

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Title: 'You are going to drop the ball on this ...' using siblings' stories to inform better interprofessional practice when someone goes missing

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a part of a larger piece of exploratory, qualitative research. A brief literature review precedes verbatim quotations from accounts of siblings' experiences of police. The accounts were gained by in-depth interviews with adult siblings of nine long-term missing people. Participant stories reveal the quality of the investigation and the manner of service as influencing their emotional well-being in the short and longer term. Findings cannot be extrapolated but indicate potential areas for future research. The need for support from human services workers to complement the role of police is recognised as is the important role of non-government support and advocacy services.

Keywords

Missing people, missing, interprofessional collaboration, advocacy, siblings, loss and grief

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Introduction

This paper discusses the role of police and other human service workers in responding to cases involving missing people. The data are drawn from a larger exploratory, qualitative study about the experience of siblings of long-term missing people in Australia. In 2009, Australia reached a population 22 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). It has a federation of six states and two territories with nine legal systems, comprising eight state or territory systems and one federal system (ABS, 1997). Each legal system or jurisdiction is supported by one police service.

The larger study, from which this paper was drawn, was undertaken as a way to explore and better understand how “missingness” affects family members and to identify better ways of responding when someone goes missing (see Clark, Warburton and Tilse, 2009). In this paper, the literature review draws mainly on publications from the USA, UK and Australia, using peer-reviewed and ‘grey’ literature as the body of research about missingness is so limited. Missingness is a concept that appears in the literature (Finkelhor, Asdigian & Hotaling, 1996). It is a useful, if not an elegant term, to refer to the state of being missing and the issues that are linked to being missing. This paper reviews the literature, and then presents an analysis of the views expressed by siblings using verbatim quotations. It suggests the impact of contact with police is more far reaching than perhaps appreciated and identifies areas in which police and human services practice might be improved.

Background

The issue of missingness has been seen mainly as a policing issue when there is demonstrable concern for an individual's well-being (Henderson & Henderson, 1998). While it may be a policing issue, it is not necessarily considered a policing

priority in Australia or in other common law countries (Hedges, 2004; National Centre for Police Excellence, 2004; Kiernan & Henderson, 2002; Henderson & Henderson, 1998). Receiving a missing person report is a common occurrence for police in Australia (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008; Henderson & Henderson, 1998) and in other countries such as the USA and UK (Newiss, 1999; Rogers, 1985) and poses serious challenges for police services in assessing risk, prioritising and responding appropriately (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008; Office of Police Integrity, 2006; Blackmore, Bossomaier, Foy & Thomson, 2005).

Research shows that most people return home themselves or are located by friends and family with minimal involvement from police services (Hammer, Finkelhor, Sedlak & Porcellini, 2004; Henderson & Henderson, 1998; Hirschel & Lab, 1988).

However, deciding which cases need an immediate and protracted police response has been recognised as a critical issue for policing (Newiss, 1999, 2006; Blakemore et al., 2005). Currently, the tools available to police to differentiate between low and high-risk presentations are not well developed. Newiss (1999) suggests that processing missing persons' cases and decision-making about those that need more urgent and intensive responses can be challenging and the potential for media involvement is always high with consequent scrutiny of police actions. Tarling and Burrows (2004, p16) noted, after examining a random sample of over one thousand cases, "the variety of cases and the rarity of adverse outcomes makes it difficult to develop statistical risk prediction scores as an aid to decision making".

More recently the quality of police investigations has become the focus of attention, highlighting the difficulty police experience with decision-making in cases where someone is reported missing (Newiss, 2006, 2004; Palmer, 2005; Tarling & Burrows, 2004). In addition, there are concerns for people left behind if police

investigations are not satisfactory (Newiss, 1999). Both in Australia and overseas, police receive criticism about their role in missing persons' cases, from a range of sources. These include family members who are searching (Clark, Warburton & Tilse, 2009; Holmes, 2008; Swanton, Wyles, Lincoln, Wilson & Hill, 1988), and recommendations from a number of reports and inquiries (e.g. Palmer, 2005; Bichard, 2004; Abernathy, 2003). Police services also review their own practices and acknowledge areas needing improvement (Office of Police Integrity, 2006; Hedges, 2002, 2004; Kiernan & Henderson, 2002). Several studies and reports have focussed on ways of revising police policy and practice to achieve improvement in the handling of missing person cases (Palmer, 2005; Hedges, 2004; Henderson & Henderson, 1998; Newiss, 1999; Hanfland, Keppel & Weis, 1997).

In Australia, Henderson and Henderson (1998) noted community satisfaction with police working on missing person cases was consistent with satisfaction with police services generally. Where improvement was identified as being needed it related to four main areas of service delivery: taking appropriate or efficient action, making contact and providing feedback, attitude and interpersonal approach and timeliness (Henderson & Henderson, 1998).

Some writers suggest police have a generally negative view of some people who go missing and at least in the past, have been uncertain about the appropriate extent of their involvement in matters that were often not clearly viewed as related to criminal justice. Someone going missing may be more likely to be seen by police, as a situation affecting dysfunctional, marginalised families, needing more a social, rather than a policing response (Abernathy, 2003). Partington (2004) suggested it is arguable that this perception has changed little within the wider community, and that the view of the majority, with a few exceptions, is that those people who go missing

are "natural victims", troubled and with poor futures. From a policing perspective Hedges (2002) asserts, "[m]issing person enquiries are not always dealt with as effectively as they might be and are not given the degree of importance they deserve" (p23). Acknowledging the social aspects of the circumstances in which people go missing makes even greater demands of police resources that exceed the span of responsibility and expertise of police services (Kiernan & Henderson, 2002).

Hedges (2002) identified several areas for improvement in missing person investigations in the UK, if police services were to achieve a more consistent national response to missing persons' issues. These included prioritising the importance given to missing persons' investigations, including improved search processes and management of sightings, based on the standpoint that every missing person report might represent a major crime. He suggested adequate training, more effective supervision by line managers, clarity in roles and responsibilities, improved review processes and recording practices, and a greater focus on family liaison and support was needed (Hedges, 2002).

The release of the UK Bichard Inquiry Report (2004) which identified significant "errors, omissions, failures and shortcomings" (p1) in the conduct of the investigation of the abduction (and subsequent murder) of two schoolgirls, included comment about the level of co-operation, standard and accuracy of record keeping and information-sharing in the investigation. This has served to emphasise a host of issues affecting quality management of police investigations in the UK. The report emphasised the imperative for a response to the issue of missing people to involve a co-ordinated response and collaborative effort across government as well as across police and welfare sectors (Bichard, 2004). In essence, the Palmer Report in Australia makes similar comments about case management.

The Australian *Inquiry into the Circumstances of Immigration Detention of Cornelia Rau*, which resulted in the Palmer Report, was critical of the capacity of government services to provide integrated, co-ordinated service responses (Palmer, 2005). While the focus of the Palmer Report was principally on the Australian Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, many comments made reflected across all aspects of Australian governments' service delivery. It highlighted the lack of a functional national missing person database and the absence of a national missing persons' policy to provide effective national recording and search capability (Palmer, 2005). While progress has been made, the adequacy of data collection remains an issue in Australia (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008).

Research also suggests that it is important not to consider just the police response to people who are missing, but to consider the interaction between the characteristics of the cases and police operations (Maxson, Little & Klein, 1988). While this research is dated it raised some worthy considerations. Maxson et al. (1988) made the interesting observation that the way police view people who go missing in relation to their responsibilities coloured police responses and that those responses were also influenced by community resources and characteristics. They suggested police have three primary functions, peacekeeping or maintaining order, crime fighting and community service. While police are occupied with peacekeeping they are pre-occupied with crime-fighting (Rubin 1974 p 132 cited in Maxson, 1988), so activities that take them away from roles they consider as more central may contribute to a sense of role deprivation and a perception of poor fit between the task and their role.

The study from which this paper is drawn sought to investigate the experience of a sibling going missing and to establish how systems may be improved for those affected. This is a small Australian study which highlights issues that are common to those affected, beyond differences in legal processes across countries.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are part of a larger study undertaken by the author in Australia to satisfy requirements of a PhD at the University of Queensland. The aim of the study was to give voice to siblings of long-term missing people as their views are largely absent from the literature. It focussed on siblings in early adulthood at the time their sibling went missing. The study aimed to inform understanding and improve service responses when someone goes missing. This exploratory, qualitative study comprised in-depth individual interviews with nine adults who had a sibling listed as missing with Australian police services in several jurisdictions and whose sibling had been missing long-term. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the experience of a sibling of a long-term missing person?
2. How does the sibling perceive the impact on themselves, their family and peer relationships?
3. What has happened that has influenced (positively or negatively) their ways of coping?

The sample achieved in this study was a non-probability sample. The sample was identified from police service records and does not claim to be representative of typical missing persons' cases in Australia. Findings from this study cannot be

generalised. The decision to use police records was made as all police jurisdictions in Australia share an agreed definition of the term 'missing'.

Ethical, practical and police operational issues were influential in the design of this research. For example, the Australian police definition of long-term missing is sixty days. In this research twelve months was used as a working definition to avoid interfering with ongoing police investigations, and to avoid being prematurely intrusive with family members who had experienced an unexpected loss and who were likely to be distressed by the circumstance and ambiguity of their recent loss. The sample size reflected the number of gatekeepers to accessing this population, and the vulnerability of the population. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Queensland Police Service and the University of Queensland and the research was conducted in strict accordance with the standards required. Ethics committees represented formal gatekeepers. Other gatekeepers included the Police Liaison Officer who reviewed potential participants and acted as gatekeeper by identifying cases that could not be contacted due to operational issues and by specifying the form of contact. Informal gatekeepers included parents and siblings who were influential in the process as they facilitated or blocked contact with potential participants.

A list of missing siblings of potential participants was generated from police records based on the date of birth of the missing person, and the criteria that they had been missing more than twelve months and less than ten years. All missing people aged 30 years or under were included on the list, with the assumption made that this group were most likely to generate a sample of participants within the period of emerging adulthood (about 19-35 years) at the time their siblings went missing. Police records did not consistently record family details, so it was not possible to be certain whether a missing person had siblings.

Twenty-nine missing people were identified through this process. The list was discussed with the Police Liaison Officer and revised, with sixteen cases withdrawn after consideration of ethical and legal constraints. Thirteen names of missing people remained. To confirm and ensure accuracy of contact details, the details recorded on police records were cross referenced with the telephone directory. All those who expressed interest in taking part were interviewed. Two additional participants were interviewed from other jurisdictions. The final number of participants interviewed was nine.

Participants were aged between 24-33 years at the time of interview, seven participants were female and two were male. Eight participants were biological siblings and one was an adopted sibling. Seven of the missing siblings were male and two were female. Four participants lived in large cities, four in provincial towns and one in a remote location. No Indigenous Australian was recruited. Table 1 describes the participants and the siblings who went missing.

[Insert Table 1 here]

All participants were interviewed twice, with the second interview conducted within 3-7 days of the initial interview. The two interview process sought to show recognition of the complexity of the stories, concern for the well-being of participants and to promote methodological rigour. The interviews included questions regarding the participants' relationships with their siblings, how they described their family before (and since) their sibling went missing, the circumstances in which their sibling went missing, how they responded or coped with what had happened and how they made sense of the experience. Comments were made about police services in describing their experiences prior to their sibling going missing, at the time their

sibling went missing and subsequently. Participants were not specifically asked about their contact with police services, rather issues about helping systems were identified through coding processes and analysis.

The interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed. The data were analysed in order to identify what themes were common or exceptional across participant experiences. Organisation, coding and analysis of the data were facilitated by the use of QSR NVivo® 2.0 software. The researcher had a deep engagement with the data, having undertaken all the interviews checked all transcripts for accuracy against audio-tapes and having coded and re-coded the data as themes and patterns emerged.

Attention was paid to ensuring the rigour and trustworthiness of the research, with any biases that threatened credibility considered. Drawing on Padgett (1998) a range of strategies were employed to address potential sources of bias including prolonged engagement and member checking, ensuring an audit trail, independent coding by a researcher from a related discipline, consideration of similarities and differences in data, as well as the decision to draw a sample from police records rather than rely on self selection.

In presenting the findings from the study, the researcher has been careful to represent all participants and the range of views expressed, especially when the view expressed by a participant was different. Pseudonyms have been used in reporting direct quotations to promote anonymity. Due to the relatively small number of long-term missing people in Australia and the high level of media exposure of some circumstances in which siblings have gone missing some details have been omitted in presenting the findings to ensure anonymity. For the sake of clarity, siblings who participated in the study are referred to as 'participants' and their missing siblings as

‘siblings’. Siblings went missing in a number of jurisdictions so any comments about police, therefore, relate to the role of police rather than any particular police service.

Findings

It was clear from the analysis of participants’ experiences that they see the role of police as pivotal in finding out what has happened. Participants all saw police as having the necessary legitimate authority to investigate and obtain information from a range of sources. Participants’ level of involvement with police differed significantly, with some participants in direct contact with police and others having no contact at all. Most participants said one of their parents’ kept in periodic contact with police. Nevertheless, all participants formed a view about aspects of police involvement.

Participants reported both positive interactions with police and were critical about some aspects of police involvement. They also acknowledged exceptional support by police. Two primary themes emerged which were, the perceived quality of police investigations and the interpersonal approach in the way the service was provided. Firstly, concerns about the quality of the investigation are elaborated.

Quality of the investigation

There was a range of views expressed by participants about the quality of police investigations. Some participants expressed satisfaction, while others expressed concerns about the quality of the investigation undertaken. The concerns related to the timeliness and adequacy of police actions.

When their sibling first went missing, participants suggested their expectations were high that police would take all possible steps to establish what had happened. Some participants felt their expectations were not met, as police seemed reluctant to take seriously concerns expressed for their sibling’s safety and this

seemed to influence the priority given to beginning any investigation. Some participants believed they did not receive accurate information, such as the waiting time before a report may be made. As Ben and Nathan explained:

It just makes you really cranky and bitter, and it just makes you, you know, they just don't care, you know. Here's our flesh and blood and they just don't give a rat's, because it's just a job and it's just a girl who's gone missing, of her own accord. So why would we [police] waste our time and bother trying to find her when she's obviously done it by herself. She'll come back when she's good and ready, and he told us that, you know, [...]. Ben

Yeah, he'd been, been listed as missing and the police had finally let that period of time go, it's like 48 hours or 24 hours or something to be able to actually now list him as missing. [...]. Nathan

Some were extremely frustrated with what appeared to be a lack of urgency demonstrated by police in gathering information to progress an investigation. At the same time, participants felt they were almost entirely reliant on police to progress search efforts. For example:

*...and so Mum told the police that and then it took another two weeks for the police to interview this guy. Like everything was so incredibly slow! [...]
Every day they don't do something could be the day that he needs our help, you know. It just was horrible. Wendy*

Um... I actually would have preferred... I didn't really feel like the police were very, um involved in the situation. A lot of the sort of ideas that we had to follow, follow up on, they wouldn't really be very responsive to. Nathan

One participant experienced particular difficulty because there was confusion about who had responsibility for the investigation of her sibling's case. Beth recalled her sibling's employer was unhelpful and she recalled her family felt they *would sort of block us a lot.*

[...] but see, if Dad rings the [employer], the [employer] will say it's a police case. If Dad rings the police, the police will say it's an [employer's] case. We've never really had any help from anywhere. No one's ever really wanted to touch it. The only person that was ever interested even was [the specialist unit police officer]. Beth

Beliefs that the police responses were ad hoc and *not systematic* [Ben] were reported. Ben felt it was only through being *very forceful and persistent* [Ben] that any progress was made. As long as three years after her sibling went missing, Judy and her family still discussed concerns about the adequacy of the police response and continued to feel *disillusioned and disappointed that the police didn't do enough searching at the time*.

Some participants were initially shocked and frightened at the implications of a limited police response and then they became frustrated and angry. Some had no contact with police, and some believed later that what they had been told, at the time, was incorrect.

It was actually lies [that the police had completed interviews]. And we only later on found all that out that they actually hadn't at all and it was only because by chance [another police officer] had actually driven to this boy's house[and the boy said]....., "How come no one ever spoke to us?"
Beth

...I said, "They didn't even interview me." Now what if I was some deranged sister who had huge sibling rivalry issues, they didn't even question me, and Dad said, "I know, they didn't even question me." And in some ways that might seem weird that we would WANT them to question us but if they didn't question US, what else were they doing? Other people that they should have been questioning, they weren't. They just seemed incredibly slack, and we were really.... [...]. Wendy

On the other hand, those participants who perceived the police investigation as systematic and thorough were comforted by the belief that all that could be done was being done to locate their siblings. For example:

...and we walked into a room and he said, "This is all [his] files, all his information." He had a whiteboard with '[a police operation codename]' on it which is [my brother's] case and it was the sliding whiteboards and there's like pages and pages and pages of people [...]. So even though it was pretty sad to see, it was really good to know and satisfying that they were really getting into it and trying to find out what was going on. Stephanie

It was important for the police response to be as transparent as possible and to actively maintain communication and liaison with family members.

In summary, participants reported they placed a great deal of importance on police responses when their siblings went missing. It was critical that the approach taken by police was motivated and systematic. When responses by police were perceived to be slow, ad hoc or inadequate, participants expressed a high level of distress and extreme frustration about the quality of the investigation, and the implications for their siblings and their families. When family members were kept informed by police, and investigative efforts were perceived as thorough, participants reported less frustration and a greater sense of reassurance that all that could be done was being done.

Interpersonal approach

In human service professions (e.g. medicine, social work, counselling) relationships are frequently identified as the cornerstone of effective interventions. Self awareness and a capacity for reflection are attributes important to developing the interpersonal skills needed to negotiate relationships with people made vulnerable by circumstances beyond their control (Harms, 2007). Empathy as well as the capacity to suspend judgment and engage genuinely, to listen effectively and provide and clarify information with sensitivity are some of the skills of an effective interpersonal approach (Harms, 2007).

In the analysis of data, most participants commented on the views they had formed about the way they experienced interactions with police. Together with having confidence that the police investigation was competently undertaken the officer's interpersonal approach was reported as influencing the emotional well-being of family members. Notably, participants who perceived police officers as supportive and helpful also expressed satisfaction with the quality of the police investigation.

From the analysis, the two key issues about an officer's interpersonal approach that emerged were sensitivity to the circumstances in which their siblings had gone missing and clear communication. Participants reported that some times police became aware of information such as the extent of their sibling's mental health problems, abuse or drug use which family members found hard to accept. The capacity to sensitively and clearly negotiate this difficult territory was not consistently demonstrated.

One participant highlighted the general point that police, of course, were unlikely to be as motivated as family members to find someone who was missing. His experience suggested police dealt with cases impersonally, with little appreciation for the anguish experienced by family members. Other participants also suggested that some police were dismissive of their siblings and had labelled them as problematic. As Ben and Judy explained:

[...] And he came down and interviewed me two weeks after she disappeared and he gave me the impression that he just thought my sister was a fruitcake and that she'd come back when she was ready, and I put it straight to him, I said, 'You are going to drop the ball on this because you just think my sister is crazy'. Ben

[...] And I said no, well, I think the fatal mistake we made there was telling the police that he had a history of suicide [attempts] whereas to them they sort of might have categorised that as, okay, this person's gone missing and for some reason, I mean, I don't know why they treat it any differently [...]. Judy

Some participants were critical of the level of sensitivity police demonstrated and felt they were reluctant to talk to family members or conveyed mixed messages to family members about calling them. Wendy and Beth said:

[...] Dad didn't want to call them. He said we can't make a pest of ourselves, we need their help. And I was like, the first day after he went missing, I was like surely somebody's got news, you know. "No, we haven't heard anything." And then the police said, "Oh look, with this weather, no news is good news because bodies tend to bob up to the surface in weather like this" [...] and that was just horrendous for us. Wendy

Yeah. He [specialist unit police officer] was really positive but really human, but not positive like “oh yes, we will find him.” He never gave us false hope, none of that, ever. He just really did try, and every time we talked to him, he didn’t make us feel like we were being annoying because some of them did. Some of them just wanted to like not even talk to us at all. Beth

Confidence in the police investigation was undermined by the way information was conveyed, or by police unwillingness or inability to discuss information or explain what, if anything, had happened to progress the investigation. Conversely, when police were accessible, suspended judgment, and took the time to listen in their communication with family members they were regarded well. Some participants considered police working in specialist missing person units had a better understanding of the issues family members were facing and were more appropriately responsive to their needs. Ben and Stephanie explained these situations:

[...] He dealt with this all the time and that’s why I think it’s important for specially trained police to be in the police stations. He’d been there before, he’d dealt with families before, he knew our emotions and, [...]. So he was very supportive because that was his job, he dealt with missing people, whereas the people, the detectives in the police station, they deal with everything. Ben

So yeah, and then I went down to [town where sibling went missing] with Mum and Dad and we stayed down there [...] and we visited the policeman that was doing the investigations, [...], and he was a lovely man. I don’t think he believed Mum at first, you know, “[my brother’s] a 30-year old male, he can do whatever he sort of wants” but when Mum told history of [my brother] and.... Stephanie

Most participants talked about the need for more contact between police and family members, especially in the initial period after their siblings were listed as missing. They were clear that difficulty in contacting police and perceived unwillingness by police to share information contributed to intense feelings of frustration. Most participants felt aggrieved when officers were unavailable for extended periods. As Wendy explained:

[...] Or he was on ten days off. I mean, ten days was an eternity for us. And finally my mum rang and complained to a senior person and he said, “Well

look, you call me if you don't get what you need" because we really needed daily contact for a while. I really believe that. [...]. Wendy

So something to say, "[...], we haven't found anything in the last week" and then he [my father] wouldn't be... Because then he'd get upset because people wouldn't be able to ring him back [...]. He went for holidays for a few weeks and Dad was beside himself because no one could tell him anything. Taylah

Taylah acknowledged the difficulty for police having to manage contact with family members when they had no progress to report. However, maintaining ongoing contact was seen as critical to ensure family members were informed, and reassured about ongoing, systematic police involvement. Most participants found intermittent or irregular contact highly distressing, especially in the early weeks and months. However, for most participants the need for regular contact diminished over time. For example, Beth acknowledged what she perceived as *professionalism* shown by a police officer who continued to be in contact with her father more than four years after her sibling went missing and Taylah reflected on what she felt must be a dilemma for police. Beth and Taylah explained:

[...] But [he's] still really good. He still rings Dad and tries to, you know [...]. But he still does think of it, and from time to time ring us with little bits of stuff, and I think that's really... That's caring in its way. That really stands out for me that he was like that. Beth

Yeah! Then again, I don't know whether... They probably haven't got a system like that where the police officer knew what to do. They probably think I don't want to talk to this guy because I want to avoid, what do I tell him? Get over it, move on? We've got nothing else to tell you about your son. So it's a really bad position for them too. Where do they finish and hand it over to someone else? Taylah

Where police were willing to be responsive to questions and requests, participants felt more positive about interactions with police. Decisions made by police, such as inclusion or removal of photos from missing persons websites or posters, which may have been routine to police, had much greater significance for some participants. As Wendy and Beth suggested:

Yeah, and I started to do this search and I'm doing this search [on the internet] for about an hour and it was absolutely exhausting and then I saw his photo [of my brother] and it was quite a distressing photo. They've changed it now.... [...]. Wendy

I went to the police station and he wasn't on the poster any more [...]. Yeah, he's been on it for years and when we went in there and he wasn't there any more, and we thought, oh... And I know that distressed my Dad a little bit.

Beth

In summary, sensitivity to individual circumstances and a focus on more effective communication were important considerations for most participants. However, the most significant issue remained the quality of the investigation, and the importance of police taking seriously the concerns raised, and actively taking steps to establish the well-being of the person who was missing. Participants wanted a realistic appraisal of the state of an investigation. They wanted information to be shared regularly and for communication to reflect a more sensitive, collaborative approach.

Walking the tightrope blindfolded

Negotiating the period of time after their siblings went missing was experienced by participants as a time of extremely intense and prolonged frustration and powerlessness. Participants felt unable to influence or control either the reality of their sibling being missing or the way an investigation was to proceed. They were negotiating the unknown and the risks were utterly overwhelming.

Not only did some participants express concern about the lack of police response, but they were also fearful of expressing any dissatisfaction. Concerns about alienating the police by being *too pushy*, or being alienated by police because of judgments police officers may have made (e.g. their sibling not being 'worthy' or a priority because of mental health or other personal issues) about the missing person or a family member, were highly anxiety provoking for some participants. Concern

about alienating police contributed to feelings of powerlessness, frustration and loss of control.

In negotiating the tightrope, choices made were seen as having substantial consequences that may be irrevocable. Some participants found deciding what to do deeply troubling, for example when and whether to give negative feedback to police, how best to raise concerns about issues, such as perceived police inactivity in investigating their missing siblings' circumstances. The ways siblings and other family members chose to respond to the dilemmas about whether to raise concerns, with whom to speak, and what to say to address difficulties seemed to influence their level of dissatisfaction and perceived powerlessness. Concern about alienating police - a system that was seen as central to any resolution of the situation- contributed significantly to some participants' experiences of profound frustration and powerlessness.

Ben and Wendy expressed considerable frustration at the level of police involvement as they recognised they were dependent on the police to progress their siblings' investigations. Both acknowledged fear, a *very big fear* [Ben] that police may overlook or dismiss their siblings' investigations should police see them in a negative light. Others reflected this concern as well. Wendy and Ben explained:

We were scared by their lack of interest right at the beginning but we were also scared of making a pest of ourselves. We were worried that because of [my brother's] problems and maybe made a nuisance of himself just before, that they thought, oh well, he's trouble anyway and completely dismissed him. Wendy

And that was, you know, just when this [police officer] guy had it, it was just atrocious, just the way we were dealt with, you know, like being told things like, oh, you expect too much and it just doesn't happen like it does on the movies and when the case was being handed over, like we jumped up... Because he just told us that the file would be put away and then he told us that no one's going to get it.... Ben

In summary, participants' primary expectations of police were for them to become active in the search for their missing siblings. It is clear from participants' stories that the way in which police responded made a significant and lasting impression that influenced participants' emotional well-being over long periods of time, often years.

Conclusion

Siblings of missing people identified the quality of police services and the interpersonal approach (or sensitivity) of police as being critically important for family members. The data suggests the action and inaction of police and the way police provide services is impactful on family members of missing people. The data is consistent with the findings of other studies and reports outlined in the review of literature (for example Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008; Office of Police Integrity, 2006; Kiernan & Henderson, 2002; Henderson & Henderson, 1998). The complexity of the issues presented when someone goes missing needs to be better recognised and acknowledged. The scope of the role of police needs to be carefully examined in consultation with police and other professionals. The roles for other human service workers need to be shaped in consultation with police and relevant stakeholders. There is a need to address gaps in knowledge, skills and service delivery through interagency collaboration and a more concerted approach to promoting change. There exists a need to recognise the importance of communication and feedback between police and family members, and the need for police to undertake this 'liaison' role more sensitively, more frequently and more consistently across cases. These issues do not appear to be confined to Australia.

Participants in this research identified specialist missing person unit police as more appropriate in their interactions with family members. The potential to develop these human resources may need to be better recognised. The practice wisdom derived from experience may have helped to develop the sensitivity of specialist unit police to the complex issues that are presented when someone goes missing. However, it may also be necessary to recognise the boundaries of the role of police and consider the ‘philosophical resonance’ between the way police perceive their role and the tasks they are required to undertake.

The need to make connections across disciplines, between professionals such as social workers, counsellors, and psychologists to provide ongoing support and free police to undertake their primary role is overdue.

Australia lags behind the USA and UK in the growth of community-based, state and national support and advocacy services for missing people. Community-based, non-government services provide alternative points of contact when families are concerned about someone who is missing as well as opportunities for advocacy if efforts to negotiate formal systems (such as police, immigration, health) are unsuccessful. Arguably, the presence of these advocacy and interest groups contributes to a more multi-disciplinary, accountable and dynamic service system environment and may be useful additions to the service system environment in Australia and elsewhere. Currently too little attention is given to issues of missingness, too few connections are made between existing family support services and police and too little research is undertaken to fully understand the nature of the problem of missingness and how to respond. The data reported in this paper emerged from a small, exploratory study. The study has limitations due to the sample size and care needs to be taken to avoid generalising the findings. However, it does provide

some useful insights about how the role of police was viewed by siblings of missing people and their families in this study. This knowledge might be used to inform further research and to challenge complacency.

This paper suggests the complexity of issues that emerge when someone goes missing requires skills and knowledge beyond that which can reasonably be expected of police. Police connecting family members to appropriate support services by making referrals to relevant services may free police to focus on investigations and assist in achieving improved outcomes for troubled family members currently left *in limbo*.

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Notes on Contributors

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Table 1. Detail of participants and missing siblings

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age of Participant (when sibling went missing in years)	Age of Sibling (when went missing in years)	Length of Time Missing (at time of interview)	Gender of Missing Sibling	Number of Siblings in Family
Nathan	Male	22.5	18.5	5.5	Male	6
Karly	Female	20.5	16.5	3.5	Female	6
Beth	Female	28	23	5	Male	4
Taylah	Female	22	21	5	Male	3
Stephanie	Female	22.5	29.5	5.5	Male	3
Clare	Female	26.5	29.5	2.5	Male	2
Judy	Female	32	24	1	Male	4
Wendy	Female	26.5	28	1.5	Male	2
Ben	Male	29	35	1	Female	2