

Hope in the liminal space

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A review

- Hope is a constant thread in the public and private explorations of the experience of having someone missing yet we know little about its role and function.
- Within the narratives of the left behind, the media reports on those who are lost, the service providers in offering support and the law enforcement agencies assisting in the searching, hope is an undercurrent that offers respite to the ambiguity of not knowing.
- The literature demonstrates a disconnect between hope in a bereavement context and hope in an ambiguous loss paradigm.
- So what do we know about hope? How does it exist in the liminal space between the missing person being both here and gone (Boss, 1999)?

Hope and bereavement

- Worden (2008), Neimeyer (2010) Cutcliffe (1998), Nekolaichuk, Jevne and Macquire (1999) and Perselz (1999) refer to hope as an outward expression that a person may demonstrate in response to the ways in which they survive a loss. Hope for the future and hope for a time where they might reach equilibrium in relation to how they cope with that loss.
- Hope was also explored as a response or a reaction to an event or trauma. The bereavement literature, that identified hope, did not explore it in the sense of it being a concrete belief, rather it was viewed as a sign of an individual's investment in the future. The person was able to demonstrate the capacity to move on from the loss and begin living again through enacting a sense of hopefulness.

Hope and missingness

- The literature that identifies the experience of hope for those left behind when someone is missing does not necessarily relate it to the persons future, or investment in themselves, but more an externalised hope for the physical return of the missing person.
- Cutcliffe (2004) explores it as a 'non static state of hope'.
- Clark (2007) explores a trajectory of hope that changes over time dependent on the circumstances of the disappearance and time since reporting. She goes on to state that 'hope provides a certain order and direction that undergirds individuals as they test reality'
- Significant missing persons events like September 11 epitomise the role of holding on to hope in a context of what might be possible. Edkins (2011) described the collection of images of missing people as 'multiple bundles of hope'
- Ai, Cascio, Santangelo and Evens-Campbell (2005) refer to hope as a 'close cognate of optimism' that link together with a desired expectation – namely that the missing person is found.

The flexibility of hope

- Clarke (2007), Wayland (2007), Boss (2002), Jones, Zagacki and Lewis (2007) and Hogben (1999) refer to hope as an ongoing flexible process where the concepts of hope are revised while the person is missing.
- Glasscock (2011) articulated that families who 'vacillated between hope and despair in their search could act out elements of the dual process model' where they could oscillate between acknowledging the loss as well as thinking of how their lives might move forward.
- The literature has a tendency to refer to hope but then not establish a definition of the term- it doesn't tell us exactly what people are hoping for, whether it is a survival tool and how missing and despair might exist together.

So can hope and missing co-exist?

- Duggleby (2009) and Bland (2002) recognise that hope has multiple definitions and that its importance should not be understated.
- Hope seems to be a logical emotion attached to the action of having someone missing.
- There was no differentiation between positive hope and false hope in the literature but it was viewed as a unifying emotion that brought people in the community together for the 'desire that the person will return' (Waring, 2001)
- In a counselling sense Edey and Jevne (2003) noted that there might be some reluctance to introduce hope in a context of loss for fear that it might introduce 'unrealistic hope' opening up the exploration that hope has both positive and detrimental connotations when living long term with not knowing.
- Hogben (2006) explains that by holding on to hope people may unnecessarily engage in a future of 'suspended present' and that hope may delay the focus on the fact that the missing person might not return.

Where to from here?

- Hope may be a safety net, a place that provides families with the space to think about positive outcomes, it may offer something for people to hold on to as a way of living through their loss – a sense of developing some personal mastery to cope with the ambiguity as noted by Boss (2007)
- There may be a creation of a mutual sense of hope between families, the media and the community when we share that someone is missing.
- The social constructions of hope are what I am aiming to uncover in my PhD research – to understand what the individual and community narratives of hope are, to test whether hope is tied to the need to have something solid to attach oneself to when there are no answers to the questions posed and to test whether or not the existence of hope, as with the bereavement literature, is an indicator of a persons survival of their loss or if it forces a person to become frozen more so to the time that the person vanished.

For more information:

For more information, or to discuss your interest in the study, contact Ms. Sarah Wayland 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

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