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Toward a better understanding of psychological symptoms in people confronted with the disappearance of a loved one:
A systematic review

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Background and aims
The disappearance of a loved one (an “ambiguous loss”) is claimed to be the most stressful type of loss (Bois, 2006). We aimed to explore the empirical evidence for this claim.

Objectives:
1. prevalence rates of psychological symptoms were summarized.
2. correlates of psychological symptoms were reviewed.
3. levels of psychopathology were compared between relatives of missing persons vs. deceased persons.

Relevance
Given the large number of people who are confronted with the disappearance of loved one due to war and state terrorism this review may contribute to:
• Knowledge about the nature and severity of psychopathology in relatives of missing persons
• Identification of risk factors of psychopathology
• Directions for future research

Method
Inclusion criteria: (1) quantitative studies published in peer-reviewed journal or published dissertations abstract and (2) studies focusing on psychological symptoms in spouses, family members, and/or friend of missing persons.

Figure 1. Search strategy

Table 1. Prevalence rates of psychopathology.

Results
All included studies used a cross-sectional design and were conducted in the context of war and state terrorism.

Prevalence rates: 1 to 67% for PTSD, 3 to 88% for depression, 1 to 65% for anxiety, 7 to 23% for complicated grief, and 43% for somatic complaints

Table 1. Prevalence rates of psychopathology.

Correlates of psychopathology: (1) being a spouse or parent of a missing person (vs. other relative), (2) being exposed to higher (vs. lower) number of traumatic events, and (3) having more (vs. less) hope that the missing loved is still alive. Associations between psychopathology and gender, age, time since disappearance, and education level were ambiguous.

Disappearance vs. death: Six studies compared psychopathology between relatives of missing persons (all in the context of terrorism/war) and homicidally bereaved persons. Overall groups did not significantly differ in severity or prevalence rate of psychopathology.

Discussion
Bois’ claim does not seem to be supported by our review. However, the small number and heterogeneity of the studies limits understanding of the experience of relatives of missing persons. This present review points at important gaps in the literature.

Avenues to pursue:
• Broadening the focus of research on consequences of disappearances beyond the context of war and state terrorism;
• employing more rigorous research methods (e.g., studying multiple potential correlates, use of validated measures and longitudinal designs).

Conclusions
We conclude (with caution) that (1) prevalence rates of psychopathology vary considerably among the studies; (2) spouses, parents, and people exposed to additional traumatic events are vulnerable for the development of psychological symptoms post-disappearance; and (3) the severity of symptoms does not significantly differ from homicidally bereaved individuals in the context of war and state terrorism.

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