SSOAR

Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

Life's on Hold

Hogben, Susan

Postprint / Postprint
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
www.peerproject.eu

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Hogben, S. (2006). Life's on Hold. *Time & Society*, *15*(2-3), 327-342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X06067065

Nutzungsbedingungen:
Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: http://www.peerproject.eu Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.
Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:
This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement ". For more Information regarding the PEER-project see: http://www.peerproject.eu This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use.All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.
By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

gesis Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Diese Version ist zitierbar unter / This version is citable under:
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-223375

Time & Society

Life's on Hold

Missing people, private calendars and waiting

Susan Hogben

ABSTRACT. Intimate relationships are forged on and sustained by the appreciation of mutually significant events. When someone is missing, as a result of a reportedly unmotivated absence, expectations of the continuity of relationships are disrupted. Using data from publicly available texts I examine how people experience such an absence. Harvey Sacks's notion of the 'private calendar' helps explicate how remaining family members experience literal and figurative desynchronization that suggests missing might be more potently understood as waiting. Finally, it seems that the duration of the absence helps family members account for the enduring lack of communication. KEY WORDS • disruptive events • interstitial time • missing people • private calendars • waiting • worry

Introduction

Time making and time measuring can currently be characterized in industrial, commodified and compressed terms (Adam, 2003). Temporality also has a role to play in how we generate a more intimate sense of self and in the organization of our relationships (Mead, 1932; Maines et al., 1983; Flaherty and Fine, 2001). Jenkins (2002) proposes that progressive time provides a fundamental unit for conceptualizing who we are. He argues, 'our past is who we have been, and the future is fundamental to imagining who we will become. However, in order to

Time & Society copyright © 2006 SAGE (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
VOL. 15 No. 2/3 (2006), pp. 327–342 0961-463X DOI: 10.1177/0961463X06067065
www.sagepublications.com

have either past or future we need a stable present, the space of our everyday lives'. Given the emphasis on stability for our and, by extension, a relationship's continuity (Sigman, 1991) we can appreciate how, when an intimate family member, lover, friend, colleague or acquaintance is reported missing, the anticipation (and realization) of the future, the consistency of the past *and* the stable present become disrupted.[1]

In this article I discuss the impact of someone being missing[2] by considering the role of time in three interrelated fashions. First, I examine how the routine relevance of relationships can be understood through Sacks's (1987) notion of 'private calendars' – the local means of organizing our relevance to others through the appreciation of events of personal significance. I demonstrate how the unexpected and prolonged absence of an intimate removes the availability of private calendars to the extent that the disruption is experienced as a kind of suspension of normal service. I examine how missing might be more aptly understood as interstitial (Gasparini, 2004); missing is experienced as a form of waiting where anticipation is populated with both worry and hope. Finally, it seems that the duration of the absence and the associated uncertainty provide family members with a way to account for the missing person's extended lack of communication.

The Data

Many scholars (Weitzman, 1970; Hepworth and Featherstone, 1973, 1974; Payne, 1995; Braid, 2000; Cowley, 2000; Boss, 2002; Rayner, 2002) observe that public talk about missing people tends only to occur when a disclosure about the missing person's absence can act as a declaration of concern and function as a direct or indirect request for the ongoing undesirable state of affairs to change. Alternatively, when missing is resolved (for example, when contact is made or a missing person returns) those involved rarely want to discuss the time of the absence (Braid, 2000; Cowley, 2000; Biehal et al., 2003). Capturing data about missing is understandably somewhat restricted. For these reasons and others the data are taken from a representative range of public sources; a newspaper report, textual missing person appeals[3] and an episode of public participation television.[4]

Time and Relationships: The Role of the Private Calendar

Relationships have been predominantly theorized through metaphors of physical proximity in terms of 'attachment' (Bowlby, 1969) and 'social bonds' (Hirschi, 1969). Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose an extension by suggest-

ing that relationships are better understood as articulations of 'belongingness'. Relationships are recognized and maintained, they suggest, 'by stability, affective concern and continuation into the foreseeable future (p. 500).

For Sacks (1987) this consistency and continuity rely on mutual attention to specific meaningful events. The relative significance of social, intimate, familial, institutional, collegial and sexual relationships is founded on the creation and acknowledgement of special events within relationships. Importantly, these events are treated as marks on a calendar which forge a referential framework through which relationships become remarkable.

The calendar, in addition to organizing time in a linear, progressive fashion (Coveney and Highfield, 1990: 26), acts as a temporal referent for general events and might indicate moon phases, national holidays or culturally specific celebrations that may or may not be treated as personally pertinent to the individual calendar user. Calendars can also be customized or personalized (cf. Symes, 1999) by marking dates which are privately apposite and peculiarly relevant to the individual calendar user, for example a father's birthday, a dental appointment, party invitation and the like. According to Sacks (1992a: 36–7), this personalized use ensures that time becomes organized in relation to an individual's 'relationships or biography'. Relationships develop what Sacks (1987) terms 'private calendars' not as clandestine practice but as a means of locating 'events within the relationship' and understanding 'events in the world in general, by reference to the relationship' (p. 222). The significance of the latter means that people can say things like, 'Kennedy was assassinated two weeks after we got engaged' (p. 222).

An important feature of the private calendar comes through its contrast with 'everybody's calendar' because 'everybody's calendar' has a 'guaranteed continuity' that runs on into the 'indefinite future without regard to anyone particular being present' (Sacks, 1987: 223). A private calendar is personalized because it relies on particular people being available and active in the making and the marking of (private) events. The need for certain people to be present has important ramifications: a private calendar (and the significance of the events therein) 'ends when "we" end' (p. 223). That is to say, the termination of an intimate relationship through, say, death or the relationship's aborted continuity, for example through divorce, means there will (most likely) be no more 'events on the private calendar '(p. 223) and so no more mechanisms for marking the private calendar.

Yet these two 'ends' differ. Following a death, Sacks (1987: 223) suggests the survivor may still be able to mark private calendar events previously shared with the deceased by reflecting safely on a normatively ended past; that is, events for a bereaved private calendar user can still 'occur sensibly in their lives' and are to greater and lesser degrees publicly permissible. An individual may recall personal(ized) events, anniversaries and the like without too much fear of

sanction. An event in a private calendar ended by death is available, if not for renewal, then, for temporary restoration. This potential can be contrasted with the more restricted use of private calendars in relationships that end by, say divorce. Events in a private calendar which were once treated as mutually significant by those active in marking the relationship are, after separation, considered inappropriate referents to the extent that, as Sacks suggests, 'one cannot even retrospectively use the private calendar one had going' (p. 223).

It seems that event referents, where a calendar-marking participant is removed but still available, are considered inappropriate to recognize, share or mark in subsequent relationships. These relationships in effect require the creation of new calendars to render them mutually significant. Following separation or estrangement a private calendar, like Cambodia under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, returns to a kind of 'year zero'.

When we consider the impact of someone being missing it seems that neither of these characterizations is wholly appropriate. The unexpected absence of a family member produces a situation that is saturated with uncertainty. Where is the missing person? Why is he/she absent? Why is he/she not in touch? When and how will the situation be resolved? The multiple uncertainties throw into confusion the status of the relationship and the role of the private calendar.

The newspaper article examined here (Goodchild, 2002; Figure 1) concerns the, then, ongoing absence of 13-year-old Amanda Dowler who did not return home from school on 21 March 2002. In the article, Amanda Dowler has been missing for three months and, unlike hundreds of thousands of missing people (Prasad, 2002), there was widespread sympathetic media coverage. The article illustrates how her absence has consequences for the continuity of mundane practices which are indicative of and significant to the routine maintenance of relationships.

The imminent arrival of Amanda Dowler's birthday (Goodchild, 2002: line 8) introduces one of the challenges that absence makes to the successful maintenance of a relationship through the appreciation of and commitment to a private calendar event. Family (and friends) are reportedly unsure about how to mark events that are pertinent to the missing person and also relevant to the still present family and friends. Amanda Dowler's father reports the collective uncertainty ('no one really knows what to do'; lines 8–9) surrounding, what the reader can infer to be, the previously unremarkable and routine marking of birthdays ('they're asking us if they should send cards': line 9). The declaration of the uncertainty around how to mark his missing daughter's birthday appears to conjoin Sacks's distinct options of when and how private calendars can reasonably end. There appears to be neither the possibility of 'sensible' restoration (following bereavement) nor is the erasure of the event possible, as it is following (mutual) separation.

While people may remember the date of a deceased person's birthday it

Milly Is Probably Dead, Say Police

By Sophie Goodchild, Home Affairs Correspondent

The parents of the missing schoolgirl Amanda Dowler have made an emotional appeal for her return just days before her birthday. Bob and Sally Dowler spoke of their suffering since their daughter went missing three months ago, and how they will cope on Amanda's 14th birthday on Tuesday. Police confirmed yesterday that they have told her parents Bob and Sally Dowler they believe that she is dead. Amanda, known as Milly, vanished on 21 March while walking home from school in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. "Her birthday is going to be so hard. No one really knows what to do, for example, they're asking us if they should send cards," said Mr Dowler. Father's Day had been a "bad day". "I hadn't even thought about it being Father's Day", he said, "and then my daughter Gemma came downstairs and gave me a card. It took me completely unawares. I just went through all the thoughts and emotions you can imagine. There's normally two cards. It was a bad day".

A nationwide hunt has failed to find any trace of Milly despite a £100,000 reward, a TV reconstruction and pleas from celebrities. Milly's parents have had several false alarms. A body found in the Thames turned out to be that of an elderly woman; a man arrested in Chertsey, Surrey, in connection with the teenager's disappearance was released without charge and a prisoner at Belmarsh has also been questioned and released.

Mr Dowler said weekends were particularly difficult. "Any family occasions are really hard. Even other people's birthdays. We go to send them a card, and then it hits us – who do we sign it from? Now we just put 'the Dowlers'. The Jubilee weekend was hellishly long."

He added: "It's impossible to describe the pain we are going through. "We need to know where our daughter is and what has happened to her."

FIGURE 1
Extract from newspaper article published following Amanda Dowler's disappearance

would be highly unusual for the deceased to be sent birthday cards. Indeed, Pauline Boss (2002) appreciates the lack of ritualistic practices involving the missing, pointing out that 'there are no Hallmark cards for families and friends of the partially missing, for those who disappeared, vanished without a trace'. Yet, to not send a birthday card would indicate the erasure of 25 June (Amanda Dowler's birthday) from the Dowlers' private calendar and, thus, the tacit acceptance of a permanent end to that suspended relationship.

The multiple uncertainties that define the missing are also protracted and amplified over time, colonizing both the past and the future with seemingly unanswerable questions: why did she/he leave? What happened? Where is he/she now? When will he/she return? Boss (2002: 553) argues that these uncertainties create a further complication to the situation which defies but also craves resolution by creating 'confused perceptions about who is in or out of a particular family'. Does the missing person still exist when they do not adhere to private calendar relevant events ('Father's Day had been a bad day'; line 10; 'There's normally two cards'; line 14)? Despite her absence should Amanda still be included in family definitions? Amanda Dowler's father reports how they now sign cards using the ambiguously inclusive referent 'the Dowlers' (Goodchild, 2002: line 25) to avoid definite removal of a particular family member for active calendar event marking (cf. Fravel and Boss, 1992; Hastings, 1999).[5]

The disruption that accompanies the absence of a family member forces a reappraisal of how relationships should continue. Family members are waiting for some sort of resolution (Goodchild, 2002: lines 27–8) but are mindful of the potentially undesirable endings that might accomplish this. The waiting, though, is not a passive or inert reaction but the combination of uncertainties through a prospective lens produces an anticipation (Gasparini, 2004) replete with apprehension.

Missing in Action: Waiting, Uncertainty and Apprehension

While the missing person is physically absent she is also psychologically present (Boss, 1999). The emotional presence typically takes some form of apprehension. The following indicative extracts are taken from missing person appeals and demonstrate a range of reactions to the uncertainties surrounding the missing person's absence and lack of communication:

> The family *fears* for Francesca as she often feels quite agitated and confused. (20 September 2003)

> His family are *very concerned* about him. They say, 'we are *desperately worried* to hear news'. (10 May 2002)

> Everyone *is worried* about his welfare. (10 July 2004)

> Amrita's mum, older brother and the rest of the family are *desperately worried* for her. (4 February 2001)

> Mark's friends and family have become *increasingly worried* about him. (10 January 2001)

> . . . has not contacted her family who are *desperately worried* for her. (7 June 2002)
>
> They are *very anxious* to contact him. (30 February 2002)
>
> His mother is *deeply concerned* about him and asks him to call. (20 September 2004)

Worry, as these extracts indicate, is not a complete action; worry in general craves resolution. Worry, here, in particular, longs for some contact from the missing person. In this respect, as Phillips (1993) has it, worry is an 'ironic form of hope' to the extent that 'worrying implies a future, a way of looking forward to things. It is a conscious conviction that a future exists, one in which something terrible might happen' (p. 56). Worry and hope both reveal the future to be uncertain and both tend, though in contrasting modes, to work towards an outcome that can reduce the uncertainty on which each is premised and thrives (Bradac, 2001). Worry, while implying a future, is also stasis inducing because, as Phillips (1993: 41) also argues, it also 'fixes the worrier in the present'. Apprehension anticipates a future that will not be realizable until there are changes to the current uncertainty. The fixing of the family members through the suspension of routine relationship-appreciating events and through worry reconfigures missing and renders it akin to waiting in general and waiting for resolution in particular.

The interstitial action of waiting can be bracketed off from other social activities by being located in specially designated spaces (such as waiting rooms, bus stops and the like) but waiting also creates its own space (Gasparini, 1995) where hope and worry engage the future in an extended or suspended present. As Thomas Mann (1962) elegiacally suggests in his characterization of waiting, it 'means regarding time and the present moment not as a boon, but an obstruction'. He continues, 'it means making their actual content null and void . . . Waiting, we say, is long. We might just as well – or more accurately – say it is short, since it consumes whole spaces of time without our living them or making any use of them as such' (p. 279). Fuchs (2001) proposes that such stasis, torpor or inability to act can be 'interpreted as the result of a desynchronization', that is, 'an uncoupling in the temporal relation of organism and environment, or of individual and society'. The uncertainty and the worry that fixes family members in the present avoiding undesirable futures, as the data will demonstrate, literally and figuratively, restricts them. Just as, Amanda Dowler's family reported uncertainty of how to mark existing private calendar events it also seems that the potential for making new events significant to their ongoing relationships is also impeded.

The next two extracts from the episode of public participation television reveal the mother of a missing son inviting him directly to contribute to her wedding (see Appendix for a list of transcription conventions):

[Christine's sons David (aged 13) left his family home on 26 December 1996, apparently to stay with his 11-year-old friend, Paddy Warren, but did not arrive there. At the time of the broadcast they have been missing for three years. In the previous turn the host has been discussing what might have prompted her son's absence.]

1. Christine: life's on hold (.) I mean I I'm frightened to go away
2. I've I've recently married this year (.) I've been
3. with my partner 14 years and we've recently
4. married this year . . . so we married in May this
5. year I had it put in the papers asking David to come
6. back to give me away (.) nothing came of that (.) and
7. um (.) it's just been it's absolutely (.) torment (.) I
8. can't go away on honeymoon (.) I couldn't go away on
9. honeymoon because I was frightened to death (.) just in
10. case I went away and David got in touch [with me].
11. Host: [it was] the day
12. he turned up.

Amid Christine's description of the anxiety and restrictions ('frightened to go away' (line 1); 'it's absolutely torment' (line 7); 'frightened to death' (line 9)) generated by her son's three-year absence and lack of communication she intimates that her marriage to her partner was used as an invitation to her son David to renew their lapsed relationship (lines 5–6). Despite embarking on her own personal calendar-making practices (her marriage), the effects of her son's absence seem to truncate what would be the normative events following marriage (lines 8–9). It seems that attempts to continue life without her missing son, to make events that might operate as new marks on their own private calendar are embarked upon reluctantly, are not wholly successful and strongly related to the desire for the significant presence of her missing son.

The relevance or denial of relevance are also evident in missing person appeals where reports of meaningful events are used as forms of inducements to encourage the reparticipation of the missing person:

> There are two new additions to the family and it would be lovely for Tony to see them. (20 April 2001)

> They are very anxious about her well-being and have important family news. (20 May 2002)

> Rob's sister, Maureen, would love to hear he is safe and well saying the she has some important news to tell him. (30 June 2001)

The reports of significant changes ('two new additions') or events ('important family news'; 'important news') are appended to expressions of concern ('They are very anxious about her well-being') and requests for some action by the missing person ('would love to hear he is safe and well'; 'it would be lovely for

Tony to see them') and act as invitations and incentives for the missing person to renew contact.

It seems that without acknowledgement by the missing person the changes to the family members' lives are diminished in some way. The next extract demonstrates how apparent suspension of 'normal' service which was summarized by Christine ('life's on hold'; line 1) also encapsulates the effects a missing person's absence has on private calendar making more generally. Later in the broadcast data Val describes family's reaction to her 16-year-old-son's absence as literal immobility.

[Val's 16-year-old son (Damien) did not return from a party and has been missing three years.]

1. Val: we live on the island Isle of Wight (.) we were due to
2. move to the mainland obviously we felt at that point
3. when Damien went missing (.) we couldn't move cos any
4. time he might come home (.) [and]
5. Host: [how] old was he?

Val reports how her family have suspended events which would otherwise form part of a private calendar as inevitable immobility ('we couldn't move; line 3). Plans ('we were due to move'; lines 1–2) which were under way prior to the missing person's absence are cancelled, postponed or temporarily unrealizable.[6]

This stasis, the worry, the waiting help explain why it is not without poignancy that the typical description of people who miss people is framed as 'people left behind' (Weitzman, 1970; Hepworth and Featherstone, 1973; Boss, 1999) in (calendar-making) time and space.

It seems that family members struggle with multiple uncertainties regarding why the missing person is absent and where he/she is but perhaps the most distressing consequence is trying to imagine and explain why the missing person is not (able to be) in touch with them. In this final section I identify how the duration of the absence seems to provide a way of accounting for the missing person's enduring lack of communication.

Accounting for the Lack of Communication: *The Longer You Leave It the Harder It Is*

The ongoing lack of communication that characterizes missing allows for the potential inference that the missing person is not in touch, not because they are somehow incapacitated but because they do not want to be; that family members are not important enough, have some shortcomings or are in any other way undesirable (Boss, 1999). This silence, as Poster (1990: 3) appreciates, is perversely amplified because of the 'new level of interconnectivity'. The multiple

modes that communication can take, in fact, 'heighten[s] the fragility of social networks'. It also means that some blame can be attributed to the missing person for not getting in touch.

The first of the two following extracts sees the potential blame generated from a lack of communication being resolved by positioning the missing person's inaction in line with some categorical group action (cf. Sacks, 1992a, 1992b). Then, in the other extract, the potential culpability is managed through a different device; by exploiting the duration of the absence/silence as an exonerating factor.

[Jo's 16-year-old daughter, Helena, since returned, had been missing for six weeks with her 30-year-old partner. Carol's daughter Kathryn is 16 years old and has been missing for six weeks. Christine's 13 year old son has been missing for three years.]

1.	Host:	and did you have any contact in that period?
2.	Jo:	uh you you wrote a a a letter once didn't you?
3.	Host:	oh so you knew she was safe and she was alright?
4.	Jo:	I uh I uh and also that she was safe because the
5.		police were were able to track her through her bank
6.		card
7.	Host:	right, so it's quite a different situation to (.)
8.		[she wrote you a letter]
9.	Carol:	[if she'd only phone]
10.	Host:	yeah (.) sorry Carol
11.	Carol:	I mean if she'd only phone if she'd only phone cos
12.		(.) I can't understand why she doesn't phone but the
13.		thing is most of them don't phone
14.		(1.0)
15.	Host:	uh Chr- uh Christine

Here it is evident that communication (line 2) provides confirmation of the missing person's her security and well-being (line 3). This experience is contrasted with Carol's report of the ongoing lack of communicative contact from her daughter. During this exchange, Carol displays her desire for a similar action ('if she'd only phone; line 9) which would presumably bring about a similar diminution of disquiet. Carol elaborates her incomprehension ('I can't understand why she doesn't phone'; line 12). In order to dispel the potential accusation that the lack of contact is a personal shortcoming peculiar to her daughter, Carol provides a description that downplays the deviance and locates her daughter's inactivity as a practice typically associated with a group ('most of them'; line 13), to which she tacitly ascribes her daughter membership (cf. Watson, 1997). Describing individual behaviour as part of group practice diffuses its potential abnormality and absolves the missing person of individual responsibility.

The next excerpt reveals that making sense of the protracted lack of communication is of great concern for family members. It demonstrates an alternative

device for normalizing the missing person's lack of contact by foregrounding the duration of the absence.

[Christine's son, David (aged 13), left his family home on 26 December 1996, apparently to stay with his 11-year-old friend Paddy Warren but did not arrive there. He has been missing for three years. Helena was missing for six weeks but has since returned.]

1.	Christine:	did you find that the longer you were gone the
2.		harder it was to come home?
3.	Helena:	yeah (.) much harder
4.	Christine:	because I've been told by missing persons
5.		that they find it very hard after they've been gone for so
6.		[long]
7.	Helena:	[the long]er you leave it [definitely]
8.	Christine:	[to (.) come] [back]
9.	Carol:	[had] you told any
10.		of your friends that you was [going]?
11.	Helena:	[no]

Christine, like Carol in one of the aforementioned extracts, locates the missing person's behaviour with already existing others ('they'; line 5). This pattern of conduct is reportedly supported by experts in the form of the external authority ('been told by missing persons'; line 4)[7] and consolidated by Helena (a returned missing person who in previous turns has been classified as a local expert by the host ('you know you're the expert'; 'Helena she's our expert here')). Helena corroborates Christine's speculation emphatically ('the long]er you leave it [definitely]'; line 7).

Both Christine's question, in lines 1–2, and Helena's response, in line 7, suggest that a formulaic structure is available as a blame-diffusing and normalizing device. Indeed, when prompted later in the programme to give advice to other missing people ('hhh what would you say (.) to those who've run away?'), Helena restates the duration of the absence as definitively influential on a missing person's enduring lack of communicative contact ('they do need to get in contact (.) and from experience I know that the longer (.) you leave it the (.) more difficult it gets').

This form 'the . . . er X the . . . Y' is a recognizable idiomatic construction (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992: 44; see also Wray, 2002: 48–50) with slots which can be filled by various adjectives *fast, slow* and such like. In this data, the comparative structure tends to contain references to duration (*longer*) and adversity (*harder*), *difficult*)]. The X and Y slots are filled by more or less explicit reference to absence and lack of communication (to get in touch, call, come back, phone). The structure 'the . . . er X the . . . er Y' also appears in agnate forms ('they find it very hard after they've been gone for so long'; lines 5–6; 'the longer you leave it'; line 7).

The structure 'the . . . X the . . . er Y' and agnates provide an alternative means of normalizing a missing person's lack of contact within a collective by constructing it formulaically as a routine articulation of an already existing practice. The formula displays an internal equilibrium which operates as an equalizing device. As a result activities are shorn of individual significance and work to downplay any potential individual shortcoming or an assessment of the minimum or maximum length of time of the absence and the ensuing silence which would render contact (im)possible.

It seems that the longer the missing person is not in touch the harder it is for the missing person to get in touch *and* for the remaining family members to continue marking or being to embark on new relationships.

Conclusion

Relationships are fragile; they require routine maintenance that demonstrates 'affective concern' (Baumeister and Leary, 1995: 500) which in turn demonstrates each individual's commitment to its continuity. Sacks's (1987) notion of the private calendar helps explicate the powerful ways that time can become personalized and indicate the relevance of people to that relationship.

However, when someone is missing, denies someone else contact, and withdraws (or is withdrawn) from a social network, life for the remaining family members is thrown into a phase of suspended animation, in literal and figurative stasis, unable to satisfactorily complete normative life events and 'move on'. This stasis occurs because family members are waiting for some action (the return of or some news of the missing person's whereabouts). This kind of resolution would restart or, as Fuchs (2001) would have it, 'resynchronize' the family members with his/her (social) environment. Family members become fixed in a present (characteristically as 'people left behind) and it is, it seems, only with reluctance (and some guilt) that family members are able to embark on making new private calendar events.

The guilt that family members may feel during the missing person's enduring lack of communication is partly informed by the inference that a missing person is not in touch with them, not because they are incapacitated in some way, but because he/she does not want to; the family members are no longer relevant. This kind of wilful rejection can lead to the missing person being blamed for his/her social inadequacy. Family members seem to want to protect the missing person from such conclusion and they do so by exploiting a range of time referents to account for the missing person's lack of communication. The emergent formula, glossed here as, *the longer you leave it the harder it is*, identifies the duration of the absence, rather than the missing person's potentially wilful withdrawal, as the obstacle to renewing contact.

This formula is not only used in this order of missing but is apparent in more mundane situations where previously frequent or regular contact diminishes. Beyond this, it seems that missing additionally reveals a resistance to identify one's own personal undesirability as a plausible reason for one's sudden or accumulated irrelevance to a previously intimate or familiar other. So while missing of this order is not a mundane phenomenon its extreme nature seems to provide insight into the complexities and, importantly, the simple ways that we use repetition and time to organize our relationships.

Notes

My immeasurable thanks go to the insights of two anonymous reviewers.

1. For concision the term 'family members' will be used throughout the article.
2. The UK police will treat an adult as missing if they are unexpectedly absent for around 72 hours. The significance of this length of time is to allow for absences that can be culturally treated as 'lost weekends'. This is not to say that people don't privately (and publicly) register the absence of someone, particularly children, after very much shorter periods of time.
3. The original corpus consists of 215 appeals published in *The Big Issue* (a weekly magazine sold in the UK by the vulnerably housed) from January 1999 to May 2000. More recent examples of appeals have been used for illustration.
4. The episode entitled 'Desperately Trying to Find a Missing Loved One' was taken from *Kilroy* broadcast on 27 October 1999. The benefits of using public participation television as data lies in the fact that the participants (including the host) are making versions of their experience publicly available because of *and* despite the constraints of the context and regardless of any researcher's agenda. Hutchby (1991) suggests that the interface and negotiation of apparently personal and indisputably institutional contexts provides the means for common-sense understandings of the public world to become available.
5. Amanda Dowler was buried on the anniversary of the day she 'vanished'. This was perhaps an attempt to erase the significance of the day she was reported missing by creating a new calendar date with a practice of ritualised closure.
6. It transpires that this family have, indeed, reluctantly moved. The ongoing appeal, available on the NMPH website (http://nmph.underwired.com/seen.php?showall=yes#) states: 'He comes from a close family who miss him terribly. Sadly, his family have had to move to USA for work since he disappeared but they are still hoping to hear news of Damien. His grandparents still live on the Isle of Wight. Damien was 21 last June 2001'.
7. In line 4, 'missing persons' refers to The National Missing Person's Helpline; a charity which supports missing people and 'those who are left behind'.

References

Adam, B. (2003) 'Reflexive Modernization Temporalized', *Theory, Culture and Society* 20(2): 59–78.

Atkinson, J. M. and Heritage, J. (eds) (1984) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baumeister, R. F. and Leary, M. R. (1995) 'The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation', *Psychological Bulletin* 117: 497–529.

Biehal, N., Mitchell, F. and Wade, J. (2003) *Lost from View: Missing Persons in the UK*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Boss, P. (1999) *Ambiguous Loss.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Boss, P. (2002) 'Ambiguous Loss: Working with Families of the Missing', *Family Process* 41: 14–17.

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss (Volume I)*. New York: Basic Books.

Bradac, J. (2001) 'Theory Comparison: Uncertainty Reduction, Problematic Integration, Uncertainty Management, and Other Curious Constructs', *Journal of Communication* 51: 456–76.

Braid, M. (2000) 'One Husband, Lost and Found', *The Independent*, 27 July.

Coveney, P. and Highfield, R. (1990) *The Arrow of Time: A Voyage Through Science to Solve Time's Greatest Mystery*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

Cowley, J. (2000) 'Where Are They Now?', *The Observer Review*, 18 June.

Flaherty, M. G. and Fine, G. A. (2001) 'Present, Past and Future: Conjugating George Herbert Mead's Perspective on Time', *Time & Society* 10(2/3): 147–61.

Fravel, D. L. and Boss, P. G. (1992) 'An In-depth Interview with the Parents of Missing Children', in J. Gilgun, K. Daly and G. Handel (eds) *Qualitative Methods in Family Research*, pp. 126–45. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.

Fuchs, T. (2001) 'Melancholia as Desynchronization: Towards a Psychopathology of Interpersonal Time', *Psychopathology* 34(4): 179–86.

Gasparini, G. (1995) 'On Waiting', *Time & Society* 4(1): 29–45.

Gasparini, G. (2004) 'Anticipation and the Surprises of Everyday Life', *Social Science Information* 43(3): 339–48.

Goodchild, S. (2002) 'Milly is probably dead, say police', *The Independent*, 21 March.

Hastings, S. (1999) 'Self Disclosure and Identity Management by Bereaved Parents', paper presented at the 'Identities in Action' conference, Gregynog, Wales, 10–12 December.

Hepworth, M. and Featherstone, M. (1973) 'Going Missing', in R. Bailey and J. Young (eds) *Contemporary Social Problems in Britain*, pp. 171–194. Farnborough: Lexington Books.

Hepworth, M. and Featherstone, M. (1974) 'Persons Believed Missing: A Search for a Sociological Interpretation', in P. Rock and M. McIntosh (eds) *Deviance and Social Control*, pp. 163–207. London: Tavistock Publications.

Hirschi, T. (1969) *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hutchby, I. (1991) 'The Organisation of Talk on Talk Radio', in P. Scannell (ed.) *Broadcast Talk*, pp. 119–37. London: SAGE Publications.

Jenkins, R. P. (2002) 'In the Present Tense: Time, Identification and Human Nature', *Anthropological Theory* 2(3): 267–80.

Maines, D. R., Sugrue, N. M. and Katovich, M. A. (1983) 'The Sociological Import of G.

H. Mead's Theory of the Past', *American Sociological Review* 48(2): 161–73.
Mann, T. (1962) *The Magic Mountain*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Mead, G. H. (1932) *The Philosophy of the Present.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Nattinger, J. R. and DeCarrico, J. S. (1992) *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
Payne, M. (1995) 'Understanding "Going Missing": Issues for Social Work and Social Services', *British Journal of Social Work* 25: 333–48.
Phillips, A. (1993) *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored.* London: Faber and Faber.
Poster, M. (1990) *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Prasad, R. (2002) 'The Girl Who Vanished', *The Guardian*, 28 March.
Rayner, J. (2002) 'Why did they have to go?', *The Observer*, 10 March.
Sacks, H. (1987) 'You Want to Find out if Anybody Really Does Care', in G. Button and J. R. E. Lee (eds.) *Talk and Social Organisation*, pp. 219–25. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
Sacks, H. (1992a) *Lectures on Conversation* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Blackwell.
Sacks, H. (1992b) *Lectures on Conversation* (Vol. 2). Oxford: Blackwell.
Sigman, S. J. (1991) 'Handling the Discontinuous Aspects of Continuing Social Relationships: Towards Research of the Persistence of Social Forms', *Communication Theory* 1: 106–27.
Symes, C. (1999) 'Chronicles of Labour: A Discourse Analysis of Diaries', *Time & Society* 8(2): 357–80.
Watson, D. R. (1997) 'Some General Reflections of Category and Sequence', in S. Hester and P. Eglin (eds) *Culture in Action: Studies in Membership Categorisation Analysis*, pp. 49–75. Washington, DC: International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis and University Press of America.
Weitzman, L. J. (1970) *Social Suicide: A Study of Missing Persons*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University.
Wray, A. (2002) *Formulaicity and the Lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

The transcription conventions are modelled on those of Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: ix–xvi):

(.) hearable pause
[denotes start of simultaneous or overlapping utterances
] denotes end of simultaneous or overlapping utterances
= contiguous utterances with no discernible pause
hh audible exhalation
- denotes truncated word.
. . . denotes some text missing.

SUSAN HOGBEN is a discourse analyst currently working on a project indentifying emerging science and technology issues in UK media. She was previously a research associate with CESAGen, an ESRC Centre for Social and Economic Aspects of Genomics examining genetics, health and identity. Her research interests include innovation, representations of identity, constructions of community, family and belonging and the role of evidence in the production of explanations. ADDRESS: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3NB, UK.
[email: HogbenSH1@cardiff.ac.uk]