a perceived ‘missing’ hierarchy between participants. These themes and sub-themes reveal new insights about the hope journey following an ambiguous loss.

### **1. Shifting concepts of hope**

Figure 5 explores how the sharing of the thematic understandings of hope from the participants built upon previous research (see Wayland, 2007) where I argued that the shifting cycle of hope was situated across a timeline that waned the longer the person was absent.

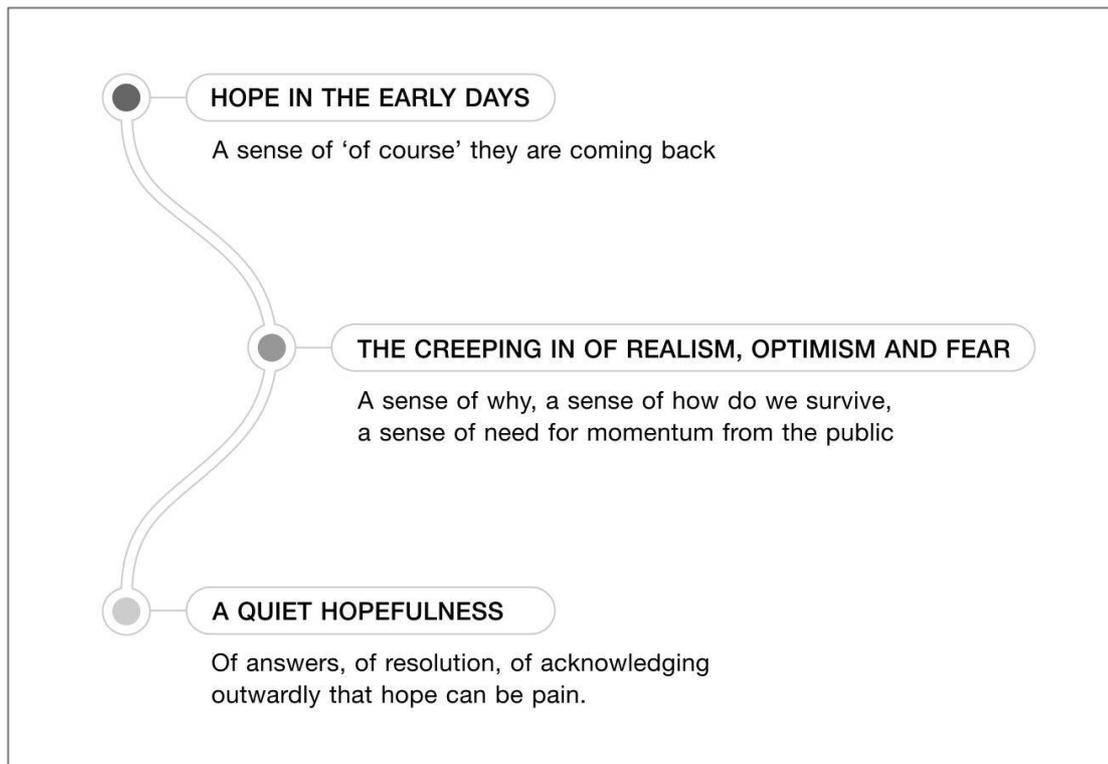


Figure 5 The shifting of hope over time

*Hope changes over time.*

Within this study, the public proclamations of hope shared by families of missing people quietened over time, as evidenced by decreased media awareness of long-term missing persons cases. Multiple weavings of hope began to consume people's thoughts, where hope was enabled in the sharing of news about possible sightings and further to hope detractors when remains were located (despite them not being their missing person). The narratives shared a gradual turning inwards, where the participants questioned how they might survive 'not knowing'. Thus became the focus of the lived experience as time moved on:

[R]: *When you get news of the sightings, like many families do, you said you were instantly hopeful because of some of the things that she talked about and when that conversation [with the person who*

*phoned in the sighting] ended and you had to get back in to your life again did the hope still stay there?*

*[P]: It did for a long time and only this year – 1½ years in [after the sighting] – it went again. The birthdays and things come around and you don't hear anything – your mind is just trying to get reason all the time. There is a space where you haven't got on with things. I think there is only so long that a body can take on that level of pain. I think there is some normality and yeah, I suppose I've just busied myself completely. Mother of a son missing for 8 years.*

Hope was seen as being both an engagement in optimism as well as an introduction to fear: hope would be unending while a person remained missing and this unending sensation diminished the idea that hope was a positive action. Figure 5 presents the experience of hope where each of the concepts was a gradual settling towards the participant learning to sit with ambiguity:

*One of the saddest aspects for me is that all her grandparents have died since her disappearance, in particular my mother with whom she was very close. As her friends get older and the older generation passes away I have this dreadful sensation at times of my daughter's life slowly slipping through our fingers. Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.*

Weeks 1 and 3 of the VFG, focussing on the telling of people's stories of hope and then the option to share how hope may have changed over time, yielded significant levels of engagement from the group as a whole. In these weeks, the narratives demonstrated that the settling into new and less obtrusive spaces occurred after the trauma of the disappearance subsided. Participants expressed that the lived experience was tinged with sadness for the person they left behind and the lack of inclusion for that person because of the uncertainty:

*I tend to avoid conversations with people about our daughter's disappearance, knowing that they cannot understand our way of thinking and coping. They have reached their decisions and know that they do not have an answer for us. It is amazing that in this day*

*and age, where we are all supposed to be more educated and understanding, people like us (families of missing people) are not looking to discuss our sadness each time we meet, but how nice it would be if things like "any news yet?", or bringing your daughter into a casual conversation, [they could] try to be "normal"!!*  
Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

The intransitive drawing of a line in the sand pre-missing and post-missing created the sense of frozenness illustrated by the participants that accompanied changing forms of hope. In this way, despite how resigned a family might have been to the notion that a person was not coming home, there was always space for the sense of possibility – described by the participants as ‘*but maybe*’ – irrespective of how sure they might be the this positive outcome was not possible. As the collection of data progressed, the participants began to explore hope as if it were a fork in the road. Some participants felt that hope was a *two way street*, where one father of a young woman missing for more than two decades shared that *faith and hope [was] a positive outcome*. This hope fuelled the families’ capacity to continue believing that the missing person would return. However, it was rare among the VFG participants, for hope to be shared in a positive, light-filled manner. The descriptors of hope were from a darker place, where the challenges or dents to hope were easier to express amongst the group than what enabled them to keep hoping. Here, dissenting views on hope were openly shared:

*My challenge with hope for my sister is that I have a differing view from just about everyone including my two brothers. They are also siblings, raised in the same household that attended the same schools yet we hold completely different views... I believe she is alive and the Police and Coroner are wrong.*  
Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

Here, hope became a dual concept when it splintered as time moved on, or if family members had dissenting views as to whether it existed. The dual concepts spoke of hope for the missing person as well as hope for the self, as shared in the previous chapter and reinforced by the VFG participants. At the end of the second week, the VFG participants were asked their ideas of what holding onto hope might have looked like, and what assisted them to maintain a sense of hopefulness alongside the waiting for news, via the following prompt:

[R]: *Whenever a story appears in the newspaper about the disappearance of a person the word hope appears. Hope for the searchers, hope for answers for the family and a sense that the community is hoping for a happy ending.*

Conversations with the participants demonstrated a sense that there was a *light and shade to hope*. This light and shade was evidenced in its descriptions and challenges, and in the way it shaped future ideas and impacted ideas of time. In this way, the inclusion of hope within the missing experience was significantly more robust than just an assertion that hope existed in the very act of waiting for an outcome. The concept of the shared public notion of stories versus the private internalised ones made me curious and using this reflexive praxis allowed me to delve further into the stories to uncover what this private story might be.

The three key elements of the stories of hope explored in the final section of Figure 5 were noticeable and somewhat simple to differentiate within the pacing and progression of the interviews with the participants. First, there was the sense of being hope-full. Second, hope could weave in and out of engaging and challenging spaces. Third, there was the complexity of hope as it began to

diminish, or was silenced, or became susceptible to stigma. The grey areas that moved between the shared thoughts versus the private thoughts of uncertainty occupied the spaces between these themes. The action of hoping existed within three experiences. One was punctuated by a sense of hoping the missing person would return. The second then stretched to hoping the person was at least safe and led to a third quieter moment of reflective hoping that, if the person was no longer here, they did not suffer.

## **2. The space between public and private narratives**

During the data collection process, I was privy to explorations of hope not commonly discussed in day-to-day conversations (as noted to me by the participants). In speaking to the participants of Phase Two, there was a sensation of secrecy in their revealing to me, as part of the study, the private narratives that sat with the experience of loss. Some of the participants of the study were well known within the media; their faces were attached to stories of loss that the community had been invited to share for many years. Yet, the space for the research sat outside these traditional conversations, with an invitation to share their private narratives of loss with me. At the end of the study, a few of the participants asked that some of their reflections not be included in the final thesis. After sharing some of their stories, the vulnerability they experienced post-interview was all-consuming and they feared that others, including the missing person, would simply would not appreciate the stories they shared. They were concerned about how they might be perceived by those who would read the study and whether their missing person would accept their reflections on what life had been like post-loss.

It was as if I was invited into a private space, for a small moment in time, with some information available to share and others that will remain between the participants and myself forever. This private space threads together the person's stories that sit alongside (not always neatly and exploring the concept of Tamas' 2011 'dirty text' in qualitative analysis) that of the story of the missing person. The yearning for answers – and the yearning for the missing person's return, which did not appear to be the same thing – was persistent and overwhelming at times. The grief reactions and the rawness of the language used by participants did not appear to have been dulled over time. The participants of this study still spoke as if they were in the early days of their loss, even though (for some) countless years had passed since they last saw the missing person.

This blurred disconnect, between the public and private world, was punctuated by stories that told of being misunderstood, where grief was disenfranchised:

*Friends and families supported hope for his return in the early days but also were quick to discourage it over time when they perceived that time had moved on and so should I (and my family)*  
Sister of a young man missing for 23 years.

There was an expectation of *no stone being unturned* when searching for a missing person. This meant that private lives had to be turned outwards to the media, and the wider community, so as to gain the potential benefit of locating the missing person. One participant, the sister of a young man missing for two years who was an active user of social media to bring about change for her family and on behalf of other families of missing people, saw this as: *a key factor in my hope is the presence of public interest and momentum for the ongoing*

*sense, an idea that I'm not alone in my search.* Other participants in this phase of the study created websites, social media pages and blogs to raise awareness about the continued lack of information as to the whereabouts of the missing person. This meant that, behind closed doors, some people suggested that there was a timeliness attached to ideas of hope. The mother of a missing son shared that: *I think my friends wish I could get some peace with it...it's a really mixed teasing journey, it's just a big tease.* In this way, there was a sensation that sharing your private world enhanced other people's capacity to both know information about you and to conceptualise how you might be living, or should be living, with your loss.

One of the most distressing moments for me as a researcher was the moment where a participant reflected upon this intersection between public and private and its capacity to impact on hope for the life they might continue to lead post-loss. The participant spoke of a friend seeing an image of her missing brother online and asking after him, thinking he was living elsewhere, when in actual fact she had not told friends he was missing:

*I just played along I couldn't bring myself to tell her, she told other friends and they came to me and said 'oh you've been keeping your hot brother a secret.' I just couldn't tell them.*  
Sister of a brother missing for 2 years.

The choice as to how much families of missing people shared is often taken out of their hands in the very early days of the missing person's disappearance, which differs from the choices made once the community interest is viewed as having subsided. The key focus of location limited a person's choice as to how much they shared with others (the community), both about the missing person

and about themselves. Here, the inclusion of hope in a context of ‘community’ had both positive and negative connotations, depending on whether participants had wished to share or whether they had differing ideas about what elements of their identity they wished to distribute. The concept of finding the missing person, or *having them back*, was explored by most of the participants. They explored what it might look like to have a person return, what the left behind might need to do for them, and about how that in-between period of missing tugged at their ideas of needs and wants:

*In the beginning I wanted him back ... it would be raining, I'd be hoping that he would be warm, if it was hot I'd hope that he wasn't without water. I hoped he had the wellbeing and that he'd come back. That he wasn't suffering but now it, if he is still alive, I hope that he... Well sometimes I'm really cranky at him for doing this. I'd hope that he was happy, that he is having the life he wants. I know that in the last couple of years he has suffered emotionally. It changes all the time. It's like being on a rollercoaster.*  
de facto partner of a man missing for almost 1 year.

These subthemes of public and private are explored below. Here the private narratives, as discussed broadly with the research team, were denoted by terms such as ‘silencing,’ with seeking to understand the impact of the influence from others and the role of those on the periphery of working with families of missing people. Public narratives were those shared in a community context, primarily by media outlets as a way for those left behind to share their version of hope that focussed mainly on closure and resolution. Assessing the value of hope in a context of those explorations being both public and private is key in understanding what is omitted when families choose to share their story.

### *Unspoken narratives and the influence of others*

The initial ideas identified in the hope schema noted that the socially constructed responses to ambiguous loss impacted the participant's engagement with hope. The VFG participants each spoke about their small corners of the universe: the ways that the people in their families, their wider community, and the media enhanced or detracted from their engagement with hope. The results were not neat, they focussed on 'dirty text' (as noted by Tamas, 2011, as the qualitative data gathered from trauma narratives); as with any rich narrative, they did not sit within the two spaces of the community holding onto or letting go of hope on behalf of the participants. It was more that the existence of the liminal space – a sense of 'betwixt or between' (Riegal, 2003) – meant that, on one level, the sense of community could enhance people's capacity to tolerate the ambiguity and, on the other level, it meant they needed to turn inwards, to keep their relationship with hope as a private concept.

Reviewing transcripts revealed that the anecdotal reflections on past conversations with families of missing people was a chance to explore the inclusion of the concept of hope in the media accounts of those left behind. In reviewing the hopeful narratives of those who lined New York streets with missing persons images post-September-11, Edkins (2011) spoke of "multiple bundles of hope." (p. 72) these image holders were unintentionally 'willing' the community to engage in ideas that the missing person might return. This sharing of their status claiming them as 'missing' placed them in the liminal space where the possibility of reunion could be enacted. So too within this study did the participants speak of the time immediately following the disappearance of a

person, where they used the media to share details about the loss. During this time, they assumed that, in the action of sharing, they too could collectively hope for the return and receive the assistance of others. The participants, in sharing this shift that occurred when they stepped back into the media circle for significant anniversaries, noted that questions of what they might be ‘hoping’ for became the focus. Ideas of hopefulness, in a media context, were at the forefront of my mind when listening to the participants’ stories of the community: could ideas of hope be something other than the missing person physically returning? This comment, which I made to a participant during the in-depth interviews, captures these notions of communal reactions to hope:

[R]: *One of the things that I’ve uncovered in the last year in looking at the literature and the studies involving missing people is the way that pervading sense in the media that families are supposed to hold on to hope for long periods of time and that that’s a natural function of missing. Some of the research says that if you live with an unresolved loss then the natural reaction to cope is to be hope-full and that there wasn’t much space to be hope-less, to say ‘I don’t have a great degree of hope at this point of time’ (to the media). Do you think you were allowed to say, ‘actually I’ve lost some hope.’ Were they discussions you were allowed to have and to be OK with having them?*

One mother’s response to this question I posed raised the issue of a *shadow of sadness* that descended upon her. In the action of reaching out to the media, of sharing her son’s image, and willing for people in her local community to help them search, was the reality that her son could have already been dead by the time she began searching for him. For her, the reality of searching for a person and not knowing in what state they might be discovered tainted the action of others influencing hope. Further, only the family knew the person they were searching for and that, as time shifted, *you go on thinking about things quietly*

when others have moved on. The other VFG participants found that the probing nature of the media, in trying to seek answers long after the person vanished, was tedious and disenfranchising for the left behind. As a result, one father of a missing young woman explained: I tend to avoid conversations with people about our daughter's disappearance. The continual 'Any news yet?' often asked of these families, was seen as a shield that protected people from having to discuss our sadness every time we meet.

In the sharing of private stories of hope, some had an element of silence attached to them. It was as if these were not allowed to be shared with the broader community. This silence or stigma surrounding the left behinds' beliefs forced people to internally reflect on the fog of ambiguity when their thoughts were different from those around them. Here, as an extension of the Phase One participants' concept of a hope hangover, the settling into ideas developed. As people continued to live alongside ambiguous loss, this led to conversations that the participants shared only in a safe space, such as the one created within the research study.

[P]: *I have to say now, I disagree with my husband on this, I don't really want to find him [missing person] now*

[R]: *Oh*

[P]: *(Laughs) yes. That's going to stir things up! I just think that would be such an enormous thing to go through again – it would really just reopen everything that we've been through; I just think he's at peace now anyways. I do worry at night when I put the dogs out that he is warm enough, which is really quite pathetic. You worry about children don't you? I have a son that's 45 and I still worry about him because they never grow up much to their annoyance.*

Mother of a son missing for 10 years.

Every participant involved in the study sought, or was in contact with, the media as a way to share news of their missing person. For many, the initial role of the media was to circulate information that became a holder to a certain place in time – a place where the image of the missing person became frozen to the moment that they disappeared. For those participants who lived for years with uncertainty, the role of the media became less a part of their personal journey of living with loss as they lived alongside their missing person:

*The media have been very helpful at times, and we have talked and met some very nice reporters. I think it must be hard for them at times dealing with so many people in our situations. With the media, unless there is any new interest in your loved one's case, I have found it best to avoid having the same story that just keeps being repeated, as this can cause a dent in my hope for a temporary moment. The story has to be told, just in case someone down the track who may know something about what happened to your loved one is now willing to speak about it, and the media are helpful with this.*

Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years

Some of the families' reflections in relation to media also connected with the idea that people stop asking questions – both about the status of the investigation and then about the ways the families were living with their loss. One mother of a young woman missing for 23 years shared that, as time extended, the invasiveness of the media focused less on the way the missing person was presented but about their capacity to live long-term with not knowing:

*We have had a radio personality at one point asking if our hope is getting more like an obsession, and over the latter years there have been certain times when comments have been made, 'you have to face reality.' This is very easy for someone not in this position. Would they give up on a precious member of their family, if they were suddenly taken away?*

Mother whose daughter has been missing for 23 years.

Just as the previous section identified the space in between the public and private narratives, the limiting of questions or enquiries from both the community and media coincided with the length of time the person was missing. This also influenced the level of comfort felt by people in the community to still enquire of the participants, but also by the participants themselves. In this case, once they had responded to initial questions related to the physicality of the search, and once the public declaration of holding out for hope (or closure) were shared, space for detailed narratives was absent. The public explorations of loss were limited as new details of the investigation diminished and the private explorations of turning inwards, as a way of self-silence to protect their emotional health, was enhanced:

*Occasionally they'll come up and ask 'any news?' and I'll say no. I don't like to talk about it; I get too emotional sometimes. I can't talk to people about it without breaking down all the time.*  
Sister of a young man missing for 2 years.

Despite the reduced number of questions asked, there was the sense of community that developed as a direct result of engagement with the media. This was particularly the case for those in control of their own social media pages that offered a *call to action* to the community to help them locate their missing person. There was also scope for on-going potential to share other information about missing people:

*Knowing people who don't even know you care about you is very comforting. I would have thought that was weird until this happened, but my grief has been so public that it offers strangers an opportunity to relate to me and me to them. It's a strange but beautiful thing – connecting with people I never would have otherwise.*  
Sister of a young man missing for 2 years.

The decision to engage the media, as defined by the participants, was a logical response to the disappearance. Yet, there was minimal opportunity to reflect on the ideas of whether or not media engagement was the right decision as it coincided with the intense need to physically locate the person. Once the initial distress subsided, it was replaced with the disbelief that they had not returned – as noted earlier by those participants, a sensation that *of course* the person would return and then the realisation that this may not be so. This led to ideas of continued privacy. Once the image of the missing person was in circulation, there was limited control about the person’s exposure to the image and the trauma that can sometimes be associated with viewing their missing person’s poster:

[R]: *Is there a trigger for you when you jump on to Facebook and you are bombarded with images of him? What’s that like for you if your hope is different (than the rest of your family)? What’s it like to see his missing person’s image? Families use different images at different times but their missing persons image can be really traumatising to keep looking at. What is it like for you?*

[P]: *I don’t see those pictures the same way now – she [family member] said doesn’t see him now she just sees the campaign and it’s sort of like that for me now. It’s sort of, yeah. It’s hard because it can happen at any time. You’re on your phone on the way to work and it pops up. I can be on the train and start reading posts that people have left and I start crying. It’s hard because it can happen at any time.*  
Sister of a young man missing for 2 years.

Other VFG participants also found that, as time moved on, their hopefulness began to evaporate in response to those surrounding them. Ideas of what they had shared in relation to the details of why the person might have vanished, including their emotional wellbeing, challenged how they could protect the missing person. One participant, who began an online site where news was posted to keep family and friends updated, found it was confronting when others weighed in with

opinions other than what the family stated. Identity issues, not just in relation to naming the person as missing, but later as the family then unintentionally became the *poster people* for the left behind, didn't sit well with some. This was also noted in the literature review, similar to ideas of belonging to groups that people had no intention of joining (Goffman, 1963). Here, one participant spoke about the ways that forming a public identity, as the mother of a missing son, shaped how she may be viewed by others in her community, and the perception of the way that the incident or traumatic loss of the missing person shaped their role within their community group:

[P]: *When it happens [the missing person vanishes] you get a bit of attention, you get put on a platform, you get played to it. I don't know. I don't like that in spite of the issue, or if that's me. I just like to get on with my life busily unless there is something to share. I'm cagey about that... I've always been conscious of his privacy and it has been my privacy too, but I was very proud of him for a lot of reasons. I used to love talking about him as proud parents do, so then we you have a blemish or a different kind of story there, I try to be silent. You can even go down the line of being the expert of 'be careful because this might happen to you' but it doesn't mean it will happen to others. Be silent, be respectful listen to others plant a seed.*

[R]: *So because your life has moved through this path – full of not being the one who tells others what might happen next. You are mindful of only telling people little bits and pieces. Is that what you are saying?*

[P]: *Yes – I don't want to be the expert saying 'don't let your kids do this and that' you have to say you have to be careful because you don't know what the outcomes are. I had my child a long time before my friends did and now they are coming to this stage where they are so scared. Their babies have become more cherished than ever because they know an outcome. You don't want to take away a child's sense of adventure and freedom. I'm still confident today that he had skills – I don't regret anything. If he did get out there and survive he had the skills, you can't wrap your baby up in cotton wool because it could hurt even more because they don't have the skills. It's just a lottery.*  
Mother of a young man missing for 8 years.

Participants who had a family member missing due to poor mental health (as defined by the participant) spoke of feeling a sense of comfort from the hopefulness of others who wished them well while they searched. The other participants, where misadventure or crime was included, viewed the outside world with suspicion, as noted earlier by one participant whose world now looked like a bucket of pus. Other participants believed that, without the inclusion of a third party (who may have assisted in taking the missing person), their ideas about worldview had not shifted dramatically:

*We do not feel that his disappearance was caused by another individual, so the only bad about the world I sometimes focus on is the existence of mental illness. But having so many people express their support via social media platforms most certainly helps us to feel looked after.*  
Mother of a young man missing for 2 years.

Yet others found that the very action of their family member disappearing, with little clue as to why they went, and potentially how unwell they were, made them less capable of reaching out to others. Their worldview now suggested that people had little understanding of the complexity of mental health and missing and, as such, the accompanying stigma attached to the sharing of news as to why the person was missing was not welcomed:

*I generally don't like to talk about it to people in my day-to-day life because I just feel that if people haven't had the experience they can't really, um, they can't engage reciprocally and it makes people awkward.*  
Sister of a missing man for 2 years.

The role of the 'other' in the pursuit of conceptualising hope cannot be understated. The influence of various members of the community such as media,

extended family members and workplace relationships, all provided scope to silence or enhance the feelings of hope that the participants portrayed.

### ***Hope and the role of the counsellor***

The literature review noted that hope-oriented conversations in a therapeutic setting provided the exploration of future post-loss. Notions of false hope were also deconstructed. The timeliness of support was included in Phase Three of the study with those who chose to clarify responses, and included the role of police and the search into the support the participants mentioned. These questions, around broad conceptualisations of support, included the role of support from law enforcement and therapeutic counselling interventions. The oscillation between being hope-full and the extinguishing of hope provided by law enforcement has been noted in the themes identified from Phase One. For some:

*...in reporting her [the sister] missing to police, this started off a chain of events in the investigation which proved to be futile and 17 years later still prove to be futile*  
Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

In contrast, for others hope was fueled by law enforcement *going one step further*, as shared by the mother of a missing son. For these participants, the police and families were left behind working together as a team (irrespective of the outcome) and they embraced the idea that hope could be encouraged from those the participants termed as outsiders. However this connection to law enforcement was strengthened by individual connections between professionals and the family rather than the institution as an entity.

One-third of the participants across the three phases of the study reflected on the role of counselling support. Only two participants divulged that they had engaged with counsellors who had specific experience in working with families of missing people. Their action of reaching out was prompted by a need: *I'd rather see a counsellor than burden a friend.* However, there were challenges for others in seeking support and that support being available long-term to talk about the slow, changing nature of the experience of ambiguous loss. The participants shared ideas around the usefulness of counselling:

*...the counsellor I have is wonderful and has embraced my hope. I have never been told by my counsellor that I was holding on to false hope. The only one to tell me this is the police.*  
Sister of a young woman missing for 38 years.

The same participant also noted that, while it may have not been her priority to find a counsellor with specific skills in responding to ambiguity, it was important in their subsequent capacity to build rapport:

*I feel the counsellor does know the role of hope in living with the unknown. She is a parent and I feel that that is enough said, as parents have empathy, we all have a shared fear. But unfortunately for me, mine became real.*  
Sister of a young woman missing for 38 years.

Due to the nature of the questions posed to participants, there was minimal exploration of the timeliness of counselling in relation to when might be the optimum time to engage in a therapeutic relationship. Another participant, whose father's disappearance occurred only four years prior, explained that they delayed engagement given the uncertainty that accompanies missing:

*I haven't really reached out for support through counselling as much as I probably should. I seem to have this opinion that 'once they find a body and I can grieve properly, then I'll go to counselling'.*

Daughter of a man missing for 3 years.

It was also noted that the action of holding out for news became a *waiting game*. During this space, the capacity to truly engage with what had happened was impossible given all the facts of a missing person's case remain unknown:

*I feel like once that happens (the missing person is located), then I will 'work through it' and need a counsellor's help to process things. Which is a silly opinion I know!*

Sister of a young woman missing for 38 years.

Some participants had not been interested in engaging in a therapeutic context. For them, liaising with other allied health professionals, such as doctors, had been suggested as beneficial in that a conversation could be started to address the long-term impact of ambiguous loss:

*If you have a client (well I prefer patient) who is still suffering this trauma it wouldn't hurt very occasionally – not every visit you go to. I had a GP when we first moved to Queensland who was fantastic: she didn't talk about it every time if I was there for a lump on my arm – just out of the blue, I was going to her one day and she said to me 'how are things going, heard anything?' Now that meant a lot to me because I didn't have to tell her, to bring it up because its there all the time. We would just chat for that wee while – we probably wouldn't see her for the next few months and we wouldn't chat about it every time. A true doctor should be able to – they are the ones looking after that person, should ask 'are you alright' checking out to see if there are problems.*

Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

Understanding the *usefulness* of hope within the counselling context was also important in exploring the disenfranchised nature of their loss. In some missing person cases, the community would readily understand some, but not all, aspects of a disappearance:

*I saw a great trauma counsellor last year and we talked about the fact that a person who has voluntarily cut ties with family and previous community is committing social suicide. Part of the counselling function was to affirm that my brother had initially 'gone missing' to protect himself from physical and emotional danger and that this was his right. Yes, I do think the last psychologist I saw understood the idea of hope, but she also understood the realities of living with that level of doubt – and I see that as the role of counselling.*  
Sister of a man missing for 7 years

Those who had engaged within the counselling space had ideas about where they saw hope introduced. One who engaged with a specialised missing person's support service within the first few weeks post-loss found that the sessions *validated a lot of my experience and feelings, which I found helpful.* In reaching out for additional counselling as time moved on, questions about hope could diminish, instigated by both the participant and the counsellor:

*...(they) would often ask if I had hope that my dad would return, but from an early time – probably one week after he went missing – (because it was so uncharacteristic for him to go missing) we were fairly certain something bad had happened, which meant we had no hope he would return. It wasn't until the Police made the arrest (years later) that her approach to our sessions changed and she no longer asked about hope.*  
Daughter of a man missing for 2 years.

However, the idea of engaging in ideas of hope in the counselling context was not viewed as useful for some of the participants. Further, the concept noted in the earlier section focusing on external forces that dented concepts of hope resonated deeply with others:

*I feel that probably in some, indeed many cases counselling would be of use but I found that counselling was of limited use to us. Counselling cannot alter the facts of her disappearance. Any hope, which I have, and a pretty forlorn hope it is, rests with our community via our politicians, our lawmakers. Taking a grip on our legal system and giving it a massive overhaul.*  
Father of a young woman missing for 23 years.

Again with others, a sense that speaking about the complexities of loss when that loss remains unresolved might be futile. This raised the question that if, as with a long-term missing persons investigation, there is no foreseeable outcome then what is being worked towards in this therapeutic space? Boss (2007) asserts that the goal of therapeutic intervention for families living with ambiguous loss is mastering the capacity to tolerate ambiguity. However, if health care professionals have limited understanding of the impact of unresolved loss, then their usual goal-oriented practice may not be sufficient:

*...we had some counselling in the early years, but I must admit for me now I would not specifically look for counselling. You know they cannot solve your problem!*  
Aunt of a young woman missing for 12 years.

For others, who were less-focused on the physicality of the search or the search for answers, the counselling space offered the opportunity for reflection and development of insight post-loss. This concept was not dissimilar to the concepts of post-traumatic growth noted within the literature review (see Chapter Three):

*Counselling was valuable as it assisted with logic, as the mind tries to find logic. As the skills I learnt in meditation [were the] skills I obtained in counselling. After many years I felt I didn't need counselling as much and felt I had skills to cope.*  
Mother of son missing for 8 years.

The sub-themes that existed beneath the concepts of public and private narratives of hope speak of an interwoven experience when grappling with hope, time and ambiguity. The final sections of this chapter identify the conversations shared by the participants within Phases Two and Three and some of the unspoken narratives that persist when these private narratives are shared.

### 3. The shared hope zone

The results of the study demonstrated that shared hope creates the potential to tolerate ambiguous loss over a sustained period. On one side, there are ideas of hope for the missing person; on the other, there are notions of hope for the left behind as shared within the concept of shifting hope. Participants explained that, over the course of time, news of the missing person – of community conceptualisations as to how long people are ‘allowed’ to hope – merge with ‘softer’ feelings of hope, which are less intrusive than in the early days of the disappearance. The results already shared within this chapter begin to identify an intersecting area, one I have named the ‘Shared Hope Zone’. This zone, following analysis of the emergent themes coupled with the sub-themes from the VFG, was impacted upon by a number of variables – time since the missing persons disappearance, their connection to the person prior to them going, the triggers that remind them of their loss and their capacity to observe their own responses to loss.

Figure 6 demonstrates how the two triangles merge. Here, the intersecting concept of a ‘shared hope zone’ can be a place where people segment hope for the missing person, for themselves, which then allows for a resulting capacity to create momentum, to be *not crazy* during that period where the loss is unresolved.



Figure 6 Shared Hope Zone

## *What occurs in this shared space?*

### *Hope for the missing person*

In terms of the person who is missing, some families found that the kindness of others (particularly those who were also living with similar losses) allowed them to hold onto hope. Still others found that to reach out and hear how others survived gave them hope about how they might survive.

For one woman, the compassion of a police officer who gave her the time to sit and talk offered her hope when they [the Police] make time to listen: it means that they might be able to do something. Another family also felt that when police showed a special interest it validated their hope:

*I was really lucky this particular detective was just about to move to unsolved homicide so he had a special interest in unusual unresolved situations and probably particular skills he was really lucky that he took it to where he took it, that he went above and beyond. He was curious. I think or he was motivated. The stars were with me.*

Mother of a son missing for 8 years.

The way families engaged with social media (such as Facebook or Twitter) offered the chance for families to hold onto hope. That same mother explained: *it was like everyone was hoping for an outcome. It's just a way of making ten more people aware.* She regularly shared on a Facebook page established to help in the search for her daughter, which created an awareness where it felt like families had a support group all hoping for a similar answer.

There were other practical pieces of information that also offered renewed

hope. Information about potential sightings of a missing person gave one mum hope six years after her son vanished: *it gave me new energy, a sense of possibility, even though I never really believed he could be dead.* In sharing news of possible sightings, some families found that the chance to speak about the missing person, and about the theories of where they might be, allowed them to hold on to hope for that moment in time. This ‘Shared Hope Zone’ offered the possibility for the participants of the study to move between ideas of how they might hope for the return or location of the missing person in addition to thoughts for themselves. However within those zone thoughts of the imagined trauma (as explored in relation to Mnemonic theory in Chapter 2) suggests that this space is tinged with the fear of the possibilities of what may have happened to the person after they were last seen.

### ***Hope for the self in surviving ‘not knowing’***

There was an undercurrent that emerged from the participants’ narratives of needing to find strength and energy to keep moving forwards when a loved one was missing. Participants shared different ideas of what enhanced their survival—below is an excerpt of the post provided to members of the VFG, in relation to the themes noted from the in-depth interviews:

*[R]: These key ideas of being allowed to talk about hope — even if others had lost their hope that the missing person would return — all provided a space for hope-full conversations. For one participant this extended to her workplace and the compassion they showed in being flexible with her. The commitment of the woman’s employer in helping her maintain her career alongside of looking for and living with the loss of her son gave her hope for her future.*

In a private capacity, people maintained their own hope for how they would

live alongside their loss in different ways. The dad of a missing son spoke about how having a sense of humour was important. For him, *a sense of balance and perspective and a sense of belonging* helped him to continue to live his life with meaning. For larger family groups involved in the study, giving people the space to have different feelings of hope was also important. The brother of a missing woman explained: *my mum still has a bit of hope*. In contrast, his hope shifted outward; hope was embodied in the future. In relation to how he managed his thoughts about the world, in learning to sit with the reality that bad things happen to good people, he believed hope was like planting a tree: you wrap your hope around those stakes that you plant in the ground. Hope wraps around those trees that grow.

Participants from Phase One of the study spoke about ideas of what facilitated their hope. Here, hope was seen as a constant within the experience of ambiguous loss. When ideas of hope could shift and move at every significant (and insignificant) interval, participants were asked what allowed them to hold on to hope? The partner of a missing man explained: *Um, I hope to sort of be able to carry on*. However, others such as adult siblings of missing people found that, even after extended periods of ambiguity, the positive hope of other people's stories pushed her on, also noted by other participants in the VFG:

*The story of the three young ladies being kept captive and released made me realise that it is possible that my sister could still be found alive. I make sure I remind a lot of the sceptical family and friends that it is possible.*

Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years

Ideas of the timeliness of hope were persistent – hope shifted after certain time frames (unique to each person and their experience) that allowed for participants to begin reflecting on how their life might be lived alongside their hope for the missing person. Personal aspects of hope also existed in the solitude of experiences. As the title of this thesis ‘I still hope, but what I hope for now has changed’ paints a picture of the individual attachment and journey with hope as time moves on, so too did other participants redefine hope across the years:

*A sense of a different type of hope [where] there are two paths of hope you have different hope in the beginning – it's a sharper hope isn't it? I think that hope is within your life and you'll channel it in different areas, it's a different type of hope – it's kind of compartmentalised.*  
Mother of a son missing for 10 years.

A brother living with the loss of his sister found that his capacity to facilitate hope lay with the idea of others being on the same page as him:

*I think as individuals we react differently. I think there will be some differences and similarities between us (him with his parents) but because we have all come from the same place we might have our own way of dealing with things but certainly we come back together to hope.*

Other participants found that faith and spirituality, alongside the assistance from the police, facilitated their hope-based interactions; these have been explored in in depth. The daughter of a missing person explained:

*Me, my mum and my sister all share a faith in God... I think having hope that there is a God who is bigger than my situation, who loves His people with a love like no other, and that there is life after death - that this world is not all there is - gives me a sense of real peace that I have not found, or been able to find anywhere else.*  
Daughter of a man missing for 4 years

In contrast, a participant felt that her engagement with law enforcement was the catalyst for hope-less thoughts. She found the challenge in learning how to survive the ambiguity was about filtering the challenges to hope:

[R]: *Do you think the Police are hoping for something similar to what you are hoping for? Do you get a sense that they impact on how hopeful you can be by how they share information about the investigation and what they think has happened to him?*

[P]: *Oh definitely, definitely I had one Police officer, he said 'I've been working in this area for years and he's not coming back, he's probably necked himself somewhere and just he's not coming back.' There is a shame, stigma there*  
de facto partner of a man missing for almost one year.

As with all the themes identified in response to the research question, the delineation between hope and despair was not neat. That the experience of being left behind was a messy journey towards learning to tolerate ambiguity. The way participants segmented their thoughts about the missing person differed and existed under a space where uncertainty remained. One couple spoke of being on *separate planes of hope* and had uncovered opportunities for personal growth in learning to tolerate the unknown within this division.

### ***What exists within the space between shared hope?***

As anniversaries came and went, media interest became sporadic and there was a gradual silencing of enquiry from those within the person's life. Along with this silencing, began the shifting of hope over time for the participants of the study. The familiar faces portrayed by the media, especially during National Missing Persons Week, secured the greatest interest. As one mother of a young

woman missing for 23 years explained, even other families of missing people no longer wanted to hear your story:

*It's so sad because you feel that you're going through the same experiences and you'd have something in common that you'd be able to chat with each other especially if you are having bad days – we end up not contacting them anymore. We feel it's a sign that they want to be left alone.*

Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

All this combined to turn hope inwards. Participants explained that hope became a solitary event, which the person wrestled with as their missing person remained lost. There did not appear to be consistent narratives about what assisted families to engage or disengage with hope, despite them all living with the same missing persons scenario. In some ways, the crucial detractor of hope became time:

*You let go of hope. Look, there is nothing I would like more than if my son knocked on the door. Our life would change enormously, he would be a terrible mess [as she suspected his mental health concerns would have amplified while away] but you still want that of course, you have to accept it.*

Mother of a son missing for 10 years.

In analysing the term *accept it*, it seemed to merge with similar themes noted by participants about their levels of *realistic* hope. This did not mean those who felt invalidated by others about their feelings of hopeful reunion, or even silenced as noted in the following section, but those participants who began to ponder what a resolution might look like, without hoping for that resolution to occur.

Other participants noted that the sensation of hope being detracted by those surrounding them forced them to defend their hope. This occurred when socially constructed ideas of too much time passing for them to legitimately hope for a positive outcome were shared, including some questions posed by the media. As the sister of a young man missing for two years explained: [this] temporarily dented my hope, but I deal with dents now when and if they materialise. Families felt a sense that their hopefulness was looked upon with pity or intrigue that they had been able to sustain a belief of resolution for so long.

The following five sub-themes emerged from the conversations with the participants in relation to what impacted upon hope and what prompted their movement left and right of the 'Shared Hope Zone'.

### ***One: Time***

The majority of the participants wanted to hold onto thoughts of a positive outcome. However, the feeling of time moving on drained the ability to keep hope afloat: *The birthdays come around and you still don't hear anything. So then you lose it [hope] and your mind is trying to reason with the amount of time that has passed.* This mother of a missing son explained that she restored her hope by forcing herself back into the normality of life: *I just busy myself* and then her hope would then eventually return.

## ***Two: Sightings***

The sister-in-law of a missing man spoke about false sightings, which *brought more hope that he would be found*. The sister of a man missing since 1975 also shared that an alleged sighting 15 years ago created a *thread of hope* that came with a *decent emotional crash afterwards* when she realised that she would need to find considerable emotional strength to keep on searching.

## ***Three: Coronial Inquests***

Seven of the 25 participants across the three phases of the study spoke of their involvement with the coronial process that declared the missing person deceased without the body being located. The capacity to *dent* hope was complex in relation to this concept. It wasn't primarily the final outcome of the inquest that dented hope, but the action of being forced through the process by the court system and the disconnected nature of professionals speaking about the missing person in clinical terms. One mother of a son missing for 10 years explained:

*I think professional people see it so differently than we do... I remember saying when they closed the books (on the investigation): 'I don't think you know what a survivor he is, how can you say he is dead?!'*

Mother of a son missing for 10 years

The participant felt that from an administrative perspective, the Coroners' Office *don't have hope – they're not involved. It isn't someone they love, it's just a name on a paper who has gone missing and presumed dead*. Others felt that the process forced them to *walk it alone*, shifting their hope out of the 'Shared Hope Zone' and towards a focus upon themselves and their capacity to respond with

resilience. In this case, it was another external force speaking about the missing person without having an understanding of who the person was irrespective of their missing status.

The practical *explorations* of managing the impact of agencies resonated deeply for Phase Two participants via the VFG. This appeared to trigger the retelling of stories related to how families may have been treated while navigating the law enforcement and legal avenues attached to a missing person's investigation. The connection with the person who was currently not here was also questioned, as self-transcribed by the brother of a woman missing for 23 years:

*I, too, react whenever I hear a body has been found. If I hear it is a female, I listen for an approximate age. If it is in the range of my sister at the time she went missing, then I start searching for more information and contacting Nicole from Australian Missing Persons Register to see if she has heard anything other than what the media has published. Then I wait, again. I HOPE it is not her as I still HOPE she is OK and has gone on with her life. The coroner's inquest five years after she went missing came out with a finding that my sister died on or around the date she went missing and issued a death certificate. This quashed nearly all the HOPE my parents and brothers had that she would be found alive. I tried to ignore the findings and still cling to my HOPE that she is OK. I will continue to HOPE she is OK until someone proves otherwise.*  
Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years

#### ***Four: Police***

There was a mix between the families interviewed in terms of their thoughts on the investigation as a way of holding onto, or being made to let go of, hope. After watching a police officer speaking about another *missing* case and suggesting that the person may be deceased, one participant remarked: *How dare you say that! How do you know what she's going through?* She felt that the harsh

tone of his words forced the family to concede hope without any news to the contrary.

### ***Five: Media and community***

Participants felt some push and pull in engaging with the media. Many felt it was a necessary tool in sharing news that someone was missing. One participant, the mother of a young man missing for 8 years, found that when she approached the media with new information they *wanted to take the story to a place where I didn't want to go* given the length of time since he vanished. Here, information about her son still being absent was insufficient for media interest, new angles would be required, *which then led to questions about possible misadventure which were not welcomed by the family, and resulted in the hope of getting news out there diminishing. For another, being involved with the media stirred things up, and only made the time between being able to cope and managing a feeling of false hope harder to sit with.*

*Within this thread, following a post to VFG participants in Phase Two, a conversation that identified a hierarchy of difference between certain types of missing persons began to develop. The hierarchy, explored later within this chapter, made some participants pull back from their ideas about engaging with law enforcement, other professionals, or the media. Here, the ideas around the disappearance of the person became a central focus – where people had perceived difference depending on the type of missing persons investigation experienced. The early stages of discussion within the VFG spoke to a sense of *me too* when people shared their emotional reaction to loss. However, the*

circumstances in which a person vanished sat widely across two perspectives – one being the disappearance of a person who was experiencing poor emotional health, and the other related to concerns about abduction/unsolved homicide. One participant appeared concerned that people who wondered about the life their missing person may theoretically be living post-disappearance, was in no way similar to the engagement of hope for those living with the absence of a person who vanished against their will:

*I began to dry up at the end (of the VFG) because I feel that people like ourselves are so radically different from those who have family members that have done a walkabout or a runner.*

Father of a young woman missing for 23 years.

Two themes are noted from these hierarchy statements about the differences between participant experiences. The inclusion of stigma-laden language in noting a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – separating those who were perceived to have intentionally vanished from those who were perceived as having no choice – became evident. These differences were not openly shared within the group but noted in post-group *interviews* where people could share how they felt connected or disconnected to the other participant narratives. In addition to this was a deviation in terms of participants feeling they could speak collectively about the experience of loss. Some also felt that the lack of understanding from the community about the on-going emotional challenges attached to having someone missing did not allow them to speak up about the way that their hope may have flexed or morphed over time. One mother explained that *my days are filled with fear that my child is dead and hope that he is alive*. There was no sense that they could provide alternate views about the changing nature of loss

and the light and shade of the thoughts they had for the missing person.

In the final stages of the VFG, participants shared a prevailing sense of isolation. Here, not only did the participants feel that the hopefulness they had attached to their missing person when they first vanished had shifted, but the lack of community perception about living with an ambiguous loss long term was also inhibited.

### ***Community impact***

*There is a perception there that 'it's a while ago – you should be getting on with things.' There is always a wish that I want to stand up and say 'right you folk, this is what's happened' – you need to pay attention to this because it's very much a feeling I have that its forgotten about – its history to most people in most circles!*  
Father of a woman missing for 23 years.

The concluding explorations of the interviews demonstrated that families were capable of speaking to their own personal story of hope. The way hope was embraced, and then at times detracted from, linked to a broader perspective of how hope and ambiguous loss were understood by the community in general. The role of the media in engaging families of missing people about a hopeful narrative was a predominant inclusion in the way people felt they were invited to speak up about the person they were looking for; yet, there was little space for their own journey with hope within this narrative.

Only one participant in the study identified that hope was not useful to her; she found that living with hope was to live with *pain*. The rest of the participants spoke to ebbs and flows relating to their connection with the idea of hope. For

these participants, hope for an outcome relating to the investigation never entirely left their repertoire of coping strategies when living with loss. However, levels of hope could become low; hope could be tedious; it even ‘*taunted*’ some. During these times, participants could begin to feel guilty given hope was ostensibly attached to their connection to the missing person:

*I have to keep that hope mainly because I have to do that for my daughter because until I have that evidence in front of me that she is definitely not with us because as a mother I can't give up on her.*  
Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

In terms of the media, there was a sense from families that news outlets were only interested in some versions of missing person’s stories and that they had to fight for attention at times. One participant felt that community education campaigns like National Missing Persons Week highlighted young people who were missing, as described by him, voluntarily. He felt that this *shouldn't be blurred – going missing isn't a catchall phrase*. In addition, he felt that more attention should be placed on the different ways people go missing and the different way the left behind look at the world.

There was a significant degree of ambiguity from the participants about the ways in which the community responded to how they survived when someone remained missing. They felt they had been forgotten after the dust settled and the person remained missing for an extended period. Further, they also believed a lack of news meant that the newsworthiness of the investigation was nullified as evidenced by the mother who felt that the media wanted more information than she was willing to divulge when seeking assistance to publicise her sons continued absence.

The limitations of the VFG made it impossible to see the nuanced changes in the person's physical presentation that appeared to come in both the in-depth interviews and the post-interview invitations to clarify. People appeared to struggle with the ideas that others might not understand their hope. The role of social media, and its capacity to publicise the disappearance of a person within a short period of time, was a positive hope-enhancer for those in the early stages of disappearance (i.e., less than a year). However, over time, this continual intrusion of people continuing to search was taxing for some:

*Look I still appreciate it and I think that its heart-warming seeing people sharing and continuing to hope, but yeah, I don't put any faith into any of that actually eventuating or being helpful, but I appreciate the fact that people still care and to care where they can.*

Sister of a brother missing for 2 years

The final theme noted in the thematic analysis incorporates the grading scale or hierarchy shared, in addition to the collegial sense of *me too* by the participants earlier in the study.

#### **4. A hierarchy of hope**

The conceptualisations of hope, as described and extrapolated within this chapter, speak to the commonalities of the experiences of the participants. As the participants of the VFG engaged with each other, and then again as participants clarified their stories, some murmurings or disconnects about the experience of being left behind were noted. In addition, differences between the participants became more pronounced than their commonalities. One participant likened the *grading of hope* to being dependent on the way in which the person vanished.

Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003) noted these as “intentional versus unintentional” (p. 2) experiences of missing; yet, participants focused predominantly on the difference between missing due to mental health concerns versus alleged homicides. This emerging concept highlighted the stigma potentially associated with identifying that a person was unwell prior to vanishing, as well as the social responsibility to ensure the missing person’s health details remain confidential. This hierarchy of hope speaks to the notion of participants perceiving others to be ‘*worse off*’ in their experiences of loss because of the way in which the person vanished. The inclusion of misadventure or criminal aspects, such as kidnappings, diminished hope for a return. Here, the inclusion of the ‘Shared Hope Zone’ might suggest that hope was more closely aligned with justice. For others who were concerned about the wellbeing of the missing person who may still be ‘*out there*’, hope for the actual return of the missing person was included within this space. As explored at the beginning of the chapter, the focus on the details as to why the person may have been absent was not at the forefront of participant narratives. It was only as individuals began to explore their attachment to hope that ideas of the ‘why’ of the disappearance surfaced. Within these explorations, some participants began to explore a hierarchy: descriptions as to what types of loss may have been more difficult to endure. One participant felt that the narratives of hope might have been *diluted* by the circumstances of the missing person’s absence:

*When some 15 year old, who has done a runner with a boyfriend or someone that has had a fallout with their family, yes. What it does is dilute? It automatically mixes in with when others go missing suddenly because you begin to ask, have they done a runner? Have they done drugs? And it unfortunately dilutes it... you can't lump it together.*  
Father of woman missing for 23 years

Extending on from this concept, one participant noted that she disengaged with the group as she felt her experience of loss related to homicide made commonality impossible. Her capacity to hear the stories of others was inhibited, as she felt that her daughter was in no way involved in the decision to not be here. One family member also noted that, by this action of *lumping together* everyone – both in the study and by law enforcement, with the catchall phrase ‘missing people’ – the nuances of each case might be missed. For example, homicide missing needed to be separate from family disconnection and mental health concerns. One family of a missing woman echoed this:

*For whatever reasons it was done, there are an awful lot of missing people, for whatever reason, I don't share my views because I'll keep a lot of people offside because I think there is a huge difference between many missing people and our missing her.*  
Father of a young woman missing for 23 years.

The purpose of including these narratives in the concluding sections of this chapter speaks to the challenges of bringing together individuals who are perceived to have common experiences, and who are viewed collectively as ‘families of missing people’ by law enforcement and therapeutic strategies, when the participants themselves do not accept the commonality in general. These presumptions around similar experiences of loss fail to identify the complexity of both the loss and the way in which the person vanished. One participant, the mother of a missing young woman, spoke of the sense that: *my heart goes out to all those people. The mental health issues out there are really bad and I – they – have every right to be feeling like they feel, but they are looking for a different support aren't they?*

### **Future-oriented hope practice**

Continual listening to and emergence within the words documented in the data transcript highlighted a transition period nearer to the end of the group and the follow-up interviews in Phase Three. This period identified a space where, irrespective of how resolute some of the participants may have been (about the lack of a positive outcome), there was a shift to *but, maybe we might find out*. This qualification demonstrated that irrespective of the assertions of participants about the length of time that their life had been consumed by not knowing, there was minimal scope to have absolute views about what had happened to the missing person,

*It is hard because I felt that if he was out and about we would have found him, the more people that get to know his face is irrelevant now. It's hard for me. It doesn't matter if all over Australia is aware I don't think that...well we would have found him (long pause) but I still hope I'm wrong.*

Sister of a missing young man for 2 years

This hedging of bets – or the concept of *but, maybe* – was observed within many of the narratives of the participants. The use of silence nearer to the end of each of the interviews yielded similar results. Within this space, the telling of stories around the loss of the missing person, and ideas of hope for the future, inevitably led to ideas of what might have happened to the missing person. One mother reflected that *to give up on hope is to give up on my daughter* was similarly noted by other participants, where no matter what potential certainty they had, they could not be resolute in their ideas as to what might have happened:

*I suppose as you say 'as far as you know' because literally we don't know. Ah...I know that my mum for example, as far as I'm aware, still has that little bit of hope that maybe something is out there. That she is being held by someone but as far as we know – from the perspective of still something bad having happened but it not being fatal.*

Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years

This *but, maybe* did not discriminate between causes for disappearance.

Even for those existing in spaces where the disappearance was a potential crime,

ideas that hope could never be extinguished for their return existed:

*There are odd times when I think to myself you have to face fact – which I think we do in a way, but I have to keep that hope mainly because I have to do that for my daughter, because until I have that evidence in front of me that she is definitely not with us, because as a mother I can't give up on her. I would hate that, however bad she was and she was found, that I had given up on her? I could never forgive myself so I think it's something I just have to hang on to.*

Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

However, *but, maybe* was not an easy space to occupy. The notion of holding on to hope was tarnished by ideas that, to hope for the missing person's return might also be entwined with suffering:

*In an ideal world you would love it if everything got back to normal – that would be the shades of hope. That would be the biggest, but there is also that other angle and aspect of hope that you hope, that you don't want someone to suffer as much as they need to. It's a diabolical situation that you don't want to go on and on.*

Brother of a young woman missing for 23 years

One participant spoke of staying in the home that her son owned prior to him going missing; she shared her hope with the outside world by placing a sign on the front door etched with his name. This outward expression of hope existed, despite the length of time that he had been gone. In this way, the concept of *but, maybe* was situated in the action of placing the sign near the

front door for him to see; however, the sign in itself also challenged her ideas of moving on:

*There was no resting place, but then I don't know how long I'll stay here or what I'll do. It's going to be hard to walk away from that. Maybe I'll just unscrew it [the sign] and take it with me.*  
Mother of a young man missing for 8 years

Some participants found that, to manage their responses to loss, they needed to find ways to reconceptualise hope – to view hope as a natural occurrence when faced with the physical disappearance of a missing person, but also the physiological ambivalence that no matter how hard they tried, they were unable to *bring them home*, a point shared by participants who had been living with ambiguity for many years. Some were creative in this reconceptualisation:

*I think my hope comes from my imagination, although your common sense and investigations tell you she is dead. I come up with ideas like maybe she is held captive and may still be alive. I have even gone as far as hiring psychics and driving them to where she may have been. But you see they are only fishing and guessing. I don't believe in them at all, but when you're left with nothing you think just maybe they are able to help and find something.*  
Aunt of a young woman missing for 12 years.

In contrast, other participants found that hope as a coping mechanism enhanced their capacity to tolerate ambiguity:

*Hope remains a very important word in my daily life. There are days when you may question hope. It is not long before you put that question out of your mind and feel safe and secure back in the land of hope.*  
Mother of a young woman missing for 23 years.

Another participant spoke of his hope shifting after the tenth anniversary of the disappearance of his child. There was a sense that, after a decade sitting with the unknown, he found that his ideas of hope turned inwards; he began to reflect

on the ways that the rest of his life might continue on – alongside, not away from his personal feelings of hope for the missing person. He believed that:

*Maybe as the years have gone by I've changed – like we all do.  
We don't stay exactly the same as we all do when we are  
younger, but I think it's more than that.*  
Father of a young man missing for 10 years.

Much of what was shared by the participants was a sensation of coming close to suggesting that the missing person might be dead, with only two participants uttering those words of finality. Terms like *I'd go to counselling later* reinforced that underlying belief that the outcome of the participant's stories was on hold in a suspected place that confirmed the missing person was not returning. This theme of an inner truth that existed beneath the hope but was not yet a reality available for the participants to engage in was both intriguing and a symptom of the potential disenfranchised grief experienced by those living with uncertainty. Terms like 'dead' 'deceased' and 'death' were only mentioned 15 times within more than 1500 lines of transcribed data despite the focus of the conversations all centring on loss and unresolved grief.

A moving reflection by one of the participants spoke to the idea of sitting above themselves and watching the concept of hope move forwards with her as time moved away from the date her brother disappeared. The deaths of both her parents after her brother vanished provided an additional layer of reflection that spoke to the deficit of having to live long-term with tolerating ambiguity. Speaking from the perspective of her thoughts prior to losing her parents, she explained:

*At first I just hoped that there was a simple explanation, and that he was alive and well and back home. Then you hope for some news, any news, and that he didn't suffer. Then you hope for any news, no matter how painful it might be. Over time, the hope turns also to the basics of living – hope that life isn't this hard always. I hope I have the strength to get on with life and to let go just a little bit. I hope that people will understand that just because it's not there being talked about all the time that it doesn't hurt. I hope that people won't forget him. I hope that we have some news before my parents pass away.*

Sister of a young man missing for 20 years.

The inclusions of the participants' own mortality, or that of other family members, also amplified ideas of hope attached to the physical location of the missing person. Just as the participant above reflected on the sadness of her parents passing without the news that would provide some resolution, other participants, in later stages of life, also shared similar fears:

*The big thing that hangs over you, and it's quite a selfish notion, is that you're never going to find out by the time you cork it. I think that is something that is in my mind all the time and I guess that's a selfish notion and I concede that, but it would just be nice to have some answers.*

Father of a son missing for 10 years.

Participants rarely raised the notion of closure, with only three mentions of the word despite its comparative use in media narratives especially in relation to the intention of coronial inquests. For some participants, it was a sense that others wished for it on their behalf – *they want closure on it themselves* – when the pain of the left behind was a challenge for those attempting to support them. The tone, by which the participants reflect on this continual focus by others on closure, was not viewed as altruism on their behalf, but a sense that they needed to forget in order to move on. In lieu of the term closure, participants focused on language around *answers* and *information* where ideas of some news to provide

an outcome could offer comfort to others. Two participants shared that finding a body was not what they were hoping for, as the reality of the finality of loss was not something they could ever come to terms with. One of the participants, as noted earlier within Chapter Six, spoke of finding the body as the catalyst for unearthing more pain. That at this stage, ten years on from the disappearance, the location of remains would circle back to the rawness experienced in the early stages of the disappearance. The other noted:

*I guess my experience of hope is very different to others, as our situation is quite different. Even though my head knows that he was not coming back and I still feel like because there's no body it's not a reality. My 'hope' is that he didn't suffer too much and that the justice or legal system ensures these people don't hurt anyone else. While I hope that his body is located so that we can get some answers, there is also a part of me hoping that the day doesn't come, as I know it'll become more of a reality.*  
Daughter of man missing for 2 years.

Alongside the idea of learning to tolerate the ambiguity, loving someone who was missing was seen as a shift in the participant's worldview. Here, irrespective of the news or information about the case, there would never be a complete conclusion to their experience of loss:

*You're never going to get full closure – you never can from this sort of [loss] ... ah, it's too traumatic event to say 'well that's that' but you can at least get to a point where we've all got to, we all know what occurred and we know where she is.*  
Brother of a woman missing for 23 years.

Irrespective of complex ideas, the sense of so much unknown was the shadow that emerged from each of the participant's lives. No matter how far they had moved from ideas of hope to ideas of their own survival, their connection to the missing person always existed just under the surface:

*These days I hope that I can honour my brother's memory well and leave a legacy that reflects who he was and not what happened to him. And I still hope that one day I will find out what happened. Every day.*  
Sister of a young man missing for 20 years.

## **Chapter Eight: Conceptualising ambiguity**

*Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope, that if you just show up and try to do the right thing the dawn will come – Lammott (1994)*

The 25 participants of the study each partook in either narrative in-depth interviews online and in real time or as part of a VFG. Five significant findings were noted from the interviews:

### ***Hope is present for all families of missing people***

Hope emerged at the same time as the disappearance of the missing person, as supported by the results of the study. However, hope was attached to the idea that *of course* there would potentially be a positive outcome. The emergence of outcome was not related to an idea that its inclusion would assist in managing the loss. Hope was a tangible belief that the missing person would return or that law enforcement would assist in locating the person.

### ***Hope splinters after the physicality of the loss is realised***

Chapters Two and Three introduced the concept of the dual process model developed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) and the task-oriented mourning framework of Worden (2008). When a person is missing hope exists on a tangential path where its fluctuations, inclusions, and sometimes dismissal, are attached to dual streams – hope for the missing person and hope for the capacity to survive being left behind. Once the left behind sense of loss orientation settles, the capacity to turn inwards begins the process of exploring the ability to survive long-term ‘not knowing’.

### ***Hope is attached to time***

Hope shifts over time, yet the ways in which the community, media, law enforcement, and the left behind themselves often silence this shifting perspective. Participants spoke to the action of sharing news of the missing person in the early days and the capacity to use their own images and those of the missing person to convey a sense of urgency around the need for location.

The results speak to the quieting or silencing of hope over time – fewer questions are asked, media enquiries are minimised and where hope shifts to realism rather than optimism.

### ***Hope has public and private narratives***

Hope reached pivotal intersections that correlated with the reason why the person vanished – primarily homicide versus poor emotional health – in this study. Time since the disappearance and the embracing or shifting of hope from those around them and in the wider community impacted upon a person's capacity to speak truthfully about their connection with hope. The results demonstrated that these hope stories can be different in terms of the physicality of the missing person's return. However, the ways in which individuals turned in, where their hope narratives became internal conversations, took precedence rather than sharing hope with the wider community.

***Hope provides the capacity to live in the space in between***

The inclusion of hope in providing an opportunity to assert *but, maybe* the person would return was the tool that assisted in learning to live in the liminal space. This *but, maybe* offered families strength and resilience to tolerate, or master, their loss. The participants shared fluctuating reactions, where they tried to tie together the timeliness of hope with the capacity to sit with the idea that perhaps the person would not come back. The possibility of hope (for a different outcome than the one they were currently being presented with) provided participants with the capacity to rise each day. This shifting *on different days* offered the chance to move in and out of this space where ideas that the loss might or might not be permanent. This stepping back action, of moving from ideas of finality to re-engaging with hope, signifies that the results of this study confirm that people can (and do) exist in the liminal space for periods of time. For them, the inclusion of hope creates the potential to keep moving forwards. In this way, hope was constant, irrespective of the lack of outcomes for the missing person.

This chapter speaks to the broader complexity of hope in the space where ambiguous loss and hope exist by applying the results of this study. There are challenges in presuming that hope can be defined, given that its inclusion in the missing person's realm appears cluttered. The persistent narrative noted within the literature review (see Chapter Three), and in the early development of the study, was an awareness of wanting to define hope, and that within its definition would be clarity associated with understanding the concept. For some of the participants, even decades after their loss, looking back to the way their own

family viewed hope in contrast to the way those around them conceptualised hope created some despondent moments. These moments provide the springboard to the broader ideas noted in the next chapter about therapeutic interventions, law enforcement engagement, and future research directives.

### **The needs of those left behind**

The Australian Federal Government does not currently have a national strategy to address the disappearance of individuals. In addition, there is no uniform approach from law enforcement agencies about the ways in which the left behind are supported. This influences the long-term wellbeing of those left behind. Policy, service delivery planning and connection to therapeutic services is limited, with only one counselling service currently funded in NSW by the Department of Justice and Attorney General to support families and friends of missing people. The Missing Persons Advocacy Network (founded by a family member of a missing person) in Victoria aims to address these inequities. However, it does not currently have funding to provide far-reaching support. This research deconstructed the stories of hope of Australian families of missing people. The learnings can be applied by those agencies accessed by families when someone is missing. Encouragingly, work from the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit now includes two research studies underway exploring the impact of missing on children and young people and the Coronial investigation of suspected deaths and its impacts on families of missing people. Given the emphasis within this study that the participants felt the Coronial system was a hope detractor, this research will be welcomed.

The narrative inquiry methodology offered the opportunity of sharing stories participants admitted never telling before. The stories provided scope to understand the dual roles of hope – of hoping for the missing person and further along, for themselves. The significant findings of the study led to a significant insight into larger, existential questions uncovered by the results. These questions are conduits for detail as to how services can provide on-going practical and emotional support to family members of missing people. Within this chapter the impacts of ambiguous loss on an individual's wellbeing, notions of what we are actually hoping for, and the benefits of hope to sustain tolerating ambiguity for extended periods are discussed. From there, the concluding section offers those agencies referred to by participants as hope detractors or enablers with future directives – whilst also acknowledging significant research gaps.

### **Are we good at not knowing?**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in exploring the dangers and risks of narrative inquiry, remind the researcher 'story writing and critical analysis are indeed separate gifts' (p. 182). The discussion and analysis section of this study demonstrates the capacity to stand back from what had been said and then conceptualise what had been learnt, taking patience and significant reflection. Pushing back against commonly held ideas of hope, as noted by the inclusion of the quote from Lammott (1994), suggest that continual hope holding would yield results. I had to question the way we as a community hold on to hope as well as my own beliefs about the hope process.

In 2007, following the completion of a Churchill Fellowship (Wayland, 2006) I developed a national counselling framework for health care professionals responding to families of missing people. It was the first opportunity I was given to bring together ideas from the counselling space with the research ideas shared with me from service providers and grief theorists internationally. The Five themes for working with families of missing people (Wayland, 2006) spoke to the complexity of support options required by those who sought assistance in managing their loss and the final chapters spoke of the ideas of trauma timelines and a hope cycle as a way to represent the on-going challenges attached to the lived experience of ambiguous loss. The cyclical response to unresolved loss (Wayland, 2007) was developed in conversation with Emeritus Professor Pauline Boss and Dr Geoffrey Glasscock, similar to the notion of sudden traumatic upsurges of grief. Understanding hope better extended this model, where hope and their multiple weavings move from sudden surges punctuated by waiting, often resulting in little resolution and then a return or restoration phase where tolerance of ambiguity endures. What was not understood from this first exploration of the cyclical response to unresolved loss was the role of hope in triggering much of this cycle, not just in response to news from outside sources (media, law enforcement, community, psychics) but the internal mechanism that drives much of the hope discussed by the participants of the study.

The role of the community in responding to the public needs of families of missing people appears to sit in opposition to the private narratives shared by the participants of the study. The continual sharing on social media sites, willing for news about the location of the missing person does not align with the dips and

cycles associated with a hopeful interaction surrounding the disappearance of a person. The only media (including social media) narrative spoken of by the participants expresses a focus of when the resolution will occur rather than a sense of sitting or shifting hope as a way to tolerate ambiguity. As a wider community, outside the confines of those directly impacted by the loss of a missing person, a narrative begins to pinpoint the idea that perhaps we are not good at not knowing. That the only social discourse allowed in conceptualising hope and missing are that an outcome will eventually be realised. There are no other options to the sitting with the unknown.

The traditional use of stories to convey the complexity of emotion when responding to life challenges not experienced by many, suggest like Frank (2010) that stories “construct what counts as individuals as well as the boundaries and categories relevant to those including responsibility and liabilities” (p. 80). The stories of hope explored by the participants of the study, and the splintering of hope at different intervals within that narrative of loss offer two stories – the stories of the missing person and the story of the capacity of the left behind. The collective hoping is attached to the two stories, the community focus on a solution to ‘not knowing’ is the restoration of the missing person – be it physically or returned as remains for ‘closure.’ This speaks of only one segment of the stories shared by the families in this study. The inclusion of ‘of course’ the missing person would be found is carried on by the community long after the left behind let go of the notion that the end of their story will be the resolution of the case or investigation. The sharing of the story of the missing person makes the person within themselves a public commodity – where their pleas for assistance

are the outward signs of their ambiguous loss and that the capacity to tolerate not knowing is not accepted within our community. The work of Edkins (2011) in reviewing the public discourse of missing persons narratives can be applied here. Where the findings of this study identify how the action of ‘hoping’ can be attached to the action of sharing news however new insights, highlighting the private conversations occurring behind this façade offer significant depth to those learnings.

This revelation then asks who listens to the idea of ‘not knowing’ within our community. If we can’t sit comfortably with the idea that we do not have answers to all of life’s questions, then who listens to the shifting of hope for those waiting for news of a missing person? If families offer narratives that do not speak to the idea that the ending of a story is a happy resolution, a ‘and they lived happily ever after,’ then how do we provide space for the shifting narratives when there is little news to offer?

### **Hope, wellbeing and ambiguity**

The findings of this study provide evidence that hope is not a static experience, nor is it specifically attached to the investigation of the missing person’s disappearance. The literature reviewed in Chapter 3 notes that Cutcliffe’s non-static exploration of hope in a context of bereavement is also relevant to ambiguous loss as confirmed by Boss (1999) and Clark (2007). Understanding the complexity of hope is significant given the number of people going missing each year and the flow-on effects that accompany family disconnection. To understand the changing nature of hope, the potential to

understand those who live with ambiguity is enhanced. This study extends the assertion that hope shifts by exploring the perspectives of families who did not speak of their loss being ambiguous, more so that the loss had elements of ambiguity and elements of clarity and that hope shifted alongside these changes.

The study provided the opportunity for participants to speak of the impact hope had on their wellbeing amidst the periods of ambiguity, where the impact of the unresolved loss was noted. The long-term impacts of living with an ambiguous loss are untested. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that for those whose loss spans decades the development of a rhythm of hope (noting that this rhythm took a significant amount of time to develop) was useful. In observing this, the impact on their wellbeing was also understood with some sharing concerns about depression or low mood induced by the unresolved nature of their loss. The inclusion of a new concept, named as a Shared Hope Zone, extends the literature gathered in relation to hope and ambiguity. It plots the liminal space between thoughts for the self in mastering ambiguity and thoughts for the safety and comfort of the missing person. This merging of spaces, developed by an understanding of the rhythm of hope, identifies that –as noted by Boss (year) that closure is indeed a myth and the ‘but maybe’ concept allows people in exist in a space where uncertainty is the new normal.

The connection between mental health and the capacity for others to enable or extinguish hope was also linked to wellbeing. Questions about the emotional health of a participant were not acknowledged amidst questions about the status of the investigation. Chapter Six refers to participants being asked by others,

‘so...any news?’ which was acknowledged as not being linked to their capacity to live with the unresolved nature of the loss. In comparison, the question ‘how are things going?’ provided the invitation to speak about living with loss rather than the disappearance of clues that would lead to a resolution. The silencing of enquiry impacted on the wellbeing of those left behind – the vehicle to speak about living with uncertainty passed as the community failed to ask after the person left behind.

Providing space for multiple narratives of hope may also enhance wellbeing. Family members or large groups known to the missing person have different conceptualisations about what has happened to the person who is lost. The results of the study note that the investigation is not the only source of hope for the wellbeing of those left behind – that the tying of hope to the potential of return, to continuously share news about the missing person, is not the goal of all families of the left behind. The study demonstrated that optimism and hope are not the same thing and that the survival of the left behind in tolerating their ambiguity is not tied to the outcome of the police investigation. Hope for the left behind’s emotional survival is connected to ideas of wellbeing.

Explorations of wellbeing and ambiguity also focus upon ‘softer’ reflections of hope – non-fixed ideas of how to engage in moments of hope in the present time appear most useful for those seeking help. The participants who felt that their hope was intrinsically linked to hopefulness about the return of the missing person felt exhausted and invalidated by the people who sought to console them. The softer or gentler aspects of hope – of re-engaging with a life post-loss, of

seeking gratitude in what people had around them – provided the chance to engage in hope, separate to the missing person. The ways that the results of the study have been blended with aspects of wellbeing demonstrate the pliability of the participants in being able to map their movement. The role of hope, in its many iterations, may be the key for longevity in a sense of surviving the unknown.

### **Hope allows for sustained tolerating in the liminal space**

The previous chapters speak of the dual streams of hope and the capacity to survive an ambiguous loss. In addition, the notion of a Shared Hope Zone identifies the cross over between hope for the missing person and hope for the self. Chapter two and three explored the role of false hope (Nekolaichuk et al, 1999), fading hope (Duggelby et al, 2009) and hopelessness (Flaskas, 2007) when engagement with hope is complicated. The analysis of the stories where hope shifted between hope for the missing person and hope for the self begins to uncover these alternate views of hope. When hope in a logical sense might be viewed as having minimal use for the wellbeing of the left behind despite the sensation of waiting continuing on. The findings of this study suggest that, in order to tolerate ambiguity, releasing oneself to the fluid notions of hope is the panacea –moving away from the missing person and focusing more on the hopeful survival of the left behind is the key to sustained toleration of ambiguous or unresolved loss. In this circumstance hope does not have to be reclassified as fading or false, it shifts focus to the person or to a high power. *When people say in those early days, post disappearance, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to survive*

*this*’, the idea of sustained tolerating by enacting hope as being multifaceted is the key.

The study validated that, enhanced by the potential to change ideas of hope, the participants inadvertently developed a framework whereby intersecting ideas of hope speak to a person’s capacity to tolerate ambiguity. The shared hope schema engaged in ideas of how hope worked alongside the details of the disappearance and the subsequent investigation created ways to live, as Boss (1999) intended, with the idea of ‘both/and,’ with and alongside the disappearance, when merging ideas of hope collided. This Shared Hope Zone is where the participants found the capacity to tolerate ambiguity – where ideas of learning to tolerate the unknown exist.

### **Hope is fundamental to living with ambiguous loss**

The significant grief theories of Worden (2008) and Stroebe and Schut (1999) heavily influenced the beginning formations of the hypothesis for the study: that the restoration orientation phase, as noted by Stroebe and Schut (1999), focussed on the rebuilding of one’s life and engaging in new activities that move away from an active grieving state. I could surmise from my years in the counselling space that the physical observations of families who sought support after their loss demonstrated that their hysteria eventually quietened and became a passive stage where unending sadness became the predominant presentation. There was not a sense of restoration in the presentation of this client group, but a sense of being resigned to that fact that ambiguity would need to be tolerated. Walter and McCoyd (2009) emphasise that these stages are not

viewed in any hierarchy of value and that the role of grieving is to “cycle back and forth between the two orientations” (p. 16). The cycling back and forth of hope was noted in the uncovering of the grief experiences of the participants.

Taking these concepts and then critically analysing the results of the study also led me to reflect upon the fifth theme identified in the counselling framework I authored in 2007. The last theme opportunities for growth profiled the tasks engaged by many individuals living with an ambiguous loss and their ways to acknowledge their loss through activities like writing books, starting groups or lobbying for change. MacBride (2013), exploring siblings of missing people, spoke of a sense that those left behind felt that they needed to “fly the flag” (p. 122) for both the missing person and for the families around them. To make meaning from the loss participants had to address the practical and emotional aspects of loss by channeling their energy to specific areas such as mental health promotion and awareness.

The concept of opportunities for growth or post-traumatic growth signifies that there is a definitive moment where families move on. This is what I had hypothesised at the beginning of the study: the trajectory of hope would shift once some acknowledgment of the loss was enacted. The results of the study demonstrate that this was not the case, meaning that the idea of post-traumatic growth was more an eventual happening, a natural settling in to the concept of tolerating ambiguity when the idea of hope evolved over time. Families had become accustomed to their dips, and some had even attempted to opt out of the hopeful reflections that came with engaging in ideas about the missing person

being found.

Walter and McCoyd (2009), in exploring grief impacts across the lifespan, explore the “maturational change brought on by the development or a tragic loss of a loved one” (p. 323). Applying this concept to the findings of this study signals that the shifting of hope alongside the time since the loss allows for the eventual settling in to the capacity to live alongside ambiguity. As people matured emotionally and physically alongside their unresolved loss, concepts of tolerating were enhanced.

The story told in the opening section of the thesis – of the elderly woman engaging with ideas of quiet sadness about the losses endured both whilst her husband was here and then once he was gone suggested that she grieved slowly, over time. This story alongside the participants’ narratives on hope shows that time provides the opportunity when finality is absent, to sit with shifting concepts of hope, to notice the movement as each year comes and goes and that the result – at whatever moment in time – is not dependent on an engagement of post-traumatic growth but of a gradual focus on developing new and unique ways to live with ambiguous loss.

So, what might occur if we removed the socially constructed requirement for finality in order to acknowledge a loss? Private conceptualisations of hope for families of missing people become more public with the increasing awareness about the impact of a ‘living loss’. Increasing engagement of families in developing their own sites or social media pages might assist in the ‘sitting with’

elements of ambiguous loss – such as those shared within Chapter Three’s literature review on caring for the chronically ill, for those living with dementia, families raising children with life limiting disabilities – the sense of disenfranchisement of the silencing of hope limits the community’s understanding of the breadth of response that accompanies this type of loss.

**Is the right to acknowledge the loss disenfranchised dependent on the circumstances of the disappearance?**

One of the final participants explained that individuals within the group might perceive each other’s stories to be contrary to their own. Upon further prompting, two other participants, in the invitation to clarify component of data collection, spoke of a perception that their grief had been different in comparison to others. These ideas provoked exploration of the concept of a missing (grief) hierarchy where families who had little information to suggest why the person was missing is primarily reserved for those who had concerns about the missing person’s mental health (or the potential for the missing person’s emotional health to be exacerbated by their disappearance) and were seen to be living with a deeper sense of ambiguity than those whose family member was taken by another.

Judith Butler, philosopher and researcher exploring loss through frames of violence refers to a grievability of life (2006) – the way in which some lives are produced “as more grievable than others” (p. 30). Reviewing her work, focussed primarily on the response to loss during times of war, raised some potential parallels to the missing continuum, noted in earlier chapters, by Biehal, Mitchell

and Wade (2003). This continuum spoke of intentional absences (those perceived as choosing to absent themselves) to unintentional disappearances (those missing due to abduction, crime-based incidences). Understanding who was perceived as struggling with increased ambiguity was shared by the participants and then again in reflection in the writing up of the results, looking back at my time in the counselling space with families. I recall saying to many families who invalidated their grief because of a view that someone else was grieving more significantly than them, that 'there is no hierarchy' to grief. Yet the findings of this study, whilst it cannot be generalised, speak to different types of missing eliciting different comparative reactions from the participants. Those whose missing person was absent due to a criminal aspect (kidnapping, unsolved murder) versus the unintentional absence due to mental health were viewed as being different. It is also important to note that the type of disappearance cannot be simply defined as intentional or unintentional given concerns about the person's emotional state and their capacity to make decisions prior to their absence. In return, those who were living with additional ambiguity surrounding the missing person's emotional health felt encouraged that this might suggest a return, rather than the grief of finality surmised by those witnessing the sadness of those missing due to an unresolved homicide (where the body had not yet been located, a loss that can be viewed by some participants as less ambiguous). The notion of 'grievability', about whose may be more difficult to conceptualise suggests that a hierarchy, or grading scale, may indeed be relevant in terms of the way that participants, and perhaps other families of missing people, empathise with each other. The hierarchy is not one that suggests who is worse off, but who is different and who understands who. The social construction of bringing together similar losses, as

we do when we group family members of missing people together, sometimes fails to acknowledge that there are dissimilar responses.

Reviewing the literature on an individual's right to mourn or the social constructions around who is allowed to grieve (given that some of the participants spoke of their relationship to the missing person and the view that they were seen as needing to be the most affected – especially in the case of mothers), the additional layer of complexity was noted when incorporating ambiguous loss. In essence, the ambiguity and uncertainty explored by the participants did not indicate that they were denied a right to mourn, but more so that the delaying of the outcome of their loss never provided the opportunity to acknowledge their grief. This, as a form of disenfranchised grief, alongside the comparison between members about the difficulties in sitting with the unknown depending on how the person vanished was noted. Attig (2004), in revisiting Doka's (2002) work on disenfranchised grief, speaks to the complexity of noting (as Doka did) the lack of right to grieve by asking what we understand 'right' to mean. If we viewed this right in the context of an entitlement then it would suggest that people were not invited to acknowledge their loss. Interestingly, in exploring the data those participants had the opportunity to openly acknowledge their loss by way of the media and in communication with law enforcement. However, other than acknowledging that the loss had occurred, and detailed indications of the way they had searched, it was the uncertainty of long term ambiguous loss that became disenfranchised. Silencing hope could be viewed as a disenfranchised loss – that the shift from the public expectations of the ways a

missing person may be discussed openly failed to give space to the private explorations of the longer-term impacts of that loss.

The predominant message from the participants was the lack of compassion viewed when families felt ‘lumped together’ in their shared experiences. Could this be the same as other marginalised groups? Maple (2005), in her research study exploring parental experience of suicide specific to the loss of adult children, noted in her findings that there was “within group differences” (p. 264) and that instead of comparing their losses with other forms of sudden death, examining differences within the group might yield deeper insights. The focus on assessing these differences in what Maple (2007) refers to as a preparedness framework in terms of individuals being aware that the loss might occur is also relevant for this study. Those who had significant contact with mental health services shared what could be described as ambiguous loss in relation to the psychological disconnection from the person. The sense of preparedness was not relevant to those individuals whose missing people vanished in a single moment without any prompts that might have suggested a disappearance was imminent. This sense of pre-loss can impact the perceived differences within the group.

The existence of comparisons amongst those belonging to the group of the left behind, as well as the communal silencing that many referred to as a disenfranchised layer, was discovered. The difference between the spectrums of intentional versus unintentional absences questions whether people need to hope more when there is more uncertainty at stake? That the loss of a missing person due to a suspected homicide extinguishes hope as well as including increased

sinister thoughts in imagining the plight of the missing person (as witnessed by those stories shared in recent years such as the three young women located in Cleveland Ohio, or the recent event of a young boy missing for four years kept in a hidden room in his father's home). The need to acknowledge difference among the group is relevant – using a framework that identifies difference within the experiences of all those that sit beneath the definition of family members of missing people may provide better support avenues when bringing together families of missing people.

The following chapter incorporates the results of the study and the way they can inform the four practice areas that the participants spoke of influencing their potential to hope: law enforcement, legal services, media engagement and therapeutic counselling professionals. In addition, research gaps are investigated following by a concluding summary to acknowledge the significant input by those who chose to be a part of this study.

## **Chapter Nine: Applying the results of the study and understanding future research direction**

*So many different feelings – there is rejection. I feel that someone rejected me who didn't want me anymore. And then there is shame because you feel like you're hiding something because you can't talk about why he is missing. You know, the issues he had to deal with, that he should have stayed to deal with. They were hard.*  
de facto partner of a man missing for almost one year.

The results and associated discussion of this qualitative study provided scope to answer the research question in addition to uncovering ways that the loss of a missing person has threads of ambiguity. As the study neared its completion, the question was continually raised within the participants' words and in my own mind: *What are we hoping for?* Given the inherent vulnerability of the missing person (as defined by the participants), concerns for their physical and emotional wellbeing made it impossible to focus solely on the left behinds' hope journey. The processes of seeking hope narratives shifted in and out of focus – between the shared hope for the left behind and the hope for the wellbeing of the missing person.

### **Engagement**

The research question *What are the stories of hope for families of missing people?* provided results that demonstrated the external impact of others on a person's capacity to engage with their hope journey. The significant impact of professionals who families met on their ambiguous loss journey shaped the way that hope was enacted or dented. These impacts happen transitorily and many became sporadic over time, from the anxious engagement of searching in the

early days with the services tasked with responding to the needs of both missing people and those left behind.

There has been minimal development in progressing the understanding of the needs of those left behind and of the population of missing people in Australia. Studies conducted by Clark (2007) and Glassock (2011) have not been applied to the work conducted in the sector however current studies underway exploring the impact of ambiguous loss on young people and the role of coronial intervention on the wellbeing of those left behind. This chapter identifies the role of engagement in supporting the needs of families like those who participated in the study. The engagement can be separated into three areas: therapeutic service delivery, law enforcement, and the media. Suggestions for practical application of the outcomes of the study have been noted in relation to each of sections detailed below:

### ***Therapeutic services***

Specialist counselling services specific to families of missing people, grief and bereavement services including traumatic loss, crisis telephone counselling services, support services established by those with lived experience and GP/allied health-related services.

Boss (2006) provided a comprehensive guide for professionals responding to a variety of living losses where uncertainty prevailed. In exploring my own previous work in developing a national counselling framework (Wayland, 2007) and then in comparison to the outcomes of this study, it confirmed that the voice

of hope is a persistent inclusion in the lived and perceived experience of ambiguous loss. The goal of supporting people living with ambiguous loss is to allow people to master multiple forms of hope, not quieten aspects of hope that might signify an inability to acknowledge a loss has occurred. The participants who spoke of their contact with therapeutic services – either specific services for families of missing people or generalist counsellors (not specified as grief counsellors) in their local community – noted that the capacity to build a relationship with the therapist based upon shifting notions of an individual's capacity to acknowledge the space created by the loss of the missing person was key. Not assigning a specific cycle to the experience of ambiguous loss provided positive reflections of the therapeutic alliance.

Rando's (2000) model of anticipatory mourning and its potential application to the ambiguous loss experience was included in the earlier literature review (Chapter Three). However, as explained within the results section of the thesis, the inability to map the participants' engagement with the term hope prior to the disappearance of the missing person was limited meaning that the capacity to explore whether this movement, alongside the feelings of loss in relation to the missing person, were anticipatory grief are uncertain. Fulton's (2003) critique of Rando's definition of anticipatory grief and then of mourning suggests that observing the responses of individuals as they respond to the continued absence of a person – be it psychologically or physically – can be related to a number of scenarios. The potential for movement or maturational change as the person begins to acclimatise to life where tolerating ambiguity is central may not be a movement towards eventual mourning but elements of

living alongside the unknown. This is key to understanding the role of therapeutic engagement with this client group.

At the cessation of the study, none of the participants had located their missing person – either alive or deceased. The theory of anticipatory mourning cannot be applied in this circumstance. However, ideas of hope's journey and its application alongside this 'living loss' does provide scope for imagining a future where the loss will continue, However, without resolution these parameters could not be tested.

### ***Law enforcement***

Australian Federal Police, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, State and Territory Police Missing Persons Units, State Crime Command and Local Area Commands. These results can also be applied to other Policing jurisdictions outside of Australia.

The study utilised an Australian Law Enforcement definition in relation to missing people – namely that concerns for safety and wellbeing were paramount (James et al, 2008). Each of the families interviewed for the study had a relationship with law enforcement, initially to locate the missing person and then to continue to investigate the matter. Where the person had been missing for more than one year participants noted a consistent decline in contact between the family and the police once all avenues of investigation had been exhausted. As with notions of hope, there were significant periods of contact between the police

and next of kin following sightings or shifts in the investigation, and then settling once the period was over if no resolution occurred.

The police role in a missing persons investigation is not to provide emotional support. The participants in the study acknowledged this statement. However, the close connection between the identified needs of families of missing people (namely to have the missing person back) and the goal of police intervention (to locate the individual or ensure their wellbeing) suggests that the intertwining of contact at significantly traumatic periods can lead to unintentional support provision or lack thereof (given the distinction between police being hope enablers and detractors in certain circumstances).

The participants of the study provided examples of the ways that hope was dented by the language used by the police in describing the possibilities of what may have happened to the missing person. Families indicated that their lived experience – of being the best possible person to have an understanding of the nature and presentation of the person who was absent (Foy, 2004) was invalidated by the way the missing person was spoken about by law enforcement – that these occurrences had lasting impacts on the participants' emotional wellbeing.

The Shared Hope Zone developed from the narratives of the participants (which police may also be invited into) suggests that the findings of the study can be applied in various ways when police and family members intersect by acknowledging that even when a family might concede hope has waned, their

sense of hope might exist or re-emerge elsewhere. The application of the results of the study also highlights the potential for the police to impact the emotional wellbeing of the left behind. Participant reflections (on their shift of worldview post-loss) incorporated the social discourse that suggests if a person cannot be found, the police will *step in and locate them – this wasn't the case*. Finally, the heightened anxiety about a potential outcome in the missing person's investigation can lead to a *hope hangover*. The participants of the study identified this period as a time for law enforcement to tread gently, to explore alternate ways of offering support that acknowledges the significance of the loss remaining unsolved.

### ***Media***

Print media, television, radio and those who administer or manage social media pages (including families of missing people).

The outcomes of the research question demonstrate that hope exists in the public assertions of the left behind as well as in their private narratives. The continual focus by the media on what a reunion might look or feel like (as reported by the participants) offered little opportunity to speak to the complexity of hope for themselves versus the missing person. Location is the goal of media usage in missing persons' investigations (Moore, 2011), where families are often requested by police to engage the media and to fulfil a yearning to have "tried everything to bring them [the missing person] home" (Wayland, 2007, 16). Participants noted their capacity to become more media savvy as time progressed. The challenge in relying on media is that its involvement is selective,

dependent on whose disappearance is considered newsworthy (Moore, 2011). It is possible, for example, that people who do not fit a 'newsworthy' stereotype may not find themselves in the media spotlight. The participants reiterated this. However, given that none of the participants identified as belonging to a marginalised group in the community (Homeless, ATSI, disability) these cases may have been perceived as newsworthy in any case. As hope splintered so too did the predominant stories of loss – participants reflected that the two stories were not present in the media – that of the left behind and the missing person.

The purpose of the media, as noted by the review of the literature (see Chapter Three) is to share information that can be seen as being within the public interest, but the impact of silencing hope by limiting avenues to explore the lived experience may be detrimental to families of missing people. The role of the media as an influencer (and potential minimiser of the disenfranchised grief) is possible. One participant shared one of the many Facebook pages she followed as a way to explore the different mediums by which ambiguous loss was shared. One social media page – established to assist in the location of a young American man missing in Mexico and then eventually located deceased – asked for reflections from their online community about the role of sharing information via social media and its capacity to acknowledge the unresolved grief of the families. 'Through Facebook you were able to reach people who did not know Harry (the missing person) personally, but felt like they did. I read about Harry through the news, and through Facebook I understood there was a real person, behind the headline' (Devert, 2014).

Hope that does not solely exist on the return of the missing person is possible given there are multiple media narratives available. Stories that do not just focus upon answers to a reunion with the remains, of notions of justice and the myriad of circumstances in which a person vanishes, reflects the complexity of stories of those left behind. No literature has been identified that explores the impact on those left behind of using families as the focus of a missing person's article. Without the missing person to tell their story, the story is left to tell by those who are searching – through the lens of the media where narratives also need to be newsworthy. The gain, as a result of media intervention in terms of how many missing people are located, is unknown. This then questions whether or not it is a worthwhile venture to seek comment from those living with loss. The question of who gains – and who does not – from media attention has not yet been explored.

The gaps in the literature, as noted in Chapter Three, raise the question as to whether or not media is the appropriate platform for sharing insights. A community is asked to keep watch on people who have removed themselves from their usual locations or had no choice in their disappearance. Despite it not being a crime to go missing in Australia, the privacy of the missing person, and the use of information to prevent further potential (presumed) harm by the self or others, continues to be a strategy used by both families and investigators as a way to ensure that all possible avenues are covered to bring people home. Both traditional forms of media and the potential to share information on social media, as well as to micro-blog (the practice of making short, frequent social-media posts) have this potential (see Wayland, 2013).

## **Research gaps**

The stories told within this study speak of a place and time in the lives of the participants. Some reflected that the ways in which they engaged with the narrative framework was dependent on what was happening within the investigation. The hope-rich media surrounding National Missing Persons Week (the month data collection began – see Chapter Five) raised the participants' attention slightly in terms of hope for some new information and in the weeks afterwards they had to settle back to some normalcy around uncertainty – where some referred to this as a hope hangover.

Two participants explained that their involvement in the study had been prompted by the need to make something positive from a traumatic period. The action of sharing their story might create the potential for another person to learn from their time since the person vanished. This is not a new concept and is noted within similar research studies focussed on other traumatic losses such as suicide and homicide (see Dyregrov and colleagues 2011). The focus on meaning making (Neimeyer et al., 2006) post-loss was at the core of involvement in the study in addition to the tasks enacted by individuals who sought to make the process easier for others, namely those who established community organisations or specific online sites to assist other families of missing people.

Additional research priorities were uncovered as a result of this study that are relevant to both aspects of the predominant stories of the study – these have been divided into two sections: the left behind and the missing persons population. They are detailed below.

### ***Section 1: The left behind***

The complex narratives of the families of missing people presented in this study speak about hope existing internally and in hope for the world that exists around them. The length of time the person is missing and the accompanying uncertainty about the disappearance directly impacts the wellbeing of family members. The study uncovered concepts about the role of hope across and within families and the acknowledgement by family members that different individuals shared different ideas about resolution.

***To understand better the lived experience of being left behind, we need to invite missing persons narratives into focus.***

Australian data indicates that 97% of people return within one month of going missing (James et al, 2007), yet this high proportion of returned, previously missing persons are currently under-researched. Within this study, participants chose not to focus on the investigative outcomes or specifics of their cases but did speak to a sense of being overwhelmed with the possibility that a person could vanish with no one understanding where they may have gone. The participants spoke of the sensation of being overwhelmed within the early moments post-disappearance when multiple investigative options were provided to them – the focus on inviting additional research into the experience of missing and returning should not be confused with providing new investigative procedures for the left behind (although this may help the police), but to give an alternative voice to the experiences of missing. The stories known to the families speak to short periods where a person is missing and then returns, yet the focus on what prompted the return is unknown at this stage.

### ***Differences between those with lived experience***

Some of the participants perceived their experience to be different to others seeking to know the outcome for their missing person. There was concern about grouping together reflections of their experiences of loss when the circumstances in which their family members went missing were vastly different. The previous chapter speaks of the varied responses to loss experienced by families when they compared their grief reactions to each other – that the feeling of being *lumped together* provided minimal solidarity for families. Inclusion in this ‘missing’ group was not just specific to the physical loss of the person, but the circumstances in which they vanished. Research focussed on the alternate impacts of ambiguous loss, dependent on intentional or unintentional absence may yield new results in addressing the therapeutic needs of the left behind.

### ***An updated therapeutic intervention tool which takes into account imagined trauma.***

Glasscock’s (2011) research recommendations noted continued application of the counselling model I previously devised (Wayland, 2007) to ensure its sustained use. Whilst many of the participants of this study failed to connect with counselling services following the disappearance, those who did felt that hope was enabled or detracted by the language utilised in the counselling space. The significant capacity to offer stories as to the fate or welfare of the missing person were observed as being traumatic in their re-telling. The therapeutic engagement can, for those who validated this concept in the study, be the only space to successfully engage in ideas of liminality. To assign ideas of specific numbers of

sessions available, or focus on goal-oriented activities (that allow people to acknowledge the finality of their loss) is in opposition to the results of this study. The fluctuations of hope are not consistent with their capacity to accept the loss subsiding. The results show that the splintering of hope – where hope shifts between thoughts of the self and the missing person – has the capacity to change over time irrespective of counselling assistance. The counsellor in these circumstances must be adept at shifting with these changes too. There is not one narrative, it is a weaving of therapy focussed on the relationship lost with the missing person and the hopefulness of the experience of being left behind being honoured.

### ***Ambiguous loss across the lifespan***

Mapping the longitudinal shifts of hope for families of missing people would provide a more detailed understanding of ambiguous loss not yet recorded. Focusing on the role of media outlets, law enforcement and legal services and their engagement with families over years (and in some cases decades) would enhance the communities as well as service providers' acknowledgement that hope for the missing person differs to hope for the left behind. Additional research on the social discourse of ambiguous loss and the lack of capacity to 'sit' with the unknown may create enhanced outcomes for the left behind.

Research studies exploring the experience of ambiguous loss have involved engagement at specific moments in time, irrespective of the time since the person went missing. Repeated observations of the same variables, namely the impact of

ambiguity, over longer periods of time would provide depth in understanding about what might occur for those whose missing people remain absent.

### ***Understanding the cultural and generational implications of missing***

The literature review (Chapter Three) touches on the international episodes of large-scale missing persons events and the role of political/civil unrest on the capacity for the left behind to seek answers to their questions. The cultural beliefs and generational impacts of not being able to resolve a disappearance, the significance of locating a body and then enacting those rituals specific to the family or to religious and spiritual beliefs (Boss, 2002) suggests that to seek closure is limited. This limitation relates to both the physical recovery of the missing person as well as the emotional requirements of those who wait and hope.

Understanding the cultural and generational belief system that might exist around the concept of what it means to go missing and then left behind is not yet understood. Research in terms of global migration and the role of living with generational episodes of people going missing and potentially never being found would seek to explore what it means for ambiguous loss to be an inclusion in a persons expected loss experiences in their lifetime. Discovering if this increased understanding of the impact of ambiguous loss may allow researchers to understand if this allows for enhanced capacity to cope with ambiguity and what emotional aptitudes were provided.

The limitations of the study are that there was no exploration of the ways that an individual's capacity to tolerate ambiguity may or may not have been enhanced by cultural beliefs about hope and loss, or about the generational incidents of missing people. One woman, whose brother had been missing for 20 years noted that:

*I really believe that our society is not educated to understand unresolved grief. This reminds me of feedback my Mum had when she initially sought counselling – and the only model they had for her was a fixed number of visit program that relied on a premise that you would come to terms with a resolution within that time. There was no 'model' for unresolved grief at that time. I think things are getting better now in the sphere of professional counselling, but the rest of the general public have not caught up. To be fair – why would they? – it is an alien experience for most. Would be interested to know how other cultures respond to missing – in particular those where public and prolonged displays of grief and emotion are encouraged and supported.*

## **Section 2: The population of missing people**

*An open and clear conversation about the outcomes of missing persons investigations, if they go where are they found, why do they come back, what is the impact on re-entering a home when they do return? What do the left behind need – how to we balance safe conversations about the return of the missing person?*  
(Stevenson and Parr, 2013)

Parr and colleagues (2013), exploring Scotland's returned missing persons population, acknowledge the stories of those who return. This is relevant to the Australian community given the significant dearth of research. More is required than the report collated by James and colleagues (2007) that provides minimal data that merely states Australians go missing and that the vast majority return. Reviewing the work of Edkins (2011) in addition to the research recommendations of Clark (2007) and Glassock (2011) suggests that more

detailed analysis of the missing persons population is required. As noted by Parr and Stevenson (2013) in exploring the writing of trauma narratives surrounding missing people, paying attention to the uncomfortableness of writing the trauma is necessary in terms of providing voice to those projects that “address a continued silence around trauma” (p. 4). It is Edkins’ (2011) contention that new ways of encountering missing personhood will help us to “better understand our relationship to the data-rich state, and render it better able to deal with who we are, not just what we are” (p. 11).

Intentionally, this study provided minimal focus on the inclusion of narratives specifically about the missing person. The stories shared by the participants touched on the reflections of what it meant to be living without a significant family member. However, there was little detail as to who the person was and what they valued. Some of these details can be gathered by the way the participant spoke of their missing person yet, without detail as to their current whereabouts or the specifics about what prompted their absence, only imagined details could be offered.

In Australia and internationally we know very little about the experience of going missing and returning. Recommendations for potential research studies examining missing people and the impact of the media have been noted in response to the outcomes of this study.

***Regular collection of Australian data in addition to qualitative reflections as to why people vanish and conversely what prompts their return***

As noted in Chapter One, exploring the definitions utilised for the study, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in the United Kingdom actively reclassified missing people using two definitions. One as Missing, defined as ‘anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another (2013, p. 5) and then a new layered definition of ‘absent’, defined as “a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be” (p. 5), allowing investigative procedures to only be enacted once the criteria of risk were sanctioned. Utilising this delineation earlier in the study allowed for the participant recruitment to focus on the ‘missing’ definition citing concern for welfare and placing aside those individuals where absence was a predominant factor in the left behinds concept of missing. A distinction that is not currently being used in Australia.

In noting this delineation and then incorporating the outcomes of ‘perceived difference’ noted by the participants of the study, a research recommendation that seeks to identify the complexity of the Australian missing persons population – types of disappearance, length of absence and potential to re-engage with life, would enhance understanding of the scope of the problem. Rather than, as termed by one of the participants ‘*lumping together*’, all missing persons cases under one term negates the differences experienced by people. These differences such as being the secondary victim of a crime, or those responding to the living loss that may accompany the disappearance of a person

with poor mental health. Analysing the term ‘missing’ and its capacity to minimise perceived difference may limit discussion about the reasons why a person has vanished further disenfranchising those left behind. The term ‘missing’ fails to speak truth about the circumstances as to why the person is not here.

### ***Media research to assess the validity of sharing images/stories of missing people***

All of the participants of the study spoke about the use of the media in raising awareness about their missing person. However, family narratives, posters, and pages created across social media platforms focus more on the detail of the person who is missing than the grief of those left behind. While commonly used, there has been limited research into the benefits of sharing this information throughout a wider network. The gaps in the literature and subsequent concepts possible for additional research raise the question as to whether or not media is the appropriate platform for sharing insights into the ambiguity of this type of loss.

The results of this study suggest that the reasons why a person may disappear are not always reflected in the media stories around missing people. Media reports do not identify the community health aspects or risk factors for going missing. Media is a tool that is increasingly used to locate individuals – a community is asked to keep watch on people who have removed themselves from their usual locations or had no choice in their disappearance. Despite it not being a crime to go missing in Australia, the privacy of the missing person, and the use of information to prevent further potential (presumed) harm by the self

or others, continues to be a strategy used by both families and investigators as a way to ensure that all possible avenues are covered to bring people home. The final chapter of the thesis draws together the outcomes of the study – what I sought to do and what findings I discovered as well as the limitations of the study and its research design.

## Chapter Ten: Looking forwards

*I think my hope comes from my imagination. I come up with ideas like maybe she is held captive and is still alive. I have even gone so far as hiring psychics and driving them to where she may have been but you see they are all only fishing and guessing [games]. I don't believe in them at all, but when you're left with nothing, you think just maybe...*

Aunt of a young woman missing for 12 years.

The incidence of people going missing is not a recent phenomenon. The literature illustrates that those left behind exist in a space where a loss is 'unfinished' (Kean, 2010). Ambiguous loss has been explored through periods of war, political intervention and migration (Boss, 1999; Glasscock, 2011), in addition to solitary episodes where a person vanishes. Boss (1999) first described two different types of ambiguous losses, one where a person is *physically* absent but psychologically present in the family, and the other where a family member is physically present but *psychologically* absent (i.e. following a brain injury, those with Dementia, some mental illnesses). The review of the literature within Chapters 2 and 3 highlights the incidence and impact on the Australian community of missing people. With at least 35,000 reports made each year to law enforcement agencies relating to the whereabouts of a person who is missing, one person goes missing every fifteen minutes (James et al, 2008). The majority of missing people are found within a short period of time, while two per cent will remain missing for longer than six months (James et al, 2008). The number of people reported missing, alongside those left behind, is numerically large; however, there is limited literature relating to the ways those impacted by loss navigate the experience, particularly when the absence extends into the longer-term. This study has been prompted by the inherent difficulty in

conceptualising the role of hope and ambiguous loss given the unanswered questions accompanying a missing person's whereabouts lived alongside the left behinds' potential to tolerate ambiguity.

Hope, and its inclusion in the journey of those left behind, tells a story that differs from our modern interpretation of hope. That is, where hope is viewed as a positive value in our responses to the our lives not yet lived – these stories show the way hope is included in the rhetoric of recovery from traumatic incidents. In specific literature relating to grief and loss, hope is noted in the sense of it being a positive outlook that 'fuels energies and investment to rebuild lives, revise dreams, renew attachments and create positive legacies to pass on to future generations' (Walsh, 2007, p. 213). The inclusion, or emergence, of hope in the case of a missing person does not specify that people are beginning to surface from the fog that accompanies a significant bereavement – the action of hoping when the person's capacity to control the outcome is nullified. In seeking answers from the broader community about the modern conceptualisation of hope, it appears that intense hoping is perceived to lead to an outcome. This is challenging in a missing persons context when there are two streams of hope – hope for the missing person, and hope for the emotional survival of the left behind. Within this frame, no matter what actions or hope-seeking behaviours are enacted, they cannot control the outcome – they cannot make the missing person come home.

At the beginning of the study, my focus was to normalise hope – there was an idea that the participants might offer the various ways that hope can be

defined, leading to a neat conclusion. The opening chapter explores the pre-reflexive assumptions about the conceptualisation of hope and how this use of looking beyond what I perceived to have 'known' (as noted by May and Perry, 2011) pushed me to broaden my own view of hope and its context through a lens of ambiguity. These pre-study assumptions suggested to me that this neat conclusion would speak of hope (in a context of missing) being either X or Y, and that this interpretation would be different to the A and B of hope in a 'normal context' when a finite bereavement has occurred. This was not the case. This goal was set-aside early in the literature review phase where the further the exploration of hope progressed, the more muddled and detailed the thematic analysis of the findings became. Moving away from defining or stating what hope may be gave richness to the inclusion of hope within the experience of having a person missing. These findings provide insight into the broader social conceptualisations we attach to hope in our daily lives.

It was also not possible to explore hope as a before and after concept. The notion of hope in a context of missing does not appear to be like the inclusion of hope in a day-to-day setting where we hope to get a certain job, or hope to parent as well as we can. The multidimensional ideas of hope around this dual stream of hoping for the missing person and hoping for the self, make the process of exploring concepts prior to the missing episode not a valid exploration useful to the outcomes of this study.

The research question for this study was simple in its delivery, yet created capacity to explore detailed and descriptive analysis of the individual and

communal inclusion of hope in the participants' experiences of living with the loss of a missing person. The question '*What do the stories of the left behind tell us about hope and the way it is experienced when someone is missing?*' provided layers that existed within the liminal space between the person's disappearance and the individual's life in present time. Narratives noted the timeliness of hope where the father of a missing son referred to its multiple threads as branches on a tree, liable to snap at any time, with both fear and optimism played out in the balance developed from learning to tolerate ambiguity.

The literature states that for every person who is reported missing, up to twelve people will be impacted by the loss (Henderson and Henderson, 1998) and that this loss will be defined as ambiguous and unresolved. The research question that centred this study conceptualised hope following the loss of a family member. The question was woven within the in-depth interviews and between participants in the VFG – prompted by the researcher. The episodes of loss stretched from almost one year gone to just over 30 years since the day they vanished. The data gathered from the narrative inquiry interviews and the VFG created a story that deepened the theoretical understanding of hope when a person is missing. The study built upon the work of Boss (1999), Clark (2007) and Glasscock (2012) in acknowledging the existence of hope in the response to an ambiguous loss in addition to discovering a Shared Hope Zone that provides capacity for families to move between hope for the missing person and hope for themselves. And that this hope for themselves became less about tolerating or managing their response to ambiguity and more about some learning to thrive

again post loss. This is the significant contribution from this study to the field of ambiguous loss when a person remains missing.

The results of the study, as well as broader discussions centring upon hope, loss, and ambiguity conclude that the impact of the loss of a missing person stretches beyond the stories told by those left behind. The role of the media and the inclusion of law enforcement in shaping the left behinds' connection with hope as well as the private narratives that the community may not yet be open to hearing (for example, that hope is a source of pain) provide scope for challenging the assumptions that when loss occurs the only option is to hope for resolution. The participants demonstrated that existing within this Shared Hope Zone their loss could be contained at times and then thoughts about the future would be strengthened by seeking ways to live with not knowing, should the episode of loss continue. The research question provided scope for conversations previously unshared to be shared, where ideas of the missing person focused predominantly on the hope narratives of being left behind. The study confirmed that there are limited opportunities for families to share openly about their shifting ideas of hope – the idea that the community tended to focus on the investigative challenges of the disappearance rather than the intertwined experience of hope of both the missing persons absence and the person's capacity to shape their world, post loss. This study provided the platform for those outlier conversations – where hope for no return of the missing person could be shared. The review of the literature and the theories currently developed within the field of ambiguous loss has not previously provided scope for the idea of not having hope. The inclusion of these concepts within the study is profound and there is a need to

continue in the research field to give precedence to the untold stories when we speak of ambiguous loss.

Reflecting on the use of the narrative inquiry methodology for this study, the accompanying thematic analysis of the stories shared with me by the 25 participants noted some discomfort in analysing and thematising the data. In ‘pawing’ over the data, as embraced by Sandelowski (1995), I became concerned that the words and thoughts conveyed by the participants (that did not fall into the predominant themes) might become lost because they stood alone, away from collective experiences. These outlier conversations explored via reflexive praxis provided scope to continue to imagine the untold stories of those left behind and the beginnings of some research wonderings about what the narratives of those who are lost might also be. What also became apparent was that the stories of ambiguous loss speak to tenacity and to determination. Many of those involved with the study agreed to participate to help others who might find themselves in a similar situation in the future. All of their stories have shaped my understanding of hope, irrespective of their inclusion in this thesis.

In revisiting the transcripts as the themes of the study emerged, the stories of loss were complex. This richness began at the very time the person vanished and for some these complexities occurred even earlier – the participants’ focus shifted as people began to speak out about their loss to the wider community, either to the media or to those they were seeking help from. The stories then flexed as the silencing and ‘denting’ of hope changed their capacity to conceptualise their responses or to be invited to ‘speak up’ about the realities of

living with ambiguity. The continual cycle of being filled with hope, to hope lessening to hope shifting between these two ideas (termed for this study as the schema of hope) created emotional exhaustion for many of the participants who likened the settling of hope to a 'hope hangover' that took time to dissipate before they could seek solace in continuing on with the day-to-day functions of their life. Only one participant shared that she wished that her missing person would not return. For this woman, hope was pain, and the stirring up that would be created by a reunion, including the discovery of remains, would challenge all of the emotions and responses that accompanied this loss. In reflecting on the unexpected outcomes of the study, hearing my own responses to this participant's assertion that her son's return or discovery would reopen old wounds spoke potentially to our own social constructions of the need to hold on to hope. My 'oh' response was the only audible noise heard following her statement, quickly followed by a laugh from the participant explaining that she knew that this was not what many people would wish to hear when talking about a disappearance. The potential stigma of sharing that hope had been vacated was discovered. In addition, those who shared the stories of partners who were missing felt that the stigma attached to being unable to convince the missing person not to go (in hindsight) created narratives that demonstrated they could not be at ease if the person returned given the feelings of abandonment exacerbated by the way in which they left.

There are no clear guidelines that stipulate how people should speak about the lived experience of the loss of the missing person; the themes revealed within this study confirmed that families felt a sense of being silenced by their

experiences of loss as time moved on from their disappearance, that the longer the person was absent the less they were invited to share their stories. As a result, the study discovered that their changing ideas of hope turned inward and their capacity to learn to live in the world where the missing person might potentially return or be found was acknowledged, yet not shared with many. The silencing of hope also became about the silencing of the sharing of their unique lived experience of loss. Hope is embodied in all the aspects of life and being involved in things one participant shared –the idea from our modern society is that you have to move on, you have to move on, as shared by another participant. Yet, the action of someone going missing forced people to slow down and sit with their experiences of loss rather than to seek ways to overcome it. Within this experience, the lack of finality created a slower sensation emergence of grief and that the hope for the missing person's return allowed them to live in a future-oriented space where they could imagine what that reunion might look and feel like: *that even when there is no conclusive proof, I still have hope, however slight.*

### **Limitations of this study**

The theoretical explorations relevant to this study centred upon trauma, grief and ambiguity – where hope is acknowledged as a response to loss but the threads of hope are not fully understood. The participants self-selected for this study. Their involvement was dependent upon being available at the time when the research was conducted and their willingness to share their story, as it was, at that moment in time. In re-contacting participants nearer the end of the study, the shift in their narratives – influenced by the status of the investigation or the

specific time of year – provided different narratives, as they would have if a different group had self-selected. Many spoke of the potential to make meaning from their loss through their involvement in this study, as a way to offer new insight to the research community and in turn to other families of missing people. The results cannot be generalised, however, given that each of the participants had contact with law enforcement, some with legal services and therapeutic agencies and all with the media, their voices can inform the way families of missing people are responded to in the community.

There were two notable limitations in the sample of the study: none of the participants identified as being from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Community, nor did any reflect on inter-generational stories of missing persons, as outlined in the previous chapter exploring research gaps. The size of the sample was also a limitation in terms of providing broad scope to understand the inclusion of hope and ambiguity however given the time constraints and the under-researched identification of this type of study the sample size provided rich and detailed narratives not shared before.

Encouragingly, the participants were spread between urban, regional and rural centres across Australia, reflecting that people go missing from all geographic areas across the nation. Data as to their cultural background was not collected, nor was information about socio-economic factors. The use of a computer-mediated portal for participant engagement allowed for a spread of participants that may not have been possible using only in-depth interviews – the use of the Virtual Focus Group provided access to those who lived far from city

centres or the researcher's location. However, in embracing this factor it was also noted that some participants who took part in the virtual focus group conceded that the forum prevented in-depth sharing of their experience as a result of their perceived differences to others with different types of circumstances in which their family member went missing. The dynamics of the group, due to being facilitated in the online space, may have inhibited the capacity to gather a depth of meaningful narratives. Studies such as those conducted by MacBride (2013), Glassock (2011) and Clark (2007) all noted difficulty in recruiting large numbers of participants willing to share their experience of ambiguous loss despite the large numbers of people who go missing in the Australian community. Despite these limitations, the information revealed to me throughout the study and the insights gained through the analysis of the thematised results far exceeded my own conceptualisations of what hope may mean when a person vanishes, and the richness of the stories of those left behind.

## **Summary**

Writing from trauma is an implicit act of hope explains Tamas (2011). The action of recording and engaging with the testimony of the participants of the study was confusing at times for me, as a researcher and as a person. The messy narratives that moved between ideas of hope-filled spaces to denting, hope-less stories of pain made it difficult to extract the truths that I had sought to gather from posing the research question. While Frank (2010) asserts that the meaning of narrative is simple, "one thing happens in consequence of another" (pg. 25), the stories presented within this thesis are offered to challenge readers to see hope in a traumatic context, to ponder how that understanding impacts our own

lives as well as our professional practices (Moore, 2005).

The focus of the study was achieved. The research question provided scope to answer what the stories of hope for families of missing people are – in varying depths and degrees. The goal was to provide space to engage in hope narratives – stretching from hope-full reflections to ideas where hope was compromised, the process of how families engaged in hope-based practices became the focus of the study and the emergence of a Shared Hope Zone demonstrated how families can and do learn to live with ambiguity. The participants' ideas of hope for the missing person and distinctly hope for themselves became a dual process in living with, as well as tolerating, the unanswered questions posed by their loss. I acknowledge that the use of a narrative inquiry methodology offered me a single, or sometimes double opportunity (for those who accepted the invitation to come back to clarify some significant points) and that these stories provided individual reflections about living long-term with the loss of a missing person at that moment in time. While this may be viewed as a limitation, it also provided scope to reinforce, through my own empathy towards the participants and my pursuit of uncovering knowledge not yet shared about hope in that space in between – more broadly as the liminal space between the absence and presence of the missing person and specifically in that space at that very moment I met with them.

There is no way to present a neat and tidy reflection on the loss of a missing person. The study asserted that each of the participants could demonstrate the long-term impacts of a confusing engagement with hope that for some dented the

wellbeing of those left behind. The role of the community in allowing those who wished to share the reality of the ambiguous threads of their loss was noted and the silencing of hope was a persistent inclusion the longer the person was absent. The experience of not knowing is tinged by traumatic, often unsubstantiated, recollections of the state of the missing person – where they might be, who might be assisting them and whether or not their basic needs are met. The study revealed that families travel two paths that intersect over time. One where they manage renewed hope for the return or location of the missing person and the other where their own hopeful life begins to flourish when their story splinters – shifting them away from a complete focus on the missing person and beginning to consider their own capacity to survive the disappearance. This splintering did not occur at specific intervals, but when time within this liminal space allowed varying feelings about the missing person.

The participants involved in the study, including those who were family members of the same missing person, all recalled different stories of the lives of the people they had lost. Memories were tinged by the inclusion of the ambiguity of their loss with many still moving between ideas of acknowledging the finality with a small sense of ‘but, maybe.’ All participants spoke of being experts on their own experiences of ambiguous loss, providing clarity and depth in the ways that they responded to my prompts. Leaving the last thoughts to one participant, who reflected on how she travelled this tenuous path for the last 22 years after her brother disappeared,

*My mother definitely wore her hope (and associated times of hopelessness) on her sleeve. In hindsight, I think this made life very hard for Mum, as people just did not know how to respond*

*and cope. Especially dealing with an incident that happened many years passed. When Mum died, several people made comments to me that made me realise that they saw Mum's sense of hope as a weakness. They mistook her need to have some hope of a good outcome as a sign that she was unrealistic and had not accepted the reality. On the contrary, Mum was very aware that the most likely outcome was that he had been murdered. People saw that hope as evidence of Mum's inability to 'pick herself and get on with life.' I personally think that this rawness probably awakens other people's sense of their own hopelessness about how to manage the situation and this makes them uncomfortable. Sister of a brother missing for 20 years.*

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# Appendices

## Appendix A Ethics Approval



Ethics Office  
Research Development & Integrity  
Research Division  
Armidale NSW 2351  
Australia  
Phone 02 6773 3449  
Fax 02 6773 3543  
jo-ann.soizou@une.edu.au  
www.une.edu.au/research-services

### HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

**MEMORANDUM TO:** A/Prof Myfanwy Maple, Dr Geoffrey Glasscock & Ms Sarah Wayland  
**School of Health**

This is to advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved the following:

**PROJECT TITLE:** Hope and ambiguous loss: what are the stories of hope in living with the loss of a missing person?  
**APPROVAL No.:** HE13-143  
**COMMENCEMENT DATE:** 05 June, 2013  
**APPROVAL VALID TO:** 05 June, 2014  
**COMMENTS:** Nil. Conditions met in full

The Human Research Ethics Committee may grant approval for up to a maximum of three years. For approval periods greater than 12 months, researchers are required to submit an application for renewal at each twelve-month period. All researchers are required to submit a Final Report at the completion of their project. The Progress/Final Report Form is available at the following web address:  
<http://www.une.edu.au/research-services/researchdevelopment/integrity/ethics/human-ethics/hrecforms.php>

The NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans requires that researchers must report immediately to the Human Research Ethics Committee anything that might affect ethical acceptance of the protocol. This includes adverse reactions of participants, proposed changes in the protocol, and any other unforeseen events that might affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

In issuing this approval number, it is required that all data and consent forms are stored in a secure location for a minimum period of five years. These documents may be required for compliance audit processes during that time. If the location at which data and documentation are retained is changed within that five year period, the Research Ethics Officer should be advised of the new location.



Jo-Ann Soizou  
Secretary/Research Ethics Officer

## **Appendix B Information/Media Flyer**

### **Understanding hope when someone is missing – seeking research participants**

There are 35000 people who go missing in Australia each year and research tells us that for every person that vanishes up to 12 people will be affected.

Researchers from the School of Health at the University of New England are seeking participants to help them explore what happens to the idea of hope when a loved one is missing. The research team believes that the study will provide insight into the way we understand this type of loss, how services can assist people left behind and what might be useful for people to know if someone disappears.

The research team is seeking participants who are over the age of 18 years across Australia for face-to-face interviews *or* involvement in an online focus group. Participation is entirely voluntary and those that choose to be part of the study can withdraw at any time without penalty. Participant's details will be confidential, as will be the details of the person who was, or is, currently still missing.

For more information, or to discuss your interest in the study, contact Ms. Sarah Wayland on 0415558735 or email [swayland@myune.edu.au](mailto:swayland@myune.edu.au)

This project has been approved by the Human Research ethics committee of the University of New England (approval No. HE13-143 Valid until 5.6.14)

Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which the research is conducted, please contact the Research ethics Officer at the following address

Research Services

University of New England

Armidale NSW 2351

Telephone 02 6773 3543

Email: [ethics@une.edu.au](mailto:ethics@une.edu.au)

### Appendix C Interview Schedule

1	Can you tell me about your life since your {insert name of missing person] vanished?
2	Was hope present when your missing person vanished? What did that hope signify?
3	What gets in the way of your hope?
4	Can you describe (if hope was shared as an inclusion) how hope changed or did not change over time?
5	Are there any specific external factors or individuals that impact the way you hope after your loved one vanished?
6	Are you aware of any persistent stories shared with you that might predict how you hope for your loved one?
7	If the media have been involved in your story how do they impact, if at all, your hope?
8	Have you ever discussed your hope with other people who are also waiting for news about your [insert name of missing person]? Is hope a conversation that happens when someone is missing?
9	Is there anything else you'd like to add that I have not asked you about today?

**Appendix D and E Information Sheets and Consent forms**  
Participant Information Sheet

**Hope and missing people:**  
*understanding the stories*

---

I wish to invite you to participate in my research project, described below.

My name is Sarah Wayland and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD in the School of Health at the University of New England. My supervisors are Associate Professor Myfanwy Maple and Dr Geoffrey Glassock.

<b>Aim of the research</b>	Over 35000 people are reported missing to Police in Australia each year, and up to 12 people will be affected by that loss – regardless of how long the person is absent for. This research study focuses what happens to hope when a loved one is missing by interviewing people who have, or have had, a loved one disappear.
<b>Interview</b>	The interviews will take place at a time chosen by you (at your workplace, or at a place where you feel supported). Most interviews take between 1 -2 hours. If you agree, the interviews will be audiotaped as well as Ms Wayland taking some hand written notes during the interview.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study will remain confidential. No individual will be identified by name in any publication of the results. All names will be replaced by pseudonyms; this will ensure that you are not identifiable.
<b>Participation is Voluntary</b>	Please understand that your involvement in this study is voluntary and I respect your right to withdraw from the study at any time. You may discontinue the interview at any time without consequence and you do not need to provide any explanation if you decide not to participate or withdraw at any time.

<b>Questions</b>	<p>The purpose of the study means that the interviews might be upsetting. Not just about your personal journey but also in talking about the missing person and the way they disappeared. The questions will focus on how you survived not knowing where the missing person was and what your idea of hope was over the length that they remained missing. Your information, and the thoughts you share, will be treated with respect.</p>
<b>Use of information</b>	<p>I will use information from the interview as part of my doctoral thesis, which I expect to complete in October 2014. Information from the interview may also be used in journal articles and conference presentations before and after this date. At all time, I will safeguard your identity by presenting the information in way that will not allow you to be identified.</p>
<b>Upsetting issues</b>	<p>Some of the issues that might be discussed in the study might be upsetting. Especially when remembering some of your thoughts around the person who is missing. If you require support you can contact:</p> <p>Lifeline (24 hour telephone and online support) 13 11 14 or <a href="http://www.lifeline.org.au">www.lifeline.org.au</a> (and click on online services)</p> <p>If you are located in NSW, or your loved one's last known contact details were NSW, you may wish to contact the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Counselling Service on 1800 227 772 or visit <a href="http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons">www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons</a></p> <p>It is also important to note that should you reveal information about a risk to yourself or a risk to another the researcher will be obliged to notify the appropriate authority.</p>
<b>Storage of information</b>	<p>I will keep hardcopy recordings and notes of the interview in a locked cabinet at the researcher's office at the University of New England's School of Health. Any electronic data will be kept on a password-protected computer in the same School. Only the research team will have access to the data.</p>

**Disposal of information**

All the data collected in this research will be kept for a minimum of five years, after which it will be disposed of by deleting relevant computer files, and destroying or shredding hardcopy materials.

**Approval**

This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No HE13-143 Valid until 5.6.14)

**Contact**

Feel free to contact me with any questions about this research by email at [swayland@une.edu.au](mailto:swayland@une.edu.au) or by phone on 0415558735.

You may also contact my supervisors. My Principal supervisors name is Associate Professor Myfanwy Maple and she can be contacted at [mmaple2@une.edu.au](mailto:mmaple2@une.edu.au) or 02 6773 3661 and my co-supervisor's name is Dr Geoffrey Glassock and he can be contacted at [Glassock@bigpond.net.au](mailto:Glassock@bigpond.net.au)

**Complaints**

Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at:

Research Services  
University of New England  
Armidale, NSW 2351  
Tel: (02) 6773 3449 Fax: (02) 6773 3543  
Email: [ethics@une.edu.au](mailto:ethics@une.edu.au)

Thank you for considering this request and I look forward to further contact with you.

Regards,

Sarah Wayland

Participant Information Sheet: Virtual Focus Group

**Hope and missing people:  
*understanding the stories***

---

I wish to invite you to participate in my research project, described below.

My name is Sarah Wayland and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD in the School of Health at the University of New England. My supervisors are Associate Professor Myfanwy Maple and Dr Geoffrey Glasscock.

**Aim of the research**

Over 35000 people are reported missing to Police in Australia each year, and up to 12 people will be affected by that loss – regardless of how long the person is absent for. This research study focuses what happens to hope when a loved one is missing.

**Interview**

The study involves a number of participants coming together via an online focus group where you can discuss via your computer the aim of the research. The group will require 1-2 hours of your time each week for four (4) weeks at a time and location chosen by you. If you agree, the discussions within the group will be recorded. You can choose to comment with other participants or confidentially.

**Confidentiality**

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study will remain confidential. No individual will be identified by name in any publication of the results. All names will be replaced by pseudonyms; this will ensure that you are not identifiable. Although attempts will be made to keep participants anonymous from each other, all participants will be requested to keep anything that they learn, or hear from other, confidential.

**Participation is Voluntary**

Please understand that your involvement in this study is voluntary and I respect your right to withdraw from the study at any time. You may discontinue the interview at any time without consequence and you do not need to provide any explanation if you decide not to participate or withdraw at any time.

**Questions**

The purpose of the study means that the interviews might be upsetting. Not just about your personal journey but in talking about the missing person and the way they disappeared. The questions will focus on how you survived not knowing where the missing person was and what your idea of hope was over the length that they remained missing. Your information, and

	<p>the thoughts you share, will be treated with respect.</p>
<b>Use of information</b>	<p>I will use information from the online discussions as part of my doctoral thesis, which I expect to complete in October 2014. Information from the online group may also be used in journal articles and conference presentations before and after this date. At all time, I will safeguard your identity by presenting the information in way that will not allow you to be identified.</p>
<b>Upsetting issues</b>	<p>Some of the issues that might be discussed in the study might be upsetting. Especially when remembering some of your thoughts around the person who is missing. If you require support you can contact:</p> <p>Lifeline (24 hour telephone and online support) 13 11 14 or <a href="http://www.lifeline.org.au">www.lifeline.org.au</a> (and click on online services)</p> <p>If you are located in NSW, or your loved one's last known contact details were NSW, you may wish to contact the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Counselling Service on 1800 227 772 or visit <a href="http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons">www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons</a></p> <p>It is also important to note that should you reveal information about a risk to yourself or a risk to another the researcher will be obliged to notify the appropriate authority.</p>
<b>Storage of information</b>	<p>I will keep hardcopy recordings and notes of the online group in a locked cabinet at the researcher's office at the University of New England's School of Health. Any electronic data will be kept on a password-protected computer in the same School. Only the research team will have access to the data.</p>
<b>Disposal of information</b>	<p>All the data collected in this research will be kept for a minimum of five years after successful submission of my thesis, after which it will be disposed of by deleting relevant computer files, and destroying or shredding hardcopy materials.</p>
<b>Approval</b>	<p>This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No HE13-143 Valid until 5.6.14)</p>
<b>Contact</b>	<p>Feel free to contact me with any questions about this research by email at <a href="mailto:swayland@une.edu.au">swayland@une.edu.au</a> or by phone on 0415558735.</p>

**Complaints**

You may also contact my supervisors. My Principal supervisors name is Associate Professor Myfanwy Maple and she can be contacted at [mmaple2@une.edu.au](mailto:mmaple2@une.edu.au) or 02 6773 and my Co-supervisors name is Dr Geoffrey Glassock and he can be at [Glassock@bigpond.net.au](mailto:Glassock@bigpond.net.au) or

Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at:

Research Services  
University of New England  
Armidale, NSW 2351  
Tel: (02) 6773 3449 Fax: (02) 6773 3543  
Email: [ethics@une.edu.au](mailto:ethics@une.edu.au)

Thank you for considering this request and I look forward to further contact with you.

Regards,

Sarah Wayland

## **Appendix F Email to Participants**

Subject: Checking in and some last questions

Happy new year everyone,

Ive spent the time between Christmas and New Year transcribing all of the amazing words people have shared with me - either in 1-1 interviews - or within the focus group. All 51000 of them! My hands have not yet recovered...

What stood out for me was the way in which hope was circular - how people engaged with it, lost it, renewed it and quite often came back to a place of having to sit with the idea of not knowing. Thank you for trusting me with those ideas.

The two questions that sprang to mind from transcribing the words are noted below. If you are happy to share your answers with me via email some time in January that would be wonderful.

As always if any thoughts or questions trigger sadness or a need to reach out for support please get in touch with me and I will arrange for you to link in with some local supports.

1. Hope and faith - while taking part in this study I have noticed how hope is discussed in the community when we talk about religion or spirituality. Has anyone found that they attach any ideas of hope to their ideas about faith? Has your faith in something bigger helped you hold on to hope?

2. Hope and support - there was very little mention from the participants about the role of counselling and hope. For those of you that have reached out for counselling support (you don't have to say who to) has your hope been embraced? Have you been told you were holding on to false hope? Did the counsellor understand the role of hope in living with the unknowns when someone is missing?

If you could reply and pop your answers below each of the questions that would be wonderful.

Ill be heading up north for a couple of weeks from the end of this week but I will still be available via email and phone if needed. Im hoping the change of scenery will give me a chance to do some writing and ponder how I can place together all of your thoughts into a relevant research document.

take care

Sarah

## Appendix G

### *Pre-group prompt:*

Over the next few weeks I will be posting an article every Sunday evening that explores different ideas about hope when a loved one is missing. The information contained within these articles was drawn from interviews conducted separately in mid 2013 with a number of participants who had a loved one missing. Each article will conclude with a question or a prompt that will invite you to share your ideas.

In choosing a focus group the researchers hope to create a space where you are encouraged to share what you agree or do not agree with. We encourage you to not only answer the questions posed but to ask other questions amongst yourselves. Feel free to discuss issues raised by others. There are no right or wrong answers.

Having worked with families of missing people for the last decade I can safely say that every person I have met has had a different experience of loss. There may be some ideas you share that others can relate to, and you might relate to others experiences. There may be other experiences mentioned that are very different from your own.

The purpose of this study is to understand better what hope might mean, how families define it and what helps or hinders holding on to hope.

As with all groups there are rules of etiquette, which you can find in the sidebar to your right. Some of the details within the articles might make you feel sad or remind you of thoughts you have not shared before. Information about the support services available to you can be found on the sidebar below the group rules. If there isn't a support service that suits you please do not hesitate to get in touch with the research team. You will find my contact details in the right hand side of the site. Alternatively if you can't see them please email me [swayland@myune.edu.au](mailto:swayland@myune.edu.au) or call 0415558735.

I hope you find the articles thought provoking.

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## *Week One:*

### **Your story of hope over time?**

During my interviews with people who were living with the loss of a missing person I asked them about their story of hope. One mum likened her story of hope to a 'lottery system', a journey that she 'wouldn't wish on anyone'.

Hope in other circumstances might be a positive feeling, a sense of being excited about what might happen in the future. However, when someone is missing, hope as explained by the participants, can be attached to two thoughts. The first thought is that the missing person might return. The second is that the person living with that loss learns to survive 'not knowing' (Boss, 1999).

The brother of a missing woman likened hope to having a 'few shades of grey' as the years moved on. He found that hope can get buried deep below, 'we (families of missing people) are like icebergs. We don't have rose coloured spectacles on, it's like they have been ripped off. We see the world as it is. There is a lot that others don't see'.

The families I spoke to ranged from 8 months to over 34 years of living with the loss of a missing person. Their hope that time would reveal new information never went away — they just began to hope for different things. A woman whose partner was missing found that in the early days she just wanted him back but then that changed to wanting to make sure he was warm, that he had water and now she focuses on the hope that he hasn't suffered. Alongside that is the

question that if he had chosen to vanish that she hoped he was OK. As with many of the feelings that come with someone being missing that feeling of hoping he was okay was tinged with anger that he hadn't spoken to her about the need to be somewhere else.

For a Dad many years down the track he found that he still had hope 'just not at the same level'. He found that a sense of needing to be rational took over those ideas of imagining a happy return but that at the end of the day hope is 'all you've really got left'.

On the flipside, was the notion that hope equalled pain 'when someone first goes missing hope is all you have. You hope they will turn up and you have great belief that they will' and when they don't that hope begins to drag people down. The need to be resilient in the face of hope appeared to be attached finding ways to bounce back from that feeling of hope, 'it's common sense I suppose' says a mum of a son who vanished but when media reports raise levels of hope, the pain that comes from no news is hard to sit with.

***What do you think about these ideas on hope?***

***What is your story of hope, has it changed over time? If it has changed what sorts of experiences, events or issues have influenced this change?***

*Week Two:*

**What helps you hold on to hope?**

Whenever a story appears in the newspaper about the disappearance of a person the word *hope* appears. Hope for the searchers, hope for answers for the family and a sense that the community is hoping for a happy ending.

The families interviewed for the first round of this study all spoke about the ways their hope was allowed to thrive. Next week we will be talking about the opposite — what (or who) makes you stop hoping? So for this section I'd like your thoughts specifically on what helps you hold on to hope.

The idea of holding on to hope fell into two categories. One was about holding on to the hope that you would find out what happened to your missing loved one. The other was about how you would hold on to your hope for your future.

*Hope for the missing person*

In terms of the person who was missing, some families found that the kindness of others (particularly those who were also living with similar losses) allowed them to hold on to hope. Some found that to reach out and hear how others survived gave them hope about how they might survive.

For one woman it was the compassion of a Police Officer who gave her the time to sit and talk. It offered her 'hope when they (the Police) make time to listen, it

means that they might be able to do something'. Another family also felt that when Police showed a special interest or went 'above and beyond' this validated their hope. (Both these examples are police bound, do you want to add something here about that others have had very different experiences of the police? Otherwise you might get a whole lot of this focused on experience of police)

The way families engaged with Social Media (like Facebook or twitter) offered the chance for families to hold on to hope, 'it was like everyone was hoping for an outcome. It's just a way of making ten more people aware' explained one mum who regularly shared on a Facebook page established to help in the search. That awareness felt like families had a support group all hoping for a similar answer.

There were other practical pieces of information that also offered renewed hope. Information about potential sightings of a missing person gave one mum hope, 'it gave me new energy, a sense of possibility, even though I never really believed he could be dead.' In sharing this news of possible sightings some families found that the chance to speak about the missing person, about the theories of where they might be, allowed them to hold on to hope for that moment in time.

*Hope for you in surviving 'not knowing'.*

There was an undercurrent of needing to find strength and energy to keep moving forwards when a loved one was missing. Participants shared different ideas of what made them resilient.

These key ideas of being allowed to talk about hope — even if others had lost their hope that the missing person would return — all provided a space for hopeful conversations. For one participant this extended to her workplace and the compassion they showed in being flexible with her. The commitment of the woman's employer in helping her maintain her career alongside of looking for and living with the loss of her son gave her hope for her future.

On a personal level people maintained their own hope for how they would live alongside their loss in different ways. The Dad of a missing son spoke about how having a sense of humour was important, 'a sense of balance and perspective and a sense of belonging' helped him to continue to live his life with meaning.

For family groups giving people the space to have different feelings of hope was also important, 'my mum still has a bit of hope' explained the brother of a missing woman. He feels that for him his hope is 'embodied in the future' in relation to how he manages his thoughts about the world, about learning to sit with the reality that bad things happen to good people and that hope is like planting a tree 'you wrap your hope around those stakes that you plant in the ground. Hope wraps around those trees that grow'.

***What helps you hold on to hope — for both you and the person who is missing?***

*Week three:*

**What might be the barriers to hope?**

When this question was asked to the families in the first round of interviews many of the same things that helped people hold on to hope also made them lose hope. The intertwining of hope for both the missing person and the person left behind was present and time seemed to be a persistent barrier to holding on to the hope that the missing person would arrive home safe and well.

‘If the sighting hadn’t happened then I wouldn’t have spiralled in to despair’ one mum explained. She found that her hope made her look at things through a ‘different lens’ and she was pulled right back into the thoughts of where he might be and the pain of not being able to solve it. The following themes emerged from the conversations with the participants:

**Time**

As much as the majority of the families wanted to hold on to hope the feeling of time moving on was a drain on keeping hope afloat, ‘The birthdays come around and you still don’t hear anything. So then you lose it and your mind is trying to reason with the amount of time that has passed’. This participant explained that she restored her hope by forcing herself back into the normality of life, “I just busy myself” and the hope eventually returns.

## **Sightings**

One participant spoke about false sightings as news that ‘dents hope’. ‘It makes you feel shattered but the hope is still there. It doesn't go away.’ The feeling of hope being a roller coaster can diminish it at times, ‘the roller coaster takes you on a ride of anticipation that there is going to be a breakthrough but then it doesn't lead to anything and you have to get off the coaster or the depression seeps in’.

## **Coroners Inquests**

Half of the families involved in the first round of the study had been through the coronial process that declared their loved one deceased without the body being located. ‘I think professional people see it so differently than we do’ one mum explained. ‘I remember saying when they closed the books (on the investigation) I don't think you know what a survivor he is, how can you say he is dead?’ She felt that from an administrative perspective the Coroners Office ‘don't have hope, they're not involved. It isn't someone they love it's just a name on a paper whose gone missing and presumed dead’.

## **Police**

There was a mix between the families interviewed in terms of their thoughts on the investigation as a way of holding on to, or being made to let go of hope.

Watching a Police Officer speaking about another missing case and suggesting

that the person may be deceased one participant remarked ‘How dare you say that! How do you know what she’s going through’. She felt that in the harsh tone of his words he forced the family to concede hope without any news to the contrary.

The partner of a missing man also found in the early days of his disappearance — when she was struggling with the shock that he was gone — that the comments of one Police Officer that ‘he’s probably necked himself and he’s not coming back’ devastated her. She felt finality in his words as well as shame in terms of not having the answers about what might have really happened. The Police Officer eventually apologized but she felt that it took a significant time for her levels of hope to return.

### **The Media**

Families felt some push and pull in engaging with the media. Many felt it a necessary tool in sharing that someone was missing. One participant found that when she approached the media with new information they ‘wanted to take the story to a place where I didn’t want to go’ meaning that her hope of getting news out there was diminished. For another being involved with the media ‘stirred things up’ and only made the time between being able to cope and managing a feeling of false hope harder to sit with.

*Can you add to this list? What puts a ‘dent’ in your hope?*

*Week Four:*

**How do others respond to your hope?**

So much about having someone missing relies on the telling of the story of the disappearance — in speaking to the Police, in sharing with friends and the community and in talking to the media.

The participants in the first half of the study shared their ideas about how people respond to their hope. They revealed the ways that some feel that they are holding on to false hope — that if they viewed the story of their missing person on a balance of probability that they should relinquish hope. In the early days of having her partner missing one woman shared that the views of her own mother that she should ‘just accept he isn’t coming back’ make her angry ‘no one has a right to tell me. They don’t know me, they don’t know my relationship with (missing person).’ For her, being told that she should give up and move on takes away the love she has for her partner.

The mum of a missing man found that there is silence from those around her about what they ‘really think’. ‘People don’t know the rules or the etiquette about what to do when someone is missing’. Families spoke of being the ‘holders’ of information to the people around them about what was happening in the investigation. One participant felt that those around her questioned the attention she received from others and the media but on the flipside it also ‘raises the point about how much people are forced to share when someone is missing’. The space between protecting the missing people’s privacy and the

need to have them back weighed heavily on the participants. One mother felt that to talk about her son's disappearance was a 'bit of a blemish on that persons character' making it hard to speak up even though staying silent might mean they aren't found.

In terms of the media there was a sense from families that news outlets were only interested in some versions of missing persons stories and that they had to fight for attention at times. One participant felt that community education campaigns like National Missing Persons Week highlighted young people who were missing who made choices about not being here. He felt that it 'shouldn't be blurred, going missing isn't a catchall phrase'. He felt that more attention should be placed on the different ways people go missing and the 'different way the left behind look at the world'.

There was a lot of ambiguity from the participants about how the community responded to how they survived when someone remained missing. They felt they had been forgotten after the dust settled and the person remained missing for longer than a year.

***How do you notice the way other people respond to your idea of hope (or lack of) in the community?***

### *Finishing up – concluding comments*

In listening back to all of the interviews I've conducted so many comments stood out. One participant explained having a sister missing meant his 'sensitivity dial was permanently set too high' and that his view of the world had shifted. He saw the awfulness in the world rather than the good.

Hope appears to exist in a 'foggy' way when someone is missing — only one participant spoke about the hope for 'full closure' whereas the majority of the participants felt that there was no such thing as having 'all of the answers'.

The older participants who took part in the study found that the 'bruising' aspect of holding on to hope had started to become about a need for answers before they became too old or passed away. They hoped for the chance to have the missing person back 'in some capacity' even if that meant finding out that they had passed away.

There did not appear to be a recovery process that each family moved through. It was more a collection of strategies to help them cope day to day with the unknown that comes with having someone missing.

Thank you to everyone for taking part in this study. I will leave you with the words of one mum who explained that her hope for the future and her hope for her missing son existed at the same time, 'It's a see-saw, you have to embrace it,

what scares me is the question of how resilient I can be because really how much can a bear bare?'

As a way of finishing up this forum I'd ask that in your final reflections you share one word or phrase that captures hope for you. In sharing this space with you all, and the earlier participants, my understanding of how people wear hope on the outside shapes the way they are viewed by others, their love for the person who was lost and their ideas for the future has been strengthened.

Thank you for your time.