Multiple Missing: Behavioural Consistencies in Repeat Missing Adults

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Background

• Despite the negative consequences associated with missing incidents, many adults engage in this behaviour on more than one occasion.

• Results presented in the previous presentation indicate that the prevalence rate for repeat missing behaviour in adults is as high as 51.6%.

• This suggests that over half of the adult missing population will have been missing before and/or are at risk of being so again.
The results of this analysis highlighted a number of variables which appeared to be associated with both single and repeat missing cases.

Previous research also indicates that a vast number of factors may also contribute towards missing behaviour:

Mental health, self-harm, suicidal thoughts/intentions, relationship problems, worries about life, unemployment, financial difficulties and bereavement to name just a few...

(Payne, 1995; Shalev Green et al., 2013; Stevenson et al., 2013; Bonny, et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2018).
Background

• Whilst it is clear that such factors are largely present in those who are reported missing, what is not clear is whether there is a causal relationship and if so, in what direction?

• Are missing incidents the result of active mental health problems? Or is the decline in mental wellbeing triggered by the missing incidents?

• It is therefore, unclear whether such issues continue or manifest in the same manner when we consider peoples lived experiences of being a missing person.
Background

• It is apparent that there is a distinct lack of dedicated research which attempts to understand the experiences of missing individuals

• Only two studies have attempted to speak directly to adults who have been reported missing, employing various techniques in the process (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003; Stevenson et al., 2013).

• Despite such attempts, no specific research has been conducted to date, that focuses on the experiences of repeat missing individuals
Research Aims

• The overall aim of the study was to give adult missing persons the opportunity to tell the story of their missing incidents for the first time.

• The study focused specifically on the repeat nature of the missing episodes in order to increase our understandings of the events which led up to each incident as well as their experiences whilst away and the circumstances surrounding their return.

• This exploratory, qualitative study comprised in-depth individual interviews with twelve adults who had been reported as missing to Police Scotland on more than one occasion.
• Overall, **666** letters were sent out for the first division, whilst a further **502** were mailed in association with the second. A total of **1,168** individuals were invited to take part in an interview and **12** took part.

• Low response rates are very common in this field of research due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

• Stevenson et al. (2013) obtained a response rate of around 1% and this study aimed to use this as a benchmark for its own recruitment.

• We noted a similar trend which is positive as final recruitment figures was just above this figure.
Table 1 – Details of participants and their missing incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Number of Missing Incidents (approx.)</th>
<th>Time Since Last Missing Incident (at point of interview)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1 (p1)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2 (p2)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3 (p2)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4 (p4)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5 (p5)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6 (p6)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7 (p7)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8 (p8)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9 (p9)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10 (p10)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11 (p11)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12 (p12)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews

• All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed shortly afterwards.

• A grounded theory analysis was adopted by the researchers due to the lack of existing theory within the field of missing persons.

• Grounded theory focuses on the systematic collection of data that allows for new theories to be formulated. Such theories are fully immersed within the context that the data was collected allowing for new patterns and trends in social processes to emerge (Noble & Mitchell, 2016).

• The current study aimed to use an abbreviated grounded theory as the full version was unfortunately not feasible due to the difficult nature of contacting participants through Police Scotland.
Interviews: Themes

- Missing Incidents
  - Childhood Stability
    - Fraught Relations
    - Transience
  - Mental Health
    - Diagnosis & Treatment
    - Suicidality
  - Personal Stressors
    - Acute Triggers
    - Chronic Stressors
  - Proclivity for Escape
    - Thoughts of escape
    - Continuous
  - Responses to Missing
    - Immediate
    - Long-term
Childhood Stability:

- Participants discussed a number of factors which they deemed to be important however the majority of these appeared to be somewhat negative events. Fraught relationships within the family environment as well as a transient nature of their childhood, highlighted the dysfunctionality of their younger years.

- Physical and sexual abuse were noted as well as an issue with sense of belonging – essentially, interviewees appeared to grow up immersed in their parents problems and subsequently had no strong ties or connections to a particular place.
"My mum hid the problem very well. I remember coming out the bathroom one day, and my father was in the wardrobe. I saw these bottles and he got really annoyed with me and I couldn’t think why but it was because he thought he had been found out but I just thought it was normal" – p3.

"I went to 6 primary schools over the 7 years so quite a lot of changes... so yeah I think as well that that didn’t help because you don’t make friendships or lasting relationships, you don’t really have extended family support”– p8

"my sister basically brought me up because my mum was out all the time drinking and everything... and my dad wasn’t much better. It was basically my sister who brought me up, looked after me and everything It was a long, long time ago, but I respect her a lot for that” – p5.

My mum didn’t take any interest in school or anything and didn’t encourage us so I didn’t do well at school. I left when I was 16. I didn’t do anything at first, I did a training scheme for a year and then I got a job” – p6.
Mental Health

• All participants who were interviewed had received a diagnosis for at least one mental health condition throughout their adult years and believed this to have a significant impact on their lives, often seeing it as a contributing factor towards their missing behaviour.

• Mental health conditions which were mentioned included: depression (n=5), schizophrenia (n=3), personality disorders (n=3), bipolar (n=2), OCD (n=1), acute psychosis (n=1) and eating disorders (n=1).

• Active symptoms were not perceived to be the direct cause of missing behaviour instead issues around not understanding their condition and misdiagnosis were discussed instead.
"I've never had a diagnosis. They've said it might be depression, but I've read things about people being bi-polar, I mean I could have something like that, I don't know" – p5.

"I think the problem as well is understanding what's going on in your head" – p9.

"I get [my medication] a week at a time and I've got to sign for it so that they see that I'm taking it, although I could probably not take it...I go through a phase of rebellion and it's like this control thing, I think this is out of my control and I don't like it so sometimes I get rebellious and stop taking it" – p3.

"I never think about missing. Only when I'm having a [psychotic] episode...it never enters my head at all otherwise" – p6.
Suicide

• Suicidal thoughts and intentions were mentioned by a number of participants and for some this appeared to act as the initial driving force behind their missing behaviour.

• Others never directly left with this suicidal thoughts or intentions in mind but it became increasingly more prominent in their thoughts as time went on.

• Interestingly, all participants who mentioned the involvement of suicidality within their missing incidents went on to discuss the fact that they believed their suicidal behaviour to be a last resort in their need for help, with many stating that they it was not their time to go.
“You see it was still just the vicious circle, it never ends... I just wanted to go, I’d just had enough... I just had the plan and I felt quite serene, content” – p3.

“I don’t know why but I ended up on a cliff in the car and I really just wanted to drive off of it but I couldn’t. I thought what if I drive off and I survive, and I just couldn’t do it. I had gone to the cliff a few times within that two or three weeks” – p9.

“I thought to myself, if I wasn’t meant to be here why did all of these things go wrong. I think to myself, it’s not my time to go, I’ve got a reason to be here but I’m still trying to find out what that is” – p10
Personal Stressors

• Participants unsurprisingly spoke about a number of personal stressors which they had experienced throughout their adult lives.

• Common themes emerged which appeared to be centered around instability, where participants discussed their living arrangements, family and relationship problems as well as financial struggles and bereavement.

• All of these factors appeared to be somewhat acute in nature serving as immediate triggers to missing episodes whilst other issues such as historic/continuing abuse, alcoholism and medical issues were highlighted as more chronic, on-going contributors.
Personal Stressors

“I felt guilty that he was dead and I don’t know why but I did... I turned 21 and I felt really guilty for celebrating it, like why are people wishing me happy birthday when my granddad has just died” – p9.

“I was stressed out because, my husband told me that we were in financial difficulty and I panicked and I thought about when I was young, living with my mum and how we struggled and that’s what triggered it off” – p6.

“my family relationships had broken down, I was living with my sister and it wasn’t working, I didn’t want to be there, they were struggling to cope with me” – p8.

“I went back to my friend’s house...I stayed at my mums... it was my grans house... my mum and dad’s house, obviously it was their house” – p9.
Proclivity for Escape

• Participants spoke at length about their need to escape. Some participants directly stated that they had experienced active thoughts of actually wanting to leave their current environment behind i.e. deliberate missing behaviour, others reported a subtler form of escapism i.e. a historically learned need to remove themselves temporarily from uncomfortable or overwhelming situations.

• Participants also discussed their lack of achievement from their missing incidents, which could have perhaps prompted the repeat nature of their missing behaviour as they sought to escape time and time again.
“if I do think that I’ve had enough and I’m wanting to escape, it’s through to the bedroom, I don’t let anybody in, I’ve seen me go two weeks, with no food” – p3.

“I felt like I just had to run away from everything that I was no good to anybody, I had very low self-esteem, I had to escape one way or another” – p9.

“I would look at the different timetables, and the screens, I would just picked a place randomly and go there, I didn’t think about the costs so much, just bought the ticket” – p1.

“I decided to go to the French Alps but again, just to escape when I should have really dealt with the problems” – p9.
After location, all participants discussed their return home and the vast majority made reference to how difficult this was. For many, their missing incidents were the culmination of a number of stressors building up as well as an inability to cope with their deteriorating mental health.

Some of the responses that missing individuals received appeared to be immediate i.e. fragile family relations, lack of trust, embarrassment/anger.

Others were more prolonged, on-going responses i.e. distinct lack of help or signposting to support organisations for being a missing person.
“the first while after I returned, I had someone there every time I went to the toilet, someone watching me 24/7” – p7.

“It’s the embarrassment really of them knowing, I just didn’t want to burden them with my issues” – p10.

“I thought, how dare my husband go and do that and I think the shock as well of this policeman coming up and knowing my name”, p3.

“There’s no help out there for me, I’ve asked for help and everything but it’s just like getting a kick in the teeth, there’s no help out there” – p5.
Conclusions

• It appears as though repeat missing behaviour may occur in a cyclical manner.

• Essentially, this cycle begins with childhood problems, which caused significant personal stressors in adulthood.

• These stressors subsequently impact the individual’s personal mental health i.e. ‘predisposition + stressor = condition’.

• This combination then prompts thoughts of escape and after the onset of a specific trigger, which may or may not be explicit, missing behaviour is engaged in as an outlet/coping mechanism.

• A problematic return however, results in increased tension within the family environment and the fact that the initial stressors still remained after return appears only to exasperate the situation further, thus resulting in an increased likelihood of the individual engaging in missing behaviour again.
Conclusions

• Newly published research by the Missing People charity (2019) has detailed the importance of a safe return home for missing children and young people – an important tool in deciphering ongoing risks and harm that have been experienced, whilst simultaneously providing a unique opportunity to offer help.

• It is not currently mandatory to offer return home interviews to missing adults and so a number of important information which may aid location practices in future remains uncaptured by the authorities and the opportunity to support a vulnerable group is completely overlooked.

• We remain hopeful that the findings from the interviews conducted, will have the cope to contribute towards current and future preventative efforts as results can potentially enhance the knowledge of those involved with regards to the salient and pertinent issues to look out for.
Thank You!

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