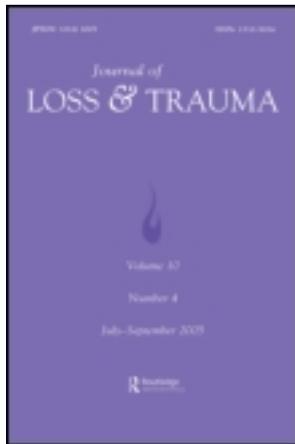


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Ambiguous Loss: The Long-Term Effects on the Children of POWs

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Ambiguous Loss: The Long-Term Effects on the Children of POWs

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The present study is a pilot in Israel that examines the issue of “ambiguous loss”: the presence-absence of a parent from the perspective of adults who were children when their father was a POW. The period of the father’s absence was examined by means of in-depth interviews with the children of the family almost four decades after the POW event, and as a focus group. The findings are explained by means of the two-track model of bereavement.

Then we played on the carpet. My brother and I stood and allowed ourselves to fall backwards into Dad’s arms. I wasn’t paying attention, and one time I fell backwards. Dad wasn’t there.

The day that POWs are repatriated is a day of national rejoicing. The television and print media bring into every home images of the moment of their release, together with the story of their being taken prisoner, their experiences, and the stories of their families. However, when the POW returns to his family he is not the same man who left it. The period of captivity leaves in its wake a heavy burden of extreme experiences, some of which are extraordinarily traumatic.

By the same token, frequently the family home does not resemble the home the POW left (Hunter-King, 1993; Neria, 1993). The POWs and their families have to start coping from the point where the natural sequence of their life was interrupted, and the return to a welcome routine is strewn with obstacles. The captivity period has been described in autobiographical

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books, as have the effects of captivity on the soldiers and their families. Studies have focused on the captivity experience, its effects (Barnea, 1981), and the stress residues left in its wake (Neria, 1993, 2000; Solomon, 1995; Solomon, Lev-Shalem, & Dekel, 2007). By means of a case study of the four children of a POW, the present study examines, after four decades, the long-term effects of ambiguous loss on their lives from a narrative perspective as adults.

CAPTIVITY AS A LOSS OF CERTAINTY

A POW abruptly loses his identity as a free man and becomes wholly dependent upon the wishes of his captors. In most cases he spends prolonged periods in isolation; undergoes grueling interrogations, torture, and humiliation; and experiences hunger and thirst (Hunter, 1986; Hunter-King, 1993; Neria, 1993). The POW's anxious family has to contend with his absence, which is accompanied by uncertainty: not knowing what has befallen the husband/father or when he will return. Until such time that the POW returns, his family exists in a state of waiting (Hunter, 1983), and the family's reactions shift from optimism and hope to depression and despair (McCubbin & Figley, 1983). It is important to note that the uncertainty is reduced when the father's location is known, but until his return the family has to cope with "knowing without knowing" (Campbell & Demi, 2000) and a sense of being "stuck in time" (Hunter, 1988). This situation, which describes uncertain and vague loss, is termed "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 1999).

Boss's work (1999, 2004, 2006) on ambiguous loss provides an important framework for studying how the adult children of POWs were affected by their parent's absence during the period of captivity and after his return. Boss distinguishes between two types of ambiguous loss situations. The first occurs when a family member is physically absent and the second is when the loss is emotional or cognitive. Physical loss is usually associated with war, kidnapping, ethnic cleansing, genocide, mass natural disaster, or situations in which a loved one is missing or has been taken prisoner. In everyday life this type of loss can occur in the wake of divorce, putting a baby up for adoption, and even emigration. Emotional or cognitive loss occurs when a family member is physically present but absent due to a disease such as Alzheimer's, traumatic brain injury, autism, depression, addictions, or chronic or mental illness, which results in the loved one being psychologically "absent" or becoming a different person.

The different types of ambiguous loss differ from certain loss, for when loss is due to death it is clear, obvious, and defined; there is official verification, such as a death certificate, and ceremonies and rituals are held that facilitate the start of the grieving process (Boss, 1999). Ambiguous loss occurs when there are doubts regarding a person's death or well-being, when the family member is "there but not there," and it "freezes" the grieving process

and prevents acceptance of the loss. The uncertainty makes ambiguous loss extremely difficult to cope with. The families seemingly freeze and do not move forward; they are in a situation of “senseless” time continuums and a sense of having no control. This is especially true when the uncertainty continues and no one knows when it will end (Boss, 2006; Huebner et al., 2007). One of the outcomes of ambiguous loss is the creation of boundary ambiguity whereby the family’s boundaries, both inward and outward, are unclear. Family members describe it as a situation in which they do not know who is in and who is out of the family (Boss, 2006).

In a long-term study, Hunter (1986, 1988) found that the father’s absence due to captivity had negative effects, which were manifested in prolonged stress and pressure, fear of abandonment, particularly close relationships between mother and daughters, and the absence of a male role model for sons. There were, however, positive effects on the children as well, such as increased self-esteem, a sense of maturity, and independence. It appears, therefore, that the children’s reactions to their father’s absence are not uniform. Some accept the temporary loss and are confident in their father’s return, while others experience the absence as abandonment.

Jensen, Martin, and Watanabe (1996) found that more than half the children in their study experienced sadness, disciplinary problems at home, and difficulties at school, and 6% displayed difficulties that mandated treatment. The most influential variable on the children’s emotional state was the functioning of the remaining parent. Some of the children avoided sharing their feelings with their mothers in order to spare them further pain. The mothers presumed that the children were vulnerable and needed to be protected against the trauma, and wanted to spare them the need to discuss and talk about their missing or captive father (Hunter, 1988; Campbell & Demi, 2000). When the mother’s coping took the form of denial and depression or emotional apathy, the children tended to feel abandoned (Dahl, McCubbin, & Lester, 1976). Some mothers found it difficult to assess their children’s emotional needs, and consequently did not acknowledge the need to seek professional counseling. In these situations there is heightened concern for the children’s health and accounts of frequent visits to doctors due to common children’s ailments or mild injuries (Hunter, 1988).

During the captivity period the POW’s reunion with his family is envisaged as perfect, but in reality it is difficult and complex. Many and varied causes contribute to this, such as disappointment, culture shock, home life having gone on, the meaning of the war, fitting into the family, continued routine, and the changes undergone by both parents. They need time to get to know one another again, and to renegotiate the division of roles, mutual expectations, and independence. Hunter’s study (1982) shows that, although at times the father’s return led to destabilization of the balance attained during the period of his absence, by his family in general and the children in particular, it was found that the father’s return was a critical

variable that “erased” the ambiguous experience in the child’s life. After their father’s return the children’s adjustment at school and in the community was good, and they displayed greater independence than children whose fathers had not returned (Hunter, 1982; Boss, 1977).

In her study on the ambiguous loss of wives of MIA pilots in Vietnam and Cambodia, Boss (1974) describes a situation wherein some wives preserved the father’s “presence” during his absence and refrained from making decisions adapted to the new situation; all of his roles in the home “waited” for his return. A low level of functioning and a high level of conflict were evident in these families. It was found that when the father’s roles were psychologically preserved and “frozen,” there was an increase in the negative effect of the situation on the children and on the functioning of the wife herself (Boss, 1999).

When the POW returns, his family faces yet another challenge if during his absence a new baby was born into the family, or an infant has grown and matured beyond recognition. These children who grew up during their father’s absence frequently have a world of their own in which the father has played no part, and consequently he is perceived as a stranger who does not belong (Hunter, 1988; McCubbin & Figley, 1993). At times, when he returns, the repatriated POW’s ability to maintain meaningful intimate relationships and fulfill close and committed emotional roles as a father and husband is impaired (Neria, 1993), and his psychological and physical condition affects the family’s ability to rehabilitate itself (Hunter-King, 1993). One repatriated POW describes it thus: “We came out of captivity . . . captivity hasn’t come out of us” (Zeifa, 2009).

In 2001 the Hunter Institute of Mental Health in Australia published a study that focused on the question of whether existing bereavement models are suitable for working with the families of missing persons. The principal finding was that the abundant research on bereavement is only partially suitable in conceptual and treatment terms for the families of POWs and MIAs (Glasscock, 2006), since for the families of POWs, as opposed to bereavement situations, there is always hope for the POW’s return even when there is a sense of uncertainty.

The present study examines the issue of ambiguous loss with reference to loss and bereavement theories and their contribution to understanding its psychological aspects, including the similarities and differences between coping with loss and bereavement and coping with ambiguous loss.

GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT THEORIES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO UNDERSTANDING AMBIGUOUS LOSS

It appears that part of Bowlby’s model of the stages of grief (1980), which addresses the first days following loss, is suitable for and relevant to families of MIAs and POWs, who react with shock and non-acceptance of the new

situation (shock and numbness). The second stage, yearning and searching, is also relevant to the feelings of families of POWs. Whereas in the process of coping with grief there is an expectation that gradually acceptance of the finality of the loss will be attained, and the searching will diminish over time, for families of POWs and MIAs this stage continues intensively over a long period and is sometimes accompanied by a desire for intensive inner or public activity. Even when the urge to search diminishes, it is very slow to do so and remains accompanied by doubt and ambiguity (Dempsey & Baago, 1998).

The new approaches to addressing the processing of grief are constructivist and are described by means of the two-track model of bereavement (Rubin, 1999), which enables examination of the loss process on two parallel axes. First, the functioning track describes the level of functioning in a wide range of aspects—emotional, interpersonal, somatic, and psychiatric—and there is also reference to individuals' ability to invest mental energy in their life in addition to their emotional investment in the loss (Malkinson & Rubin, 2007). Second, the relationship track reflects the relationship with the deceased loved one in the bereaved individual's inner world, the nature of the relationship, the intensity of preoccupation with it, and the positive and negative reactions associated with memories of and missing the deceased (Rubin, 1999, 2000). In the case of the family of a POW, as with families that have experienced loss, the continued preoccupation with the absent father and the search for the ongoing inner relationship with him is evident. An individual can function well but still experience high levels of involvement with the image of the absent person and conduct a dialogue and interaction with him by means of inner representations, such as memories, a sense of illusion that he is present, a sense of feeling him, smelling his scent, or experiences of supposedly seeing him (Marwit & Klass, 1995; Klass, 1993).

Whereas the functioning track has been investigated in studies on the responses of family members in general, and children in particular, during the father's absence and soon after his return (Boss, 2006), the present study is innovative in that it explores the experience of ambiguous loss from the perspective of the second track of long-term inner relationships. The study examines the traces left by the absence period on the worldview, emotions, beliefs, and interpersonal relationships of the POW's children many years after their father's return.

METHOD

The present study employed in-depth interviews with four children from one family whose father was an Israeli air force pilot who was taken prisoner and remained in captivity in Egypt from 1970 to 1973. A joint meeting was then

held with all the interviewees using the focus group method. The individual interviews and the meeting of the focus group were all recorded and transcribed.

The methodology employed is an interpretive constructivist approach (Bruner, 1990, 1992) that examines reality through the eyes of participants and according to their understanding. Children of POWs are studied from their subjective experiences, the meanings and interpretations they accorded to the period of their father's absence from their lives over a protracted time continuum. The meaning of the concept of ambiguous loss in the participants' experiences is the subject of investigation; the phenomenon is the emotional experience, and hence can only be described by the subjects by means of the subjective memories, beliefs, and images with which they present their inner world (Creswell, 1998).

The attempt to identify common characteristics in children of POWs is complex due to the profusion of variables unique to each family: the nature of the captivity, its duration, the children's ages during their father's absence, the mother's personality and functioning, the existence of a social support system, the family's financial situation, the father's physical and psychological condition when he returns, and the family's ability to rehabilitate itself after the captivity period (Hunter-King, 1993). What makes generalization difficult is the relatively small number of children comprising this group. Furthermore, long-term effects are examined in retrospect. It is impossible to isolate the effects of the period of the father's absence from other life components: successes and failures, healthy and satisfying intimate relationships, or additional family losses. A case study serves to illustrate a phenomenon and search for premises that can be tested in later studies. Stake (1995) contends that a case study is not conducted for the benefit of the case itself, but in order to gain further insight. Despite the limitations described above, we view the case study described in the present investigation as a pioneering one that can contribute significantly to understanding the unique psychological condition of children when one of their parents is present-absent (meaning that the parent is physically absent but psychologically present), and can serve as a point of departure for further research on children of POWs and MIAs and families who have experienced ambiguous loss.

A CASE STUDY OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Family members of POWs can describe the moment they are notified, after which nothing would ever be the same. The time, the place, the sights, the smells, light and shadow, where they were standing, and the music that played in the background are imprinted in the person's body and memory, together with the words that were spoken, which come back and reverberate accurately even after a considerable time has elapsed (Leonard, 1999).

I remember the first day: We were just about to go out with Mom to see a children's play. The phone rang. Mom said we have to wait now . . . another phone call . . . and then two of Mom's friends come and tell her that Dad's been taken prisoner. . . . I remember that day and I remember the day he came home . . . they are a living, breathing memory for me; I don't remember the years in between.

Ambiguous time constitutes a central component in the experience of the father's absence, since regular time continuums come to a halt on the day the father's absence begins.

When the POW is taken prisoner, the family's clear boundaries are lost. Although people in the family's immediate surroundings come together to help the family and contribute to its ability to continue functioning, their very involvement in the family's life leads to loss of its clear boundaries. If the father is absent when the child is very young, there is constant preoccupation with the question of who the permanent attachment figure is. His or her first memories can include interchangeable figures, people who come into the home to help the mother and are intermittently present:

Mom told me that we were really cute little girls and everybody loved us. Actually, everybody raised us. I have this memory of lots of people raising us, it seemed odd, unexpected, you wonder about people, what's their story, what do they want from me.

Two central themes recur in the interviews: the issue of attachment to and detachment from the parents and a sense of puzzlement regarding an incomprehensible world, for to some extent everyday events are detached from concrete existence and are not anchored in it. The child finds it difficult to decipher the picture of the world with the tools of thinking and understanding at his or her disposal: The father is gone, yet at the same time his presence is mediated by the mother. The close environment links every event to his absence and existence simultaneously.

The child's inner feeling is one of confusion and complexity, and moreover, of doubt regarding the existence of permanent, routine, everyday reality.

The sense of continuity may be restored and resume structure when the mother decides to continue celebrating birthdays, the seasons, and festivals, as the mother of the children in the present study indeed decided to do. One of the children describes how all the children pleaded with their mother to mark on the calendar the date their father was going to come home, and to promise that it would be so, but the mother was cautious and avoided doing so while at the same time expressing her total belief that the period of the father's absence would come to an end.

The adult children describe the family during their father's absence as being obliged to outwardly appear as strong as society expects it to be. Real

life with the pain, loss of the father's presence, with yearning and anxiety, does not receive legitimate forms of expression. Moreover, there is a sense that the real feelings attending the father's absence must be concealed.

Adults frequently find it difficult to bridge between the father's presence and absence. Ambiguous loss presents every answer provided by the mother as conveying a double message: "The experience I had with her was one of double meanings, ambivalence. Like ambiguity." One of the girls who found it difficult to tolerate the ambiguous situation preferred her mother to declare the father dead, and goes on to explain to her mother: "They're lying to you, he's dead. You should remarry, we want a new father."

The captivity period, or the period of absence, is experienced as an impossible interim state, and as such it undermines the confidence of the adults who "cooperate" with the ambiguous loss. This experience has an impact on a wide range of life aspects, such as choosing a partner, a career, and even raising children. The captivity experience continues to accompany the children as part of their life narrative and includes the impossible cost: "It's like being abandoned in an incubator."

For the children, the "display window" experience continued throughout their lives, even after their father's return, and was manifested in a sense of disparity between the way things look from the outside and what the children are like on the inside, between false and truth.

One of the normative developmental tasks of young children (especially boys) is identification with their father. One of the children described how dramatic games provided him with identification situations, and how he "presenced" his father through play:

I'm his son. Even when he was in captivity I felt that he was with me. We wrote to him, and he was absent at all kinds of events, but it was clear to me that he was coming back and it was clear to me that he is present. No question! The image was inside me and it came together for me when he came back.

McDougall's (1989) findings support the son's account to the effect that despite the difficulty, this kind of identification is possible: Simple actions like writing letters to the father and collecting the children's drawings and photographs create outwardly mediated continuums. When the father is in captivity and the mother continues to display admiration over each of the children's big or small achievements, the children feel that the abilities developing in them are appreciated, and despite their father's absence a positive self-image is constructed within them. The ability to display admiration for the children, their progress and achievements, and to validate them is the basis for self-knowledge and a positive self-image. This admiration is described as one of life's "little surprises" when the mother, by means of her physical presence with the children, and the father, by means of

the mother's letters, obtain proof that the children are growing up and developing even though time is ostensibly standing still.

From the accounts of the children interviewed in the present study, it emerges that the mother took it upon herself to maintain constant contact with the father. She took pictures of the Lego structures the children built so that their father could admire them, and also encouraged her son to maintain a "connection" with his father through verbal messages by means of which he could imagine his father praising him for his good behavior.

The children of the family describe those in their environment as expecting them to fully adapt and function, disregarding the upsetting emotional experience attended by anxiety, which was manifested in attention disorders and concentration difficulties: "I remember my teacher always saying 'You've got a head, but you don't have a backside.'"

The period of the father's absence is described as "wasted" time due to the inner feeling that life has stopped: "The whole time Dad was in captivity our regular life stopped. I didn't dance like a regular girl in extracurricular classes, and this missed opportunity has always been with me." From the accounts of the parents and the children alike, it is evident that the children had a rich and full upbringing, including nonformal education in the form of extracurricular classes and activities with other children of the same age. Yet, despite the fact that during this period the children were physically involved and engaged in their day-to-day activities, on an emotional level they were "absent," as if floating in the air, and experienced similar situations to those described in a grief process.

Due to a sense of ambivalence and ambiguity regarding the boundary between life and death, between present and absent, the children of POWs and MIAs remain in a state of constant anxiety. There is no situation that is final and there is no situation whose existence is assured. Some of the children demand "solid facts" to enable them to reorganize themselves and stop suffering from yearning and longing for their father.

The inner grappling with the amorphous entity of the ambiguous loss experience is generally described by means of negative representations: "There's a kind of black hole that just swallows people up. Takes them into captivity, or kills them."

In concrete reality, the POW's children felt that the adults close to them lacked the ability and strength to maintain a stable and secure living environment for them. Small, everyday events that in a regular environment would have elicited reactions of encouragement and admiration from adults were experienced as worthless compared to the dramatic events associated with their father and the amplified national myth he represents:

From a very young age it was clear to me that what decides life is in the sky. It has nothing at all to do with me. It's not worth making an effort at school, because something can always happen.

The boundaries between life and death, between presence and absence, are blurred. Death is incomprehensible, and somehow life is also perceived as unreal, made of unstable material: "It's obvious that there'll be some disappearing. It's all kind of cardboard."

The children's accounts of their father's return are related in the third person ("as if one day a man appeared"). The father's image, which accompanied the children during his absence in the form of photographs, remains photograph-like in their internalized representation as well: "Dad was like a very distant figure. He definitely remained like a photograph."

The memory of the day the father returned is etched in their memory down to the smallest detail and remains imprinted on it, just like the day he was taken prisoner:

Dad stepped off the bus, he hopped, as if he'd fallen through the door - . . . We all hugged one another . . . He was a bit fatter than I remembered and his hair was cropped short.

Hunter (1988) describes the POW or MIA parent's return home as a source of stress for both sides: for the family and for the POW or MIA himself. Alongside the fantasies of being reunited, there are also fears concerning the man who will return and to what extent he will resemble the familiar man. For the children in the present study, the experience of the father's absence remains even after his return: "My dad returned home from captivity and a few days later he was already back in the army. He came back from the photo on the wall over there, but he was hardly ever home."

For the POW's family, his return home is not a one-time event that immediately restores everything to the way it was. The children and the mother have adapted to a particular way of life in the father's absence. The experience of the father's absence during his captivity does not remain a distant memory, but is an experience that accompanies and affects the children into their adult life. Memories repeatedly resurface, and stories from the period of his absence continue to preoccupy their thoughts. Alongside the collective joy over the POW's return, Hunter (1988) describes a situation wherein many families isolated themselves from their friends and community and preferred to keep to themselves rather than being an object of watchfulness. Yet there is a constant feeling that the father's presence in the home is not self-evident and a need to create situations that will "necessitate" his presence and validate it: "I used to invent homework in math just so he'd sit with me, help me." The parents attempted to make up for lost time with intensive family life: "After he came back there were more family trips, more visits with friends." But despite the parents' attempts to create a welcome routine, an inner feeling of the present-absent experience remains: "Sometimes he's there, and sometimes not."

In her studies, Hunter (1983) found that children's ability to cope with the stress reflects the mother's ability to be attentive to them and fully present in her relationship with them. When the mother is overwhelmed by her own distress and hardship, the children are liable to feel that *both* parents have abandoned them. In the case described in the present study, the mother's meaningful presence during the father's absence is evident, as well as the genuine efforts of both parents to create a support system when the father returned.

The children of POWs have to develop a worthy self-identity beside a parent who constitutes a public symbol and a national myth. Is it possible to feel anger, disappointment, anticipation for small things, and especially self-worth and importance in the face of the power of a parent who is also a symbol and a myth? The inner turmoil and confusion between feelings toward the family and these feelings being attributed to representatives of the state made it difficult for the children to find a discrete identity:

Everybody did really important things for the state . . . and I had no value, because what could be the contribution of a little boy compared to the importance of the heroic POW who'd returned. I was afraid the myth [was] taking over our lives.

Years after the father's repatriation, the children's self-perception remained firmly fixed in their identity as "the POW's boy/girl," for their close environment continued to process and reconstruct the experience of the captivity period: "For many years everybody tells you how they looked after you and how much they helped Mom; I never felt important enough."

Faced with the overwhelming force of the myth, the children harbor a desire to be ordinary children with an ordinary family, with parents who do not place excessive demands on the children.

From the accounts of all four of the POW's children, it appears that the captivity story continues to accompany them even after their father's return, and the ambiguity regarding his psychological presence remained for many years.

A question that has been almost entirely overlooked in the literature pertains to the continuing effects of the captivity period even after it has ended. How can a relationship be established with a parent figure who has been absent for a prolonged period?

I made steps toward him, I wanted a connection with him so badly. I wanted his approval and to have all kinds of talks with him to gain his approval.

Anger is an expression of pain, and for some of the children it continued for a long time after their father's return: "I also felt a need to be angry." In

the children's perception, it is inconceivable that no one is to blame for the suffering caused by their father's absence.

Formulating a personal identity is the main task during adolescence (Flum, 1995; Marcia, 1993), which requires an inner choice system. Choice occurs in the wake of a crisis that raises identity questions, some of which are connected to relationships with the family of origin. The basis for the ability to decide is conditional upon a sense of basic confidence in the experience of stability (which usually originates in family perception). The difficulty of coping with life choices, from which adolescents are "launched" (Sofer, Kacen, & Shochat, 1993) to the social space beyond the family, was brought up in the interviews: "It's hard, it's hard, I don't know how to decide, things happen to me and I can't decide."

Some of the accounts describe difficulties in choosing a partner, since intimacy is perceived as dangerous and as such should be carefully checked, and even avoided: "It's important to leave the [intimate] place so it's not too costly—if he leaves."

From the children's accounts it appears that they attach considerable importance to their own role as parents and to the "correcting" they can effect. They express a powerful need to experience raising their own children without interruption or disruption, to experience pleasure from seeing them grow "before their very eyes," and to establish with them broad, deep relationships uninterrupted by external factors.

Studies dealing with growth after a traumatic experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) have found that despite a sense of growth in terms of worldview and self-perception, the loss and the absence impair self-image (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). However, they have also found that some people who experience trauma report a sense of growth as a result of the trauma and coping with it (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Defining events can result in transformation and development or become inhibiting and blocking, and the way an individual makes choices and his or her subjective interpretation are determined by a multitude of complex factors. A traumatic event, such as a parent being taken prisoner, can also lead to the discovery of strengths, as one of the POW's children describes:

When I look back at this whole event, I see my parents coping well. They set a personal example of very strong people who don't give in—not to despair, not to pain, and not to difficulty.

With this growth and development, however, residues that affect worldview and beliefs still remain. They experience fear of change and unexpected separations, a sense that life's boundaries are unclear and that the boundaries of death and disappearance are not absolute: "I don't really believe in death, because it's a place you come back from," said one of the POW's daughters. The "ordered world" that was disrupted during the "present-absent"

experience during childhood remains vague and ambiguous despite the adult's cognitive understanding and knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The present article has described the psychological processes that occur in children with reference to their father's absence from their retrospective perspective as adults. The study shows that the families of POWs cope on the two tracks described in the two-track model of bereavement (Malkinson & Rubin, 2007; Rubin, 1981, 1999): the external functioning track and the inner relationship with the absent person. Concurrently with independent everyday functioning, unconnected to the POW or MIA, a constant inner dialogue is conducted with him by means of memories, returning to places he liked or preserving his belongings (Trevor, 2001).

Conventional wisdom holds that a supportive environment plays an important role in providing support for the mother and children during the father's absence. However, from the interviewees' accounts it emerges that the presence of so many people helping their mother with everyday problems actually heightened the sense of ambiguity and confusion.

In this situation, wherein the family boundaries that distinguish between those who are and those who are not part of it have been erased, and with them the family's differentiation, the family faces new difficulties in its functioning. Although support for the family seems an obvious need, in her study on bereaved parents Shalev (2009) found that not only did the efforts to socially support the family not ease its functioning, they even exacerbated the difficulties. Although the parents indeed tried to seek comfort and compassion with others, they also felt that no one really understood them.

After the first stage, in which all the emotional systems are undermined, the mother and children adjust to a new way of life on their own. The family creates new routines and habits that support its new identity and are suited to it from an understanding that the father's absence, albeit temporary, is an existing situation. The way the family copes with ambiguous loss during the absence period has long-term effects on the children's continued growth and development, their general outlook, and their ability to experience a wide range of experiences, within and without the perspective of their father's absence. Of paramount importance during this period is the mother's ability to not only direct emotional resources to dealing with the issue of repatriating the POW, but also to providing the children with an experience of security and a sense of rebuilding the family.

The father's repatriation and his return home dispel the ambiguity in the children's lives, and facilitate the return of the whole family to the community. But the period of the father's absence, his physical absence and often his psychological absence as well, affects the children's lives and

the effects do not dissipate as soon as the captivity experience ends. Moreover, the POW does not always manage to find a place in his family as someone who has a role and carries parental authority. Previous studies have indicated long-term posttraumatic effects on POWs and their wives and on the marital relationship (Dvir, 2004).

Lieblich (1989) presents the accounts of repatriated POWs and their wives in which it emerges that, in some families, the psychological coping with captivity was a positive and even heroic and strengthening experience. Hunter (1983) found that some families described the captivity period as an opportunity for growth, for strengthening mental fortitude, and for functioning more independently and maturely.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

Can a case study be considered representative of processes that take place in other families? This issue was discussed in general terms in the introduction, and it is especially pertinent in light of the considerable variance between the narrative descriptions presented above, since all of the interviewees presented the captivity period and its long-term effects on their life in a different way. This variance is supported by studies in the field of bereavement, in which the need to examine personality variables in order to understand coping processes is emphasized. We believe that universal processes, which are the outcome of expected reactions to ambiguous loss, and unique personality and family variables should be examined simultaneously. We contend that the psychological significance of a parent's presence-absence can shed light on a fairly large population of children living in the shadow of ambiguous loss, whether physical or psychological, such as parents suffering from depression or posttraumatic stress disorder.

A few practical recommendations emerge from the increasingly mounting body of research: Ambiguous loss should be recognized as a stress situation, and professional and social assistance should be provided to family members. It is of paramount importance for relationships within the family to be strengthened (included intergenerational relationships), and at the same time for new relationships outside the family to be formed. Family members should be encouraged to search for and find meaning in the ambiguous loss and to create ceremonies and rituals that construct and establish regular family and social reference, such as celebrating events and occasions. Boss (1999) emphasizes the need to learn how to live with uncertainty, to avoid self-blame and blaming others, and to practice positive thinking. During the father's absence it is also important to strengthen the figure of the mother as a mediator, and to build as normative a life routine as possible. In this context, it seems that the mother's functioning and its implications for the children during and following the absence period are worthy of further research.

The parent who remains with the children needs support in three areas: (a) familiarity with reactions associated with the stress of absence, (b) help in creating a new routine that is adapted to the new situation, and (c) support from the nonformal system. The parent should be encouraged to talk with the children about their concerns and the difficulty of coping with the changes, and he or she should be aware of the many and varied ways in which children can display and express their feelings and should view this as healthy behavior. The parent should also serve as a model for self-help with stress reactions so that the children do not feel responsible for his or her emotional reactions to the situation. The importance of placing school demands on the children should also be addressed, as well as the importance of work and family responsibility, while creating a sense of control over the surrounding life space. In addition, psychological assistance should be provided for all the family members when the POW or MIA returns home.

Despite the methodological difficulties, we recommend basing further research on a broader sample of children who experienced their father's absence in their childhood. This would enable examination and confirmation of the understandings obtained in the present study, as well as greater understanding of the long-term inner processes that take place during a parent's prolonged absence and the impact of the absence on the children's continued development and growth after the parent's return to the home and his family.

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