Living in Limbo: Technical report

Ethical safeguarding

A full ethical review was undertaken, according to Missing People Research Procedures. During the project the participants were afforded confidentiality, all gave informed consent to take part, and were free to withdraw from the process at any time. Interviewees were all provided with written information about the research, the charity's confidentiality policy and the uses of their data.

In Holmes (2008) the author contends that conducting research within a voluntary sector organisation, with service users directly involved with the research, presents "*unique pitfalls compared to conducting research from the safety of a university department or government agency*" (Holmes, 2008: 9).

Such risks arise primarily from the pre-existing supportive relationship between the charity and the service user. The risk of jeopardising this important relationship formed the basis for protective measures. A significant protective measure was the maintenance of a clear separation between the researcher and the case management (service providing) staff. For example, it was made clear to interviewees that their case manager would not hear or read their interview. Further measures included providing interviewees with detailed information about how the interview would take place, avoidance of 'evaluative' questioning, opportunity to read the report prior to publication, and consistent communication.

Finally, the benefits to service users of taking part in the research was identified not only by the author, but also by interviewees themselves. The notion of research interviews providing 'serendipitous therapy' has been raised by others (Morse, 1994 in Lowes and Gill, 2006), and is an important factor in balancing risk with the importance and usefulness of the research outcomes.

Methodology

Sampling

All participants were sampled from the charity's case management database. Interviewees were sampled on the bases of having an open case with Missing People, and of having an adult family member who had been missing for at least two months and was still missing. An initial group of 36 families was randomly selected from eligible cases, and the primary named contact nominated as sample member. The Case Management team, who provide family support to all open cases, requested that one family be removed from the sample because of a recent development in their case. This family was subsequently removed from the sample and no contact was made.

Negotiating access was straightforward, and there was a very high level of cooperation from sample members. Of the initial 36 cases, one was rejected on the recommendation of the Case Management team.

The potential for the interviewees' involvement with the charity to result in biased data was acknowledged from the start, and mitigated by the decision not to incorporate any evaluative questioning into interviews. Further, it was emphasised to participants that their data would not be shared directly with their case manager, to ensure that they perceived no potential detrimental or advantageous effect on the way their case would continue to be handled.

Contact

Initial contact with the 35 sampled families was made by the Case Management team; members of staff within the charity who provide family support to all open cases. Once case managers had

obtained permission for the research team to contact the families, a letter was sent explaining the aims and methods of the project. All 35 sampled family members agreed to receive this letter from the research team.

Telephone contact was attempted within a week of posting the letters, and when telephone contact was achieved the research team explained the project again, asked whether the sample members wished to take part, and made arrangements to conduct the interviews. Telephone contact was achieved, within the designated time period, with 21 of the sampled families. No families declined to take part, although one interview was subsequently cancelled because of travel disruption, as an alternative interview could not be scheduled within the fieldwork period.

Missing people's characteristics

The following two tables outline the characteristics of the nine missing women and eleven missing men whose families took part in this research.

Age group	Number
18 – 19	2
20 – 29	4
30 – 39	4
40 – 49	5
50 – 59	2
60 – 69	2
70 - 79	1
Total	20

Duration missing (whole years)	Number
Less than 1 year	3
1-3 years	7
4-10 years	6
More than 10 years	4
Total	20

Interviewees' characteristics

Seventeen women and five men took part in research interviews. The following table shows the relationships of the interviewees to the missing people.

Relationship to missing person	Number
Mother	5
Father	2
Sibling or sibling-in-law	9
Son or daughter	6
Total	22

Interviews

The first three interviews were conducted as a pilot phase. For the pilot interviews a semi structured approach was adopted, in order to gauge the suitability of the interview schedule. It was apparent, during and after the pilot phase, that a semi structured approach was too rigid for tackling this sensitive issue. Pilot interviewees pre-empted a large proportion of the interview schedule, and attempts to follow the schedule meant repetitive questioning.

Subsequent interviews were conducted in a narrative style. Participants were invited first to talk about the missing person and their lifestyle, character and family relationships prior to their disappearance. Interviewees were then asked to describe the disappearance in a factual, chronological manner, and then asked more detailed questions about their emotional response. Further questions and probes ensured that sufficient information was gathered about practical experiences, and dealings with service providers and the media.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were conducted in a way that suited the interviewee: thirteen interviews were conducted in person at the interviewee's home, one in person in a public place, five by telephone and one by email. All of the face to face and telephone interviews were digitally recorded, and later transcribed verbatim.

Interview topics

Each interview covered a range of topics, listed below as they appeared on the interview topic guide.

• The disappearance; the events leading up to and immediately following the disappearance

• The aftermath; what the family experienced in the days and weeks after the disappearance

• Reactions; telling people and the reactions the family received

• Emotional experiences; emotional, physical, social and family experiences and impacts

• Practical experiences; financial, legal and practical impacts resulting from the disappearance and the search

• Support services; experience with the police (if applicable), Missing People, and any other statutory, voluntary or informal support providers

• Recommendations; the services interviewees would recommend are offered to families of missing people

Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo 7, according to the attached coding framework. The coding framework was created inferentially.

Reference: Lowes, L. and Gill, P. (2006) 'Participants' experiences of being interviewed about an emotive topic', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 55: 587-595.

Coding structure

Difference between missing adults and missing children

- General sympathy and understanding is different for adults and children
- Police search is different for adults and children

Interviewee's Experiences

- Behaviours
    - Drinking
    - Got in trouble with the police
    - Imagining
        - Decomposition
        - Dreaming
        - Scenarios of what happened
        - What they're doing now
    - Lost interest in appearance
    - Managing the family's image
    - Managing the missing person's image
    - Put on weight
    - Smoking
- Coping strategies
    - Coming to terms with it
    - Compartmentalising feelings
- Experiences with the media
- Financial Impacts
- Impacts on the job
    - Changing occupation
- It's affected everything
- Mental and Emotional Impacts
    - Anger
    - Anniversary of the disappearance
    - Depressed
    - Despair
    - Emotional rollercoaster
    - General mental and emotional impacts
    - Guilt
    - Hope
    - 'In limbo'
    - Just thinking about it all the time.
    - Regret
    - Relief
    - Sadness hits at odd times
    - Scared or frightened
    - Seems unreal
    - Special days are hard
    - Stress
- Physical Impacts
    - Ill health
    - Physical pain
    - Sleeplessness
- Relationships Between Remaining Family Members
    - Closeness of remaining family members
    - Relationships between remaining family members
- Support
    - Consulted a psychic
        - Psychic negative or unhelpful
        - Psychic positive or helpful
        - Psychics conflicting
    - Counselling

Official Things

- Notifying people
  - Don't like to burden other people
  - Medication
  - Religion
  - Support from friends and or family

  - Reactions
  - Telling adults
    - Negative reactions
    - Positive reactions
  - Telling children
    - Answering questions about family
    - Telling distant family
    - Telling friends and family so they can search
    - Telling older family
    - Telling people on a need to know basis
  - Telling official agencies
    - Children's experiences
    - Children's reactions
    - What to tell children

    - Telling official agencies
    - Telling the bank or building society
    - Telling the missing person's employer

- Sorting out their affairs
  - Dealing with the missing person's belongings
  - Dealing with the missing person's bills/payments
  - Dealing with the missing person's debts
  - Dealing with the missing person's income
  - Dealing with the missing person's job/occupation
  - 'Seven year rule'

Presumption of Intent and Outcome

- Believe it was intentional
  - Maybe it was intentional
  - Think it was certainly intentional
- Believe it was Unintentional

  Looking for evidence
  Suspicion of foul play
  Think it was unintentional
  Wouldn't have done it to us
- Dead or alive
  - Believe Missing Person is dead
  - Decomposition
  - Deny Missing Person is dead
  - Feared the worst
- False alarms
- No news is good news
- Scenarios of what happened
- Unsure if it was intentional or unintentional

Support Services and Agencies

- Missing People
  - Missing People emotional support
  - Missing People importance of contact
  - Missing People practical support
- Police
  - Deciding whether to call the police
  - Expectations of police
  - Felt it was not taken seriously
  - Felt it was taken seriously
  - General police comments
  - Individual police officers
  - Police first response
  - Police importance of contact
  - Police longer term relationship
  - Police main response
  - Police processes
  - Police stereotyping
- Unfamiliar with processes

The Missing Person

- Experiences
  - Missing Person has Alzheimer's
  - Missing Person's bereavement
  - Missing Person's character
  - Missing Person's drinking
  - Missing Person's financial difficulty
  - Missing Person's health
  - Missing Person's mental health
  - The disappearance
- Missing before or not
  - Missing before, but told family
  - Missing before, had not told family
  - Not been missing before

- Missing Person's living arrangements
- Missing Person's occupation
- Relationships
  - Missing Person's contact with family
  - Missing Person's family closeness
  - Missing Person's family commitments
  - Missing Person's family structure
  - Missing Person's relationship with partner

The Search

- Friends and family searching
  - Initial looking
  - Posters and leaflets
  - Searching makes you feel better
  - Searching public areas
- Private detectives
- Search ending
- Trying to find out information from official agencies
  - Data Protection

The Effect of Time