The impact of missing a loved one: A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative research

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Aim of the systematic review

> Synthesize the results qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies about psychological distress among relatives of missing persons
Methods

› Search in three databases: PsychInfo, Web of Science and Medline

› Three topics structured the search terms: 1) missing persons, 2) loved ones who are left behind, and 3) psychological distress
Inclusion criteria

Criteria for inclusion:
› Data are gathered among persons of whom a loved one is missing at the time the study was conducted;
› Focus on psychological distress in relatives of missing persons;
› Empirical study using a quantitative, qualitative or mixed method design;
› Study is published in an international peer-reviewed academic journal or dissertation.

Criteria for exclusion:
› Case studies;
› Study focused on adoption and foster care.
Study Selection

Screening for eligibility based on:

Step 1 → title
Step 2 → abstract
Step 3 → full text

Search strategy and study selection will be performed by two independent raters
Search n = 769

- Medline n = 166
  - Removed n = 183
- Web of science n = 200
  - Removed n = 383
- Psychinfo n = 403
  - Removed n = 383

Titles screened for eligibility n = 586

- Abstracts screened for eligibility n = 203
  - Removed n = 145
- Full texts screened for eligibility n = 58
  - Removed n = 22

Included in review n = at least 21
Methodology of included studies n = 21

- 10 quantitative
- 7 qualitative
- 4 mixed methods
Context of studies

- Colombia
- North USA
- Bosnia Herzegovina
- Honduras

- Kidnapping
- MIA
- Armed Conflict
Sample

- Majority of the studies are exclusively focused on female participants with mean age of 40 years of whom a male relative is missing for 8 years.

- Mean sample size = 56 participants
Psychopathology among relatives of missing persons

- 48 and 68 % Depressive disorder (n=193; 2 studies)

- 39 - 67 % Posttraumatic stress disorder (n=211; 3 studies)

- 23 % Complicated grief (n=73)

- 40 % Serious anxiety complaints (n=120)

- 51 % Severe somatic complaints (n=120)
# Disappearance vs comparison group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Comparison group:</th>
<th>Disappearance is related to more severe:</th>
<th>No difference in:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elvira, 2003</td>
<td>Post disappearance</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barakovic, 2013; Barakovic, 2014</td>
<td>Women without war missing family member</td>
<td>PTSD, depression, anxiety, somatization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heeke, et al. 2015</td>
<td>Relatives of the deceased</td>
<td></td>
<td>PTSD, CG, depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powell, et al., 2010</td>
<td>Women whose husband were killed</td>
<td>CG and depression</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quirk &amp; Casco, 1994</td>
<td>Deceased and no death in family</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Background variables related to psychopathology

- The older the women, the more severe complaints of depression, anxiety and somatization (Barakovic, 2013)
Loss-related variables

- Women with missing son highest symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety and somatization (Barakovic, 2013; Barakovic, 2014)

- The more hope that the loved one is still alive, the more severe symptoms of psychopathology (Heeke, et al., 2015)
Coping strategies

- Continuing seeking leads to more emotional health issues (Boss, 1977)
- ‘dwelling on the past’ and ‘reducing anxiety’ are considered as dysfunctional (McCubbin, et al. 1976)
Other variables

> Wife’s who persue independance, desire to remarry, have close relationships with others experience less psychological father presence (Boss, 1977)

> Psychological father presence is positively associated with wife and family dysfunction (Boss, 1980)

> Family coping mechanisms were not associated with PTSD, but with psychological distress (Elvira Navia & Ossa, 2003)

> 45 % experienced increase of family conflicts (Elvira Navia & Ossa, 2007)
Conclusion

› 10 quantitative studies show mixed results regarding prevalence of psychological complaints

› Mixed results with respect to difference in severity of psychopathology among relatives of the disappeared vs the deceased

› More preoccupation with the missing relative increases risk of psychopathology

Limitations

1) The review is not complete and 2) few and diverse studies
Thank you for your attention

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Search terms

> "missing family member*" OR "missing father*" OR "missing mother*" OR "missing people" OR "gone missing" OR "missing child*" OR "missing person*" OR "missing in action" OR "people go missing" OR "unconfirmed loss*" OR "ambiguous loss" OR "kidnap*" OR "forced disappearance" OR "disappeared person*"

> AND "families" OR "family" OR "child*" OR "relative" OR "relatives" OR "wife" OR "wives" OR "husband*" OR "spouse*" OR "parent*" OR "son*" OR "daughter*"

> AND TX ("mental health" OR "stress*" OR "trauma*" OR "disorder*" OR "psycholog*" OR "symptom*" OR "emotion*" OR "distress" OR "impact" OR "dysfunction" OR "experience" OR "grief" OR "griev*"
10 Quantitative studies

1. Elvira Navia & Ossa (2007). Changes in the family system and in its beliefs about control, trust and vulnerability related to economic extortive kidnapping

2. Elvira Navia & Ossa (2003). Family functioning, coping, and psychological adjustment in victims and their families following kidnapping


9. Powell, Butollo & Hagl (2010). Missing or killed: the differential effect on mental health in women in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the confirmed or unconfirmed loss of their husbands.