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'No news today': talk of witnessing with families of missing people

Hester Parr
Glasgow University, UK

Olivia Stevenson
Glasgow University, UK

Abstract

The paper contributes new ways of thinking about and responding to interview talk in the context of recent scholarship on interviewing, orality and witnessing. We proceed by paying attention to specific examples of interview talk on the experience of absence via the collecting of narratives from families of missing people. We highlight how ambiguous emotions are bound up with broader ways of recognizing such talk, largely exercised here as reflections on what is involved in witnessing those who are missing in communications with police. Tensions that may be produced by official ways of regarding and responding to family character witness of the missing are discussed in the context of two case studies. In response to these tensions, we offer suggestions for finding different spaces through which to value such 'witness talk' by families, particularly via ideas from grief scholarship. The paper concludes by briefly reflecting on how interviewing encounters might produce versions of praxis in which the content of talk is not *just*, and simply, 'apprehended' as academic evidence.

Introduction

The title of this paper is taken from an interview with a daughter of a missing mother, someone who spoke about the painful act of regularly ringing the police station to ask for updates on the investigative search. She found it hard to convey her emotions when told, yet again, by the officer who answers the call, that, indeed, 'there's no news today'. Despite the apparent difficulty in

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Corresponding author:
Hester Parr, Geographical and Earth Sciences, Glasgow University, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK.
Email: Hester.parr@glasgow.ac.uk

communicating the difficult emotions created by the unexplained absence of a loved one, we might imagine the heart-drop on hearing these words, the resignation, the pain, the sense of distance, the cruel wonder, the crushing effort in thinking about picking up the phone for tomorrow's call. These descriptive words do something to convey what might be involved, but clearly talking about missing people is a difficult exercise, one saturated with a range of feelings, relational gaps and other affects.

This paper explores 'family talk' about missing people, via an analytical commentary on the *content* of interviews with family members, for a *cultural geographies* theme issue on methodologies. As such, the paper contributes to writing about interviewing within a discipline that traditionally values such forms of evidence gathering. The focus here is on what families have to say about *witnessing* their missing members. Witnessing is referenced in two ways in the paper. Firstly, in relation to the formal reporting of the absent person and formal witness statements given to the police.[1] Secondly, it is more substantially discussed in the context of broader forms of what might be called 'witness talk', in which families reflect on the less formal ways in which they have discussed and related the character and personhood of their absent member to the police and others. The paper is specifically targeted around the latter thematic and what families have to say about how the police, in particular, seem to fail in being appropriately responsive to their witness talk. We also write about our own exposure to 'talk about witness talk' in the research interview, in that this resulted in conceptual moves and practical actions suggesting how families might be enabled to enrol such talk as a cultural performance, rather than (only) experience it as a representational problem.

The paper emerges from an ESRC funded research project in which we have engaged with a range of families of missing people, including those who have had the difficult pleasure of a return, and alongside families who are still searching for loved ones. We have also interviewed people formally reported as missing and who have returned, and police officers who search for them (see www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk). We focus here on questions of family talk about missing people, and seek to reflect on the profound difficulty of engaging in discursive acts of witnessing what and who is missing.[2] While these themes might be cast as theoretical problematics elsewhere, relating to more conceptual explorations of representation and non-representation,[3] we instead discuss witness talk about missing people *methodologically*. We consider the possibilities for praxis relating to the conducting of emotional interview work, and aim to contribute one answer to the question that Bondi[4] asks: 'how it is possible to think about feelings in ways that help us understand other people's emotional experience?'. In doing this, we do not focus on 'how to do' talk about talk, but we ask about *the value* of *ways of regarding* certain kinds of talk inside and outside of the research interview. We conclude by referencing our own actions, inspired by the content of family interviews, and couched in the context of responsive work in 'emotional geographies'.[5]

We will start by briefly situating the paper with reference to selective writing on interviewing, talk, witness and orality, and we cast this as a very partial, but theoretically informed, entry-point to thinking about a version of the 'politics of methodology'[6] concerning the interviews with these families. In the next section, we move through our empirical materials, and specifically *the content* of family talk about *their* 'missing experience' (a phrase that we deliberately use here to reference the complexity and range of experiences that are associated with human absence[7]). Here we move beyond talk about 'how missing experience *feels*', to consider what families say about how their wider witness talk with respect to their missing members seems to be regarded by police officers. The resulting dynamics, we go on to argue, are critical to the production of feelings of 'ambiguous loss'[8] that many families of missing people report. In the third section, we relate how post-interview reflection led us to consider other ways in which witness talk (rather than the

formal witness statement) might be put 'to work' for and by families. We borrow from work in grief scholarship to explore the construction of what Walters[9] has called the 'durable biographies' of the dead, to think through how performative talk about missing people might be enrolled in more empowering ways for family members. We relate how these suggested pathways for the use of witness talk are being shared with the UK charity Missing People in workshops with families, and with various police education forums. We conclude by claiming that interviewing in emotional geographies research is not just about furnishing an ever-expanding shopping list of emotive content,[10] but can instead be focussed on questions about how talk (only some of which is overtly emotive) may become 'well-regarded' both inside and outside of the interview.

Interviewing talk and witness talk

In 1993, Miles and Crush wrote about life history interviewing as interactive encounters, arguing 'that geographers might explore these methodologies as a means of recovering lost geographies and venting alternative voices in academic texts'.[11] Since then there has been a profusion of work, often quoting this article, on interview politics, techniques, practices and problems.[12] We wish to connect with this work, but also recent writing on the power, conduct and purpose of talk, orality and witness.[13] Reflecting on the historiography of the spoken word, for example, Ogborn[14] writes that 'speaking is . . . linguistic and embodied, a matter of performance and representation, and understanding speech practices in the past or the present demands a continual rethinking of those distinctions so as to acknowledge representations as "actions themselves" in the on-going making up of the world'.[15] The practice of talking and speaking, Ogborn argues, has thus been variously contested, refuted, silenced, interrupted and listened to throughout history, and *where* speech happens is critical to how it is regarded by multiple audiences.

In academic human geography, oral interviews have similarly been associated with different kinds of power and the fostering of inter-subjectivities which (somehow) equitably mediate these dynamics, and many researchers have thoughtfully experimented with sensitive techniques and reflexive thinking around this form of verbal exchange, partly via the attempted creation of 'safe spaces' for talk.[16] We want to offer further reflections on oral interview talk, specifically to address interviews as spaces where important talk which happens *elsewhere* in the lives of respondents is itself witnessed. This doubling (of talk about witness talk) has complex meaning in our paper, as our interviewees discuss providing official witness statements, but also broader forms of witness talk, to the police for the purpose of search. These interviews can thus be cast as a partial insight into the complex act of witnessing someone that is missing. While we cannot hope to cover all the implications of the above, we do want to offer a line through this issue, privileging how different forms of witness talk are perceived to be valued by the families concerned. We acknowledge, but do not discuss, wider debates about truth claims and the social and political relations of witness accounts which are also bound up with geographies of testimonial orality and power.[17] Rather, we deliberately alight on two particular human geographers who have recently discussed witnessing in particular ways, in order to generate a conversation around the witness talk of missing people that occurs in our interviews.

How might we understand the significance of the witness talk about which families speak? Harrison[18] helps us by writing of the inherent, unavoidable 'incapacity' of the testimonial witness to 'attest' because of the failures of language. Furthermore, he and Carter-White[19] problematize witness testimony, with the latter writing of it as being comprised of disruptive, non-representational gaps which jarringly induce contingent co-responsibilities for readings and interpretations. This sense of disruptiveness may nonetheless still be apprehended by systems of analysis, and Harrison[20] argues, using Derrida,[21] that:

testimony is, as it were, pre-comprehended by the systems and systemisations of analysis; sense is anticipated and so any idiomatic phrases and impossible concatenations are available to perpetual negation, translation and re-contextualisation into the order of the 'analysable', the manifest and the representational.

The notion that whatever is said, however idiosyncratically, will be translated into wider systems of understanding and analysis is a point that is relevant to what the families below say about their witness talk with police officers, and we return to this point later. These authors emphasize the sense in which witness testimony is comprised of an unstable privileging of authority (e.g. as 'the' eye-witness to an event or 'the' intimate witness to a person's life) and also an impossible responsibility to be both subjective and objective in the telling of a testimony.[22] For our interviewees, the impossible authority at stake in witnessing missing relatives and their geographies is particularly profound. A mother might feel that she intimately knows her son and his usual (geographical) routines and preferences, for example, but be uncertain as to why he disappeared and where he is. There is thus a gap in understanding, a relational rupture, and one which might speak to the broadly non-representational tenors evoked in the writing about witness testimony above, in which the trauma of a missing son might evoke difficult questions such as '*Where is he?*' but also '*Where are the words to convey his missingness?*'.

We explore this issue here specifically (and therefore partially), assessing what interviewees say about this difficult witnessing work; and also we suggest what we, as researchers, might *do* with such interview talk.[23] While acknowledging the problematic status of diverse forms of witness testimony, as highlighted by the writings above, we want to provide some space to how we as researchers might help engage *value* in witness talk about the missing, as opposed to simply '*apprehending*' it[24] as part of a 'social scientific project' (although this is also, arguably, inevitable). This latter ambition does nothing to bridge relational gaps between those who consider themselves present and those who they (almost) know as absent, and how this is spoken about, but it does offer ways to think about how *talking more* and *in different spaces* might assist with the trauma of such disjuncture.

Talking about missing people

> *Dad was interviewed a few times, he must have been interviewed about sixteen, seventeen times by them. We got interviewed by uniformed police, but then we had quite an in-depth conversation with CID later on in the process. So it does start to get a wee bit muddy as to what I was asked, when.*[25]

> *So I was kind of putting the story of how well I know him and where I think this radius may be and that he wouldn't be able to do very steep paths, they would be low paths, and they were kinda like, 'well, you know nothing'. So there was a bit of 'he's left you, rather than he's missing' and to this date they class him as a missing person who's left me, rather than a missing person who's disappeared with the intention of suicide.*[26]

> *The police officers actually said, 'he's an adult', 'he's a male' and 'as an adult male it's his civil liberty to go missing'.*[27]

In talking about the intensive process of searching for their missing relatives, family members related multiple conversations with the police in which the spatial preferences, characteristics and routines of their missing relatives were discussed. As Rock[28] suggests: 'the witness interview is more than . . . a speech event, it consists of multiple tasks – telling, listening, writing, formulating, analysing – and has multiple goals – the extraction, communication and use of emotional and factual information'. In many family accounts of such interviews, and other related conversations,

there was positive commentary about how police interview tactics usefully jogged memories and generated ideas. There was also, however, a barrage of talk about how difficult it had been to impress upon some officers the *particularity* of the person who was absent. For those families who report difficult relationships with police officers in this regard, they describe communicating with them as deeply unsettling, as Sasha relates: '*I didn't feel that what I said was valued*'.

In interviews with 25 family members who have/had a missing relative,[29] various dimensions to their relationship with the police were discussed, alongside their understandings of the search that was taking place, how their spatial knowledges were being drawn on or out, and how they themselves conducted what might be called search activity. In these conversations, the difficulty of providing an account of the absent person was discussed, alongside commentary about how this form of witness talk was recorded, valued, used or seemingly discarded by the police. As the extract above reveals, what families understand to be an unusual absence that *they* cannot explain was sometimes dismissed by police officers as 'typical' spatial behaviour bound up with rights-to-go-absent. There was a strong thematic across some (not all) of our interviews about the minimal talk centring on the character of the absent person in follow-up police liaison by phone and in person once a missing person report had been made. We argue below that this perceived lack becomes central to the production of ambiguous feelings of loss for family members 'left behind', as their case enters police systems and analysis.[30]

The search for character recognition: witnessing Paul and Jim

In police search enquiries, the missing person's character and their spatial preferences are re-assembled via the formal witness statements of family and significant others, and through on-going versions of family liaison work where less formal 'witness talk' may also contribute to police work. As might be the case for all of us, there are often inconsistencies that emerge in such forms of data collection: we are complicated emotional and social beings, and constructing coherent narratives around our relational lives is always going to be a tricky business. In our interviews, it was also often here that senses of contestation arise in family narratives about their missing person: over what he or she is likely to have done and *where* they may have gone, and how this fits with or deviates from emerging police case files. The latter encompass what the police sometimes call 'missing person or misper profiling', a kind of technical categorization based on the character witness and tied to prescribed risk status.[31] As might be anticipated, there is often a disjuncture between the intimate and historical knowledges of character that emerge in family witness talk and the more essentialized, operational categorization of character profiling that begins to be built in police cases.

To explore this issue from the family's perspective, we draw on the detail of the interviews with Ben and Jane, who discuss their missing 18-year-old son. Paul has been missing for three years, and was living at home with his parents on the day he was last seen. On the day Paul disappeared, his dad was meant to give him a lift to college, but instead, and unexpectedly, Paul ended up driving himself because his parents were late. Paul did not return home that evening and his parents called the police. The next morning the police informed them that the car had been found near cliffs popular with bird watchers, but that there was no trace of Paul.

As a result of his absence and the police report, Paul's room was searched, and his computer and some personal items including a dictaphone were taken to the station. The dictaphone was found to contain a suicide message and Ben said the voice was Paul's, but Ben believed that it was from several years ago and relating to a time when Paul had experienced serious difficulties at school. The police undertook a variety of further search tasks tabled below (see Table 1) as a response, including forensically examining Paul's computer and ascertaining the age of the voice

Table 1. Police Search activity.

Car park and cliff area search
Petrol tank analysis
Reconstruction of likely car route driven by Paul
Computer analysis
Voice analysis
Local interviews undertaken
'Live' body search at the bunker
Media appeals
Finger prints of car taken
Case analysis: Paul is likely to have committed suicide

Table 2. Family Search activity.

Car park and cliff area search
Petrol tank analysis
RAF maps and bunker site plans consulted
Reconstruction of likely car route driven by Paul and film made
Posters put up along cliff top
Computer search
Local interviews undertaken
Consultations with fire and rescue operatives
Media appeals and contributing to newspaper features
Letter writing to police and MPs
Case analysis: Paul's body is likely to be in the underground bunker

on the dictaphone via voice recognition experts, confirming Ben's initial thoughts about the age of the tape and Paul's message. His parents are nonetheless sure the police felt that Paul drove to the cliffs to commit suicide, despite the age of the tape and how the family represented Paul's state of mind, indeed his character, at the time of his disappearance. The family dispute the police assessment of their son's missing behaviour as suicidal and are insistent that he was much more likely to have been interested in an underground bunker adjacent to the cliffs and had likely gone to explore that. Paul's web-browser registered him having looked at a website relating to the bunker at 7.03am on the morning of his disappearance, something the family registered before the computer was taken away for police forensic examination. The family reported at their interview that the bunker has not yet been subjected to a dead body search, two years after the event, and despite their requests.

The disjuncture between the police and the family narrative of the case resulted in both parties making extensive search enquiries, but the family search extending to individuals and experts beyond the known police search in order to find explanation and also further action (see Table 2). The family were evidently attempting both to verify and extend police search as a result of dissatisfaction at how their witness of their son had been acted upon, a process which had significant financial, temporal and emotional cost to them, as Ben explains:

> I occupy myself with trying to think of something to do all the time that is going to lead to a break through. I go over the facts of the case repeatedly, this is why I have such detail in my mind, it's all live to me. I think and think and think about the things that I think I've done and I think I know . . . perhaps

something else will occur to me that I haven't done that I will be able to do. I constantly strive to find an answer.

The family believe that the police developed a suicide narrative very early on in the case, which hampered their ability to take seriously the family witness statements and wider witness talk which suggested that Paul was happy and probably exploring the bunker that day. The family do think that their son is dead and that probably his body lies in the bunker, which has since been sealed by the local landowner. They think that the case and the site has not been fully investigated because of the assumption of Paul's suicidal intention and the body then being lost at sea.

In relating the detail of their search and their disagreement with the suicidal characterization of their son, Ben and Jane reflect further on questions of character, repeatedly referencing the buoyant mood of Paul on the day: '*he was anxious* (in a positive way) *to get to college that day*'. It is Ben's assumption that Paul always intended to go to the bunker, but from college and by bus, and the fact that he had the car meant that he drove there instead. In Ben's view, the original suicide tape recording was made at a time when Paul was struggling at school around the age of 15, but that three years later he was recovered, at college and doing well. The tape was found at the back of a drawer, under some books, dusty and sticky with age. Ben is insistent that the police scenario about suicidal young males does not fit with the Paul who they knew at that time: it '*did not relate to his circumstances that existed on the day that he disappeared*'. Although there is more nuance to the case or story than we can relay here, the family are in dispute with the police because, as Ben says, '*it was a mindset that his car was found by the cliffs and this tape said he was unhappy with his life. And they never got over that. It was a hurdle we could never climb over*'. There seemed nothing Ben and Jane could say to change the interpretation of his absence, even though they could not explain it themselves. This kind of relational gap – not just between Paul and his parents, but more particularly between his parents and the police – is partly bound up with how Ben and Jane's witness talk about Paul has been seemingly 'apprehended'[32] into systematic police knowledges that seek to explain his absence by recourse to more generic spatial behaviour profiles categorizing him as suicidal, largely because of the location of the abandoned car at sea cliffs.[33]

Ben and Jane describe how they have immersed themselves in searching the details of Paul's last known journey as a way to counter this dominant police narrative about their son as a suicide case. Ironically, though, Paul's own disembodied youthful voice, spoken onto an aged tape, provided a form of witness that proved more influential than their own, and it meant that the police did not need to look any more closely at what his parents said about Paul's *characterful* choices as a young man with interests in military landscapes. This, his parents maintain, means that the police are not really searching for *their son*, but rather a male suicidal stereotype. They were still pushing for an excavation of the bunker site at the point of interview.

Ben and Jane's discussion of their 'failed' witness testimony resonates with Carter-White's writing about such problematic forms of representation, particularly as Ben and Jane's words seem to have been 'assessed and potentially discarded according to a criterion of scientific evidentiality'[34] connected with male suicide typologies. The 'scientific evidentiality' is not fully present in this case, not only because we do not have police records,[35] but more because the most obvious evidential traces of Paul are gone, and what remains are only the abandoned car, its contents and words about Paul, the latter doing an unstable job of saying who he is/was.[36] While we cannot be more precise about the status of the witnessing words in this specific case, we can relate Ben and Jane's experience to that of other families of missing people, who also spoke during interviews about the difficulty in relaying the character of the absent.

In the case of Linda and Pete, they discuss their son, Jim, aged 21, who has been missing for two years. Jim was living with friends at the time of his disappearance, which was reported to the police

by his flatmates, to whom he owed a small amount of money for rent. Linda and Pete initially thought that he had found himself in a financial hole and that he would bolt away, but come back shortly afterwards. After a few days, however, Linda began to feel her son's disappearance unusual, and tried to report him as missing, but the police would not file the report and told her to come back in a few weeks. It was not until three weeks after the disappearance, with repeated calls from Linda to express her concerns that her son's disappearance was '*out of character*', that the police filed a missing person report. Linda recalls that the police expressed reluctance and that they said things like, '*he'll turn up, don't worry about it. We've seen this thing happen before*', as well as claiming that he needed to have been missing 12 weeks before a report can be filed because '*he's not got any psychiatric problems, he's not ill, there's nothing wrong with him, he's quite a normal mature lad*'.[37] Although at the three week mark a report was filed and Jim's parents were interviewed, the main investigation did not begin until Jim had been missing five to six weeks. An inspector and a PC were assigned to the case and they began interviewing the family, friends and contacting Interpol, as there was a suggestion that Jim had been researching European destinations on his mobile phone. Linda and Pete spoke about a varied relationship with the police from this point, and how they felt that their case was not a priority because they were often called on Sunday nights or late at night for news updates or obtaining information. They report being often unaware of what police searches were being carried out, and who was on/off the investigation team. On one occasion Jim's sister was re-interviewed and the police mistakenly used the name of another 'non-missing' brother. The parents relate their feeling that the actions taken, and questions asked about Jim, were inappropriate, unclear and repetitive. Late one Sunday night, after a year, the police called to say they had closed the case, as they believed Jim to be a '*perfectly competent adult and he's gone missing of his own accord*'. The family report not being involved in this decision and feeling in limbo as a result. They nonetheless discuss trying to live an active life, alongside their own continued search.

Reflecting on the above events during the interview, Linda is certain that she enjoyed a good relationship with Jim, who phoned her every week. Her witness talk about their relationship, and Jim's habits, was something that the family used repeatedly to counter the initial police dismissal of his absence and their assertive discourse about a male adult's right to missing mobility. Linda says:

> They wouldn't accept he was a missing person. I said, 'this is not right, there's something not right here, he's gone'. And they wouldn't accept it, they said to call back in a few weeks, so I kept badgering them. What I couldn't get across to them was he didn't phone on the Wednesday, he phoned me every Wednesday, that's my day off, he always phoned me. I think generally the police at that time thought 'he'll turn up, don't worry about it. We've seen this thing happen before, he must have overreacted to the situation'. And there was this thing about a missing person for a certain time. Yeah, they kept saying 12 weeks. And I kept saying 'I can't believe that's right'.

> *Pete contributes:*   'the thing was it was a bit out of character. It was just so odd'.

In the interview, Linda and Pete complain about constantly changing police officers assigned to the case – some who never came to their house – and who seemed to remain distant from the detail of Jim's life and his parent's account of his character and habits mentioned above. They feel that their talk of Jim's character was not really being taken seriously in the investigation. They go on to discuss Jim:

> *Linda:*   That's the biggest thing. This is just so totally not like him, and that's what I can't get my head round, the fact that we've not had a postcard saying 'I'm sorry, miss you'. Or anything.
> *Pete:*   From a mental illness point of view, I don't think he was in that frame of mind, but you don't know people.
> *Linda:*   He was just so normal.

Pete:	I mean, he could be a right idiot . . .
Linda:	When I went to that Missing People [the UK charity], I took all these photographs that I had blown up, and when I looked I thought, God, he's got his hair coloured differently in every photo. And that just broke the ice and I said 'that's what he would do'.
Pete:	He's absolutely different to his brother.
Linda:	Dead soft, though, dead soft.
Pete:	That's what I said about very non-confrontational. His bottom lip would quiver if there was any real violence in a situation. Although he was reasonably streetwise, he was gullible because he liked being in with people.
Linda:	He has got a lovely personality, he's the one that can make me laugh.

In this exchange, Jim is talked about warmly. His character emerges and he is depicted as soft and gullible and yet streetwise, a right idiot who likes hair dye, and so normal. He has a lovely personality and can make his mum laugh, but his dad is ultimately unsure as to whether he was mentally ill. This rich confusion speaks to the value and instability of the character witness statement: his parents are sure of who he was and who they think he is and why they love him, but this narrative is also wobbly, it lacks essential coherence (how could it ever be so?), more perhaps because he is now gone. The Jim who is missing also does not fit with this rich family narrative – this Jim is inconsistent with Linda's anguish connected to '*the fact that we've not had a postcard saying "I'm sorry, miss you"*'. The parents clearly find it difficult to revision the Jim who they know with the Jim that goes missing: and all of this is then compounded by what feels like a mis-representation or dismissal of what they say about his character by the police, who then cease to search for him. Jim seems impossible to witness precisely because of his absence *and* the questioning or dismissal of his character. Jim is still missing.

The struggle for witness talk

In collecting and then re-reading these interview materials, we were struck by how the parents had struggled to witness their absent adult children, and also struggled to get their witness talk properly accounted for and valued (from their perspectives) in the police search enquiries. This may be a problem that relates to the inherent instability of witness talk, and to its fissured relationship to systematic knowledge and process (and what might be deemed 'factual' evidence): 'Witness testimony is particularly effective at highlighting the problematic implications of this approach'.[38] Yet, given that much of the 'investigative methodology'[39] of police enquiry comprises just such evidence, the treatment of it in these cases is lamentable and raises problems about how such professionals act on and, importantly, *around* witness talk. The families above are both engaged in detailed discursive work about the character of their sons, and their intimate knowledges of their characters may or may not be helping to explain whether their sons were being suicidal or illegal or thoughtless in their 'going missing', but their character witness is seemingly not *well regarded* by the police. The families thus emotionally struggle with this lack of regard because it matters and materializes on different levels. Firstly, because character is discussed with numerous police officers officially charged with finding their missing sons. New officers appear without warning, and sometimes do not meet the family face to face, forcing the family to begin their character witness talk again and again. Secondly, part of the experience of the stressful liminality which results from having a missing relative is, we suggest, the *repetitive disappearance of the nuanced character witness* that emerges between the family and particular police officers. That the police often seem to compile this detailed character witness to form a 'type' of missing person, discussed in different ways in both cases, seems like a denial of the specificity of the character in question for the

families. So the families may struggle to co-witness *their* missing person *as particular* within such official scripts, and, indeed, this is precisely the point made by Edkins in her recent work on the politics of missing people.[40]

The resulting tension is part of what can produce a structure for what some might call 'ruminating grief', a repetitive trap of traumatic thinking, as relayed by Linda:

> Somebody asked me in the summer 'how often do you think of Jim?' And I just looked at her and said 'every hour of every day, and I dream about him at night'. And that's exactly what it's like . . . it is like a loss, but you haven't lost him, and that's the hard part to take, because there is no moving on. You're just left in a limbo and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

In hearing 25 complex stories of absence from families of missing people, and reading closely the transcripts afterwards, we were moved to find new ways of addressing aspects of this absence and talk of it. Like Harrison,[41] in his questioning of the value of concern for singular human existence, we found ourselves wanting to do something with the uncertain witness talk of the families who live in the strange limbo produced by their experience of human absence:

> What place is there for such concerns when everything is of the order of compositions, even decomposition? What reason for mourning when the subject is produced each time on the basis of objects? To what is reason addressed, to what is it owed, when there are no others? . . . I find myself wanting to retain or give voice, to save or keep safe, some form of 'minimal humanism'. I find myself wanting to save or keep safe the name.

Our register is different to Harrison's, but we also want to do something with words, and also want to argue that the witnessing of missing people via talk does not constitute 'wasted words',[42] despite the impossibility of the task and the official barriers facing families who try. In what follows below we suggest *what else* we might *do* with witness talk of singular humanity – a particular missing person – as a way of harnessing its value, and also of responding to the pain of profound loss so clearly voiced in our interviews.

We hence return to thinking about what Ogborn[43] argues are the particular performative powers associated with different forms of orality as actions, registering that the spaces in which speech happens might make a difference to how it is regarded. We ask what else might be said about missing people and where? How might such talk happen and for what purpose? We ask these questions in a methodological theme issue, because the content of the interview talk characterized by the examples above prompted us to want to *act*, as empathetic researchers, and ones who may have more flexibility than police officers to suggest doing different things with it. As Bondi[44] says, when she discusses the commonalities between research and therapy:

> When research participants tell their stories to attentive listeners, the act of narration in the presence of sympathetic witnesses is likely to enable participants to hear themselves anew in ways that make their stories freshly meaningful for themselves as well as for the researchers listening to them.

Although our interview work contained potential risks as well as benefits for participants, our shared conversations were deliberately framed by elements of an ethic of care (in our attentiveness and responsiveness[45]) and a general *positive regard* for the stories told. One aspect of our responsiveness is the generation of new thinking and suggestions for practical action around the representational struggles in family witness talk. In this, we are seeking to support families by suggesting new interpretative frames for enabling broader forms of witness talk about their missing person. While this is not participatory research as it is usually defined,[46] there might be parallels with work

that enables: 'the retelling of certain geographies that are taken for granted because they emanate from authoritative sources'.[47] What we are claiming here is that families may find value in talking in different ways and in different spaces about their missing person, unfettered by police negotiations and interpretations of such talk. Grief scholarship has been useful in providing a context for such thinking.

Talking back to human absence

That which is remembered as absent becomes present in a different way.[48]

The loss experienced when someone goes missing might be conceived as a traumatic experience, and indeed many interviewees described traumatic spaces of 'limbo', or what Wayland calls 'the space in between' grief and trauma.[49] Such states and spaces might be ones where talk and witness is not always possible or even desirable: as Tamas[50] puts it, when she says that trauma 'leaves me lost and speechless . . . what breaks my heart also breaks my tongue'. Although some family members were lucky enough to be surrounded by a strong friendship network, allowing them to speak of their loss and the missing person, regularly and when they chose, for others this was not the case. The lack of a legitimate space in which to discuss not only feelings of loss, but also the character of the missing person, can be understood as a profound lack, and one which leads to senses of stasis, as Linda above describes as she says: '*you're just left in a limbo and there's nothing anyone can do about it*'.

Turning to ideas in grief scholarship has helped us to find ways of addressing this rather static dilemma, and we summarize some of this thinking here by Walters:

> The construction of a durable biography enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives; the process by which this is achieved is principally conversation with others who knew the deceased. *The process hinges on talk more than feeling*; and the purpose entails moving on with, as well as without, the deceased.[51]

Recent grief scholarship has largely orientated around a commentary on how continuing bonds[52] with the dead enable a lived life for those left behind, and venerates the role of spoken narrative (talk) as one link in the vital relationality between the dead and the living. There is emphasis here on grieving as a social and cultural project rather than as a narrow occupation of stages.[53] Maddrell's work[54] is particularly notable here for recognizing the 'relational and dynamic *absence-presence*' that infuses material and cultural geographies of grief. While being inspired by such ideas in the context of missing people, it is important to state that we are precisely *not* suggesting that families of missing people straightforwardly feel 'grief', although this may be the only language available to them to express their loss. Indeed, many explicitly address this in interview, as this quote suggests:

> I have coped with a lot over the years but this is something completely different from other things. Grief is one thing, this is grieving and not grieving all at the same time, it's really weird, really very strange. (Judy, mother)

So, we are not suggesting that the missing are like the dead; indeed, they are quite differently absent. Nonetheless, we draw on the usefulness of the 'durable biographies' concept, and mobilize it in relation to the senses of ambiguous loss that are often experienced as a result of human absence.

In Walter's[55] early work, he problematizes many of the assumptions about the grief process and in particular discusses how therapeutic interventions around grief often concern themselves with the 'feelings of the bereaved, rather than with the character of the deceased'. Critically, he argues, it is in the establishing of durable characterful biographies of the dead, ones fully *talked about*, that is central to recovery from abject or ruminating grief. In establishing durable biographies – in which spoken character witness and construction is important – Walters suggests that relatives of the dead benefit from co-constructing a discursive narrative of the dead which pictures a life lived with an ending, but a life that also continues through the on-going biographies of the mourners. This 'narrative life story' which connects the absent dead with those who continue to live is most comforting to the mourner when it contains little stigma or public shame (this also contributes to its *durability*); and so silences, what is *not said*, as well as what *is said* become important. In the modern age, Walters continues, this is important because 'ritual is replaced by discourse'.[56] Ironically, he notes, this discursive salve is actually less available to many in modern societies, as our need to do it increases, partly because of our 'dis-embedding in place', as we literally move away from family and intimate social networks who might have known those for whom we grieve: it is less possible to discuss intimately the character of a dead cousin, for example, known to no one locally. The result is a problematic lack of a discursive life around the character of the dead: 'testing the reality of their memories with geographically distant others who knew their spouse or child can scarcely be attempted'.[57] Walters effectively makes a case for the value of a 'discursive life'[58] around the character of the absent dead, and via interventions that might focus on 'talk' about that character, rather than (just) on the feelings of the bereaved. He thus understands talk about the absent as particularly helpful in the grieving process.

We have rehearsed Walter's argument here because we think that it signposts potentially interesting routes for conceiving of the struggles of families to witness their missing members, and might even prompt actions around the creation of new spaces of characterful witness. If renewed attention could be directed to ways of discussing, and gathering and *retaining* character witness not only as a function of police work, but also as an important form of cultural work, then *a version* of durable biographies for missing people may be possible. In part this is about trying to create an adequate narrative space of recognition for the missing, as well as of talk about them. Social media is one such space for some families (e.g. www.dancomehome.com), but for others this is not enough, nor an option, and so the struggle for well-regarded character witness is an *on-going* struggle. Emotional difficulty may arise because any 'durable biography' of the missing is hard to incorporate into a wider family narrative identity because of the partiality that it represents. The lack of knowledge of the missing makes constructing *continuing* relationships between the individual biography and wider family narratives hard, especially if there is conflict or stigma over the character concerned (as is likely in cases of shocking and sudden human absence).

In this regard, a secure place for the story of the missing is difficult to achieve in the same ways as people may find a place for the dead:

> The purpose of grief is not to move on without those who have died, but to find a secure place for them. For this place to be secure, the image of the dead normally has to be reasonably accurate, that is, shared by others and tested out against them.[59]

However, harnessing how families use their geographical imaginations about their missing members, imaginations partly exercised through witness talk, may be instructive. Imagining what Jim or Paul would have done, *where* they might be now, is relevant here. In Paul's case, his parents' geographical imaginations are sadly bound up with a closed underground bunker and the location of a dead body, and so the possibilities are limited. In Jim's case, it is more difficult for his family

to suggest *where* he might be in relation to his character, but Linda, his mother, retains an open geographical imagination in this regard:

> I would imagine that he was dead in ditch, that he was living homeless on the streets, that he was starving. That was hard. I had to stop myself doing it because I was basically making myself ill. So now I imagine him . . . that he's working in a bar in Ibiza and having a great social life and he's on the beach during the day and he's got a suntan.

For several families of the longer-term missing, they deliberately employ quite expansive geographical imaginations in their constant questioning of 'where?' to enrol new projections of their missing members which might see them as streetwise and networked in new places, if still *unbearably missing* from and in their old lives. This, we would insist, is not just damaging illusion or fantasy, but an active process whereby the biography of the missing is *held open*, *as continuing*, and as related to their new *possible geographies*. In part this is based on their known character preferences, and in part this is difficult family work which accepts that a form of biographical revision may have happened *without them and at a distance*. We cast this as an unstable but *potentially* helpful way to approach the ambiguity of durable biographies and character witnessing of the missing, and one that finds a productive place for the 'where?' question.

Boss,[60] a therapist with families of missing people, argues that such speculative talk is not always dangerous:

> Those who wait endlessly for news about a lost person do not do so in vain if they find hope and optimism in their struggle. Indeed, they are able to find meaning in the midst of ambiguity because of their ability to remain optimistic, creative and flexible.

Boss[61] also elaborates the potential of 'dialectical thinking', and enabling families to talk positively about 'both'/'and' scenarios: e.g. I have a son *and* he is missing, he is present *and* absent. For those families who find ways to live with this notion and talk about the expansive possible geographies of 'where?', there are perhaps new ways of creating a discursive life around the character of the missing that responds to a deep need to communicate, to talk about them and to have this talk recognized, as Jane relates:

> When I say now Paul's missing, I want them to ask me questions. I actually want them to show some interest and not just go 'oh, right' and walk away. Because you need to talk, you do need to talk.

We propose that there is a need to find service-specific but also more collective ways of valuing and responding to character witness and talk about those who are missing: acceptable ways for families to retain a discursive life for those who are absent, and not see this as just a form of 'complicated grief' or 'search work', but rather as a space of recognition *and* a potential space of revision around a durable if uncertain biography.[62]

What might this look like in practice? Wayland,[63] a social worker, who writes in an Australian context about ways forward for counselling families of missing people, argues that they need to be enabled to 'reanimate' the missing so 'they can reclaim the missing person as a person: their identity is not defined by the fact they are missing', and that this may happen by small celebrations of the story and person *so far*. Indeed, it may in part happen by generating 'ideas about how the missing person can be celebrated'. It may take the form of story-telling, photography or film, or events which continue to celebrate the person's life, as part of an on-going family, an on-going strategy of lives still lived. This is not quite the same as remembering the dead: as here, families may also hold open the possibility that the absent missing may one day *speak back* to address their place in such

family narratives.[64] These are clearly speculative strategies, but ones about to be the focus of experiment, as we are holding a workshop together with the UK charity Missing People in late 2013, bringing together 60 families, trauma experts, police representatives and researchers to talk about the possibilities outlined above. New kinds of performative cultural projects connected to those who are missing, orientated to who they were and may still be, is therefore *somewhere* important that we might go with talk about those who are missing (and see also the 'Wall of Reminders' www.missingpeople.org.uk).

Conclusion: cultures of talk about missing people

By *speaking* to them, their presence was acknowledged and reasserted in public.[65]

In recent work on undocumented human absence, Sigvarsdotter reminds us that talk can bring the absent into presence. In interviews with families of missing people their accounts of talking about absent others brought to presence *both* these missing people *and* the ambiguities often surrounding their words about them. In human geography, especially in work on emotional geographies, interviews can be a space where 'feeling talk' emerges,[66] and the types of talk discussed with us in interviews have prompted us to engage in particular ways with the feelings produced. We have sought to go beyond cataloguing and naming the various emotions that human absence generates (the liminal 'ambiguous loss'[67] at stake demands this), and instead recognize that neglecting family talk of the missing characterful 'other' is central in producing painful aspects of loss for families. We have claimed that the *repetitive disappearance of character witness* between families and police officers is key to the emotional liminality that can result for the former, and is bound up in a politics of recognition[68] as well as prompted by particular processes of system capture.

   As part of an emotive response to the haunting testimony in our interviews, we have suggested finding new performative spaces and purpose for family witness talk, creating pathways away from the stasis of representational problems in police services. In turning to the notion of durable biographies in grief scholarship, we argue that witness talk about the missing holds potential to be built into lived family narratives in new ways, allowing such talk to be *positively regarded* as unstable and open, and bound up with imaginations of unknown possible geographies. Families might be supported to re-interpret their witness talk as part of a bigger cultural project which retains the absent person *as more than missing* and as still integral to the on-going family story of itself. This difficult and ambitious family work may be possible with therapeutic or social support, as one way of responding to human absence. This strategy enrols broad forms of witness talk as part of the project, and it suggests that we *talk more* about missing people and in different ways. This talk could be deployed in times and places appropriate to each family, as well as given space in national support programmes for families of missing people (see www.missing.people.org.uk). Such a strategy is not unproblematic, practically and conceptually, but does begin to find a place for the 'where?' question that families constantly ask themselves, and responds to the need to create new cultures of talk around missingness.[69]

   In returning to the frameworks that were cited in introducing this paper, we position our work in its conclusion as a hopeful contribution to understanding the diverse potential of interview work,[70] and as part of a potentially 'useful' emotional geography[71] which seeks to do more than list emotions as they are felt.[72] In responding to family talk of missing people with both conceptual suggestions and pragmatic action, we are endeavouring *not only* to 'apprehend' their witness talk in systems of analysis[73] as evidence for academic scholarship, but to think about *what else* to do with such talk. We suggest ways of finding new places for it that will affect how and whether it is received (and see Pratt's work on *Families Apart* for other responses to traumatic family absences[74]).

Indeed, Harrison,[75] in discussing Pratt's text, argues that one response of the academic to unstable witness talk (what he might call 'testimony') could be:

> rather than seeking to repair testimony, to reformat it and make it suitable to existent regimes of representation and address, it may be desirable, and certainly more just, to seek to change such regimes and invent new ones. To invent new public spheres with new grammars, where new forms of connection and separation are possible.

Our own attempt here is in a state of becoming and not available for further translation and, although it may yet be unsuccessful, it is an experiment which recognizes the possibilities that exist between ideas, talk and feelings. As Walters[76] says of grief scholarship: 'what bereaved people *do*, and *how they talk* about what they feel, is influenced by theories of grief'. Likewise, if we can conceptually engage with witness talk about missing people in human geography in order to *talk more* and *differently* about it, in 'new public spheres with new grammars',[77] then this might be one useful purpose of interviewing people about the anguish of human absence. This process will not, in all probability, diminish the pain of receiving 'no news today', nor simply close the gaps which separate the families concerned, but it offers some suggestions about sharing the inadequate words that we have to mark such ambiguous loss, and then more collectively to act around it.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Despite the formal status of a witness statement in legal proceedings, it is noted that: 'Witness statements are taken within specific context and using specific processes of production' (F.E. Rock, 'The Genesis of a Witness Statement', *International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law*, 8, 2001, pp. 44–72). Our own paper does not consider the production of the formal witness statement.
2. P. Harrison, 'Flētum: A Prayer for X', *Area*, 43, 2011, pp. 158–61.
3. R. Carter-White, 'Primo Levi and the Genre of Testimony', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37, 2012, pp. 287–300; P. Harrison, '"How Shall I Say It?" Relating the Non-relational', *Environment and Planning A*, 39, 2007, pp. 590–608.
4. L. Bondi, (forthcoming) 'Understanding Feelings: Engaging with Unconscious Communication and Embodied Knowledge', Paper for Special issue of *Emotion, Space and Society* on 'Affective and Emotional Methodologies'.
5. K. Anderson and S. Smith, 'Editorial: Emotional Geographies', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 26, 2001, pp. 7–10 and see R. Pain and S. Kindon, 'Participatory Geographies', *Environment and Planning A*, 39, 2007, pp. 2807–12.
6. H. Parr, 'The Politics of Methodology in "Post-Medical Geography": Mental Health Research and the Interview', *Health and Place*, 4, 1998, pp. 341–53.
7. See H. Parr and N. Fyfe, 'Missing Geographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(5), 2012, pp. 615–38.

8. P.G. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

9. T. Walters, 'A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography', *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying*, 1(1), 1996, pp. 7–25.

10. S. Pile, 'Emotions and Affect in Recent Human Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographer*s, 35, 2010, pp. 5–20.

11. M. Miles and M. Crush, 'Personal Narratives as Interactive Texts: Collecting and Interpreting Migrant Life-Histories', *The Professional Geographer*, 45, 1993, pp. 84–94.

12. M. Limb and C. Dwyer (eds), *Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers: Issues and Debates* (London: Arnold, 2001); M. Crang, 'Qualitative Methods: The New Orthodoxy?', *Progress in Human Geography*, 26, 2002, pp. 647–55; K. England, 'Interviewing Elites: Cautionary Tales About Researching Women Managers in Canada's Banking Industry', in P. Moss (ed.), *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 200; G. Valentine, 'Tell Me About Using Interviews as a Research Methodology', in R. Flowerdew and D. Martin (eds), *Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project* (London: Pearson Education, 2005), p. 110; C. Nicholas, S. French and G. Valentine, *Key Methods in Geography* (London: SAGE, 2010).

13. Bondi, 'Embodied Knowledge'; R. Carter-White, 'Auschwitz, Ethics, and Testimony: Exposure to the Disaster', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27, 2009, pp. 682–99, p. 628; P. Harrison, 'Testimony and the Truth of the Other', in B. Anderson and P. Harrison (eds), *Taking-Place. Non Representational Theories and Geography* (London: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 161–79; Harrison, 'Prayer for X', p. 158; E. Laurier, 'Geographies of Talk: "Max Left a Message For You"', *Area*, 31(1), 1999, pp. 35–48; M. Ogborn, 'The Power of Speech: Orality, Oaths and Evidence in the British Atlantic world, 1650-1800', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36(1), 2012, pp. 109–25; C. McGeachan and C. Philo, 'Words', in R. Lee, N. Castree, R. Kitchin, V. Lawson, A. Paasi, C. Philo, S. Radcliffe, S.M. Roberts and C.W.J. Withers (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Human Geography* (London: SAGE, 2013); C. Philo, 'Discursive Life', in V.J. Del Casino, M. Thomas, P. Cloke and R. Panelli (eds), *A Companion to Social Geography* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 362.

14. Ogborn, '1650-1800', p. 10.

15. See also Philo, 'Discursive Life' and McGeaghan and Philo, 'Words'.

16. Bondi, 'Embodied Knowledge'; Pile, 'Human Geography', p. 458; Parr, 'The Interview', p. 341.

17. J. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); S. Felman and D. Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Harrison, 'The Other', p. 161; Ogborn, '1650-1800'; Rock, 'Witness Statement'.

18. P. Harrison, '"How Shall I Say It?"; and see also Harrison, 'The Other', p. 161.

19. Carter-White, 'Genre of Testimony', p. 289.

20. Harrison, 'The Other', p. 169.

21. J. Derrida, *Resistances: Of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by P. Kampf, P.-A. Brault and M. Nass (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

22. Carter-White, 'Genre of Testimony', p. 287.

23. See also H. Parr and O. Stevenson, *Families Living with Absence: Searching for Missing People* (Glasgow University Print Unit, 2013).

24. Harrison, 'The Other', p. 169.

25. Alice, family member interviewee. Alice is not her real name.

26. Sasha, family member interviewee. Sasha is not her real name.

27. Tina, family member interviewee. Tina is not her real name.

28. Rock, 'Witness Statement', p. 44.

29. Families were recruited for interview via two UK police forces and the UK charity Missing People. All participants were sampled from these organizations databases. The sample frame was developed in consultation with these organizations and excluded cases where the reporting person was under 18 years of age, where possible abduction was suspected and where we were advised that receiving an invitation could potentially be too distressing. In each organization we worked with a designated point of contact to send a standardized letter, project information sheet and consent form to a relevant

sample. Potential participants were invited to respond directly to the project Research Fellow – via reply slip, email, phone or social media. Initial police and charity recruitment strategies yielded low response and so strategies were diversified to include recruiting families via charity support days, placing an advert on the Missing People website. In total approximately 700 'attempts' to contact families were made and from that 21 individual interviews and one focus-group took place. Families were located across the UK and had experiences of family absence that ranged from a few hours to over 20 years. The focus group and 14 individual interviews were conducted face to face with seven interviews taking place via telephone as requested by the participants. Interviews lasted between 1.5 hours to 2.5 hours and covered a range of topics. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews have been coded with a range of emic and etic codes. The data forms the basis for the report 'Families Living with Absence: Searching for Missing People' as well as forming part of a police education package delivered to officers involved in training via the Police National Search Centre (PNSC) and Scottish Police College (SPC). See www.geographiesofmissingpeople. uk for further information and materials.

30. Harrison, 'The Other', p. 169.
31. Parr and Fyfe, 'Missing Geographies', p. 615. See G. Gibb and P. Woolnough, *Missing Persons: Understanding, Planning, Responding – A Guide for Police Officers* (Aberdeen: Grampian Police, 2007), <http://www.sipr.ac.uk/downloads/missing_persons_understanding.pdf>; and for a review of other research on profiling see P. Woolnough, O. Stevenson, H. Parr and N. Fyfe, 'Geographies of Missing People', in K. Shalev-Green and L. Alys (eds), *Missing Persons: A Handbook of Research* (Farnham: Ashgate, forthcoming).
32. Harrison, 'The Other', p. 169.
33. For explanation and critique of spatial profiling, see Parr and Fyfe, 'Missing Geographies', p. 615.
34. Carter-White, 'Disaster', p. 683.
35. We do not have access to police data in this case and so this paper is written entirely from the family perspective. Police officers involved in the case may represent the scenarios and evidence base differently.
36. See main text above and also Harrison, 'Prayer for X', p. 158.
37. This is not technically correct. A person can be reported missing at any time if their absence is deemed to be 'out of character' as stated in the official technical definition from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO 2005, 2013) whereby Missing is 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: 5); see Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), *Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons*, <http://www.gpdg.co.uk/pact_old/pdf/MissingPersonsInteractive.pdf>.
38. Carter-White, 'Disaster', p. 683.
39. M. Innes, 'The "Process Structures" of Police Homicide Investigations', *British Journal of Criminology*, 42, 2002, pp. 669–88, but see also R.P. Fisher and N. Schreiber, 'Interviewing Protocols to Improve Eyewitness Memory', in M. Toglia, J. Reed, D. Ross and R.C.L. Lindsay (eds), *The Handbook of Eyewitness Psychology: Volume I: Memory for Events* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2007), pp. 53–80 and M. McLean, 'Quality Investigation? Police Interviewing of Witnesses', *Medicine, Science, and the Law*, 35, 1995, pp. 116–22.
40. J. Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).
41. Harrison, 'Prayer for X', pp. 159–60.
42. Harrison, 'Prayer for X', p. 159.
43. Ogborn, '1650-1800', p. 10.
44. L. Bondi, 'Research and Therapy: Generating Meaning and Feeling Gaps', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19, 2013, pp. 9–19.
45. J. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: a Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (London: Routledge, 2009).
46. R. Pain, 'Social Geography: Participatory Research', *Progress in Human Geography*, 28, 2004, pp. 652–63.
47. M. Cieri, 'Between Being and Looking: Queer Tourism Promotion and Lesbian Social Space in Greater Philadelphia', *ACME*, 2, 2003, pp. 147–66.

48. L. Meier, L. Frers and E. Sigvardsdotter, 'The Importance of Absence in the Present: Practices of Remembrance and the Contestation of Absences', *cultural geographies*, 20, 2013, pp. 423–30.

49. S. Wayland, 'Supporting Those Who Are Left Behind: A Counselling Framework to Support Families of Missing Persons Australian' (Australian Federal Police, 2007).

50. S. Tamas, 'Writing and Righting Trauma: Troubling the Autoethnographic Voice', *Qualitative Social Research*, 10(1), 2009, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1211/2641>.

51. Walters, 'Bereavement and Biography', p. 7, abridged abstract, our emphasis.

52. A. Maddrell, 'Mapping Changing Shades of Grief and Consolation in the Historic Landscape of St. Patrick's Isle, Isle of Man', in M. Smith, J. Davidson, L. Cameron and L. Bondi (eds), *Emotion, Culture and Place* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 49; A. Maddrell, 'A Place for Grief and Belief: The Witness Cairn at the Isle of Whithorn, Galloway, Scotland', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 10, 2009, pp. 675−93; A. Maddrell and J.D. Sidaway, 'Introduction: Bring a Spatial Lens to Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance', in A. Maddrell and J.D. Sidaway (eds), *Deathscapes. Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1−18; D. Klass, R. Silverman and S.L. Nickman (eds), *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996).

53. R. McManus, *Death in a Global Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

54. Maddrell, 'The Witness Cairn', A. Maddrell, 'Living with the Deceased: Absence, Presence and Absence-Presence', *cultural geographies*, 20(4), 2013, pp. 501–22. Maddrell's work is similarly concerned with continuing bonds and dynamics of absence-presence. In A. Maddrell, 'Mapping Grief and Memory in John Banville's *The Sea*', in O. Jones and J. Garde-Hansen, *Geography and Memory, Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 58–67, she notes that Walters, 'Bereavement and Biography', identified the significance of creating 'durable biography' (oral or written) for the deceased, not only as a means of retrospectively storying their life, but also as a form of sense-making of a loved one's death' (p. 65).

55. Walters, 'Bereavement and Biography', p. 9.

56. Walters, 'Bereavement and Biography', p. 15.

57. We note this argument is particular to 'westernized' societies in the 21st century.

58. See also Philo, 'Discursive Life', p. 362.

59. Walters, 'Bereavement and Biography', p. 20.

60. Boss, 'Unresolved Grief', p. 132.

61. P. Boss and D. Carnes, 'The Myth of Closure', *Family Process*, 51, 2012, pp. 456–69.

62. One referee suggested a link with therapeutic research on 'family scripts': J. Byng-Hall, 'The Family Script: A Useful Bridge between Theory and Practice', *Journal of Family Therapy*, 7, 1985, pp. 301–5. Our suggestions might well destabilize the 'safe scripts' that some families hold that are referenced in this article, but in productive ways.

63. Wayland, 'Missing Persons Australian', p. 13.

64. 'Holding the door open' so that the absent missing may one day *speak back* is complicated by the fact that no legal powers exist currently to enable families to manage and maintain a missing person's affairs on the basis that they *might return*. The only option available to families is through the newly revised 'Presumption of Death Act'. This is where families negotiate legal processes to obtain a 'presumption of death' legal order so that a grant of probate might be applied for the missing person's estate to be dealt with by the family. The charity Missing People along with the MP Ann Coffey, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults are also campaigning for a legal guardianship bill to enable relatives to cope with the complicated financial and practical affairs of a relative who has been missing for a short period of time (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-for-missing-persons-gets-royal-assent>).

65. E. Sigvardsdotter, 'Presenting Absent Bodies: Undocumented Persons Coping and Resisting in Sweden', *cultural geographies*, 20, 2013, pp. 523–39.

66. Bondi, 'Embodied Knowledge'.

67. Boss, 'Unresolved Grief', p. 132.

68. Edkins, 'Persons and Politics', p. 280.

69. O. Stevenson, H. Parr, P. Woolnough and N. Fyfe, *Geographies of Missing People: Processes, Experiences and Responses* (Glasgow: The University of Glasgow, 2013), p. 99.
70. Bondi, 'Embodied Knowledge'.
71. Anderson and Smith, 'Emotional Geographies', pp. 7–10.
72. S. Pile, 'Emotion and Affect in Recent Human Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35(1), 2010, pp. 5–20.
73. Harrison, 'The Other', p. 169.
74. G. Pratt, *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). In discussing the absent dead, Maddrell, 'Absence-Presence', p. 511, notes that 'each memorial, as text, is in dialogue with its audience, asserting the right of the deceased to be remembered'. We also might be similarly prompted to think about witness talk about the absent missing as a route through which there is a right to be remembered.
75. P. Harrison, 'Oscillations', in Book Review Symposium – Geraldine Pratt's 'Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love', *AntipodeFoundation.org*, 2013, <http://antipodefoundation.org/2013/05/07/families-apart/>.
76. Walters, 'Bereavement and Biography', p. 20.
77. P. Harrison, 'Oscillations'.

Author biographies

Hester Parr is Reader in Geographical and Earth Science, Glasgow University and is PI for the ESRC 'Geographies of missing people' research project. A fuller profile of both authors can be found at www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk

Olivia Stevenson is Research Fellow for the project, also at Glasgow University.