

Perceptions of the Absence and Reintegration of a Prisoner of War Father from the Perspective of His Children as Adults

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Abstract The studied test case presents the adult voices of Israeli children whose fathers were prisoners of war (POWs) in Egypt from 1969 to 1973. The study's findings indicate long-term effects of the captivity on the children of POWs, and that an inner formative experience associated with the period of the father's absence remains despite his return. The findings are explained by means of ambiguous loss theories and by loss and bereavement theories. Recommendations emerge for ambiguous loss to be recognized as a stress situation, and for professional and social assistance to be provided for the family in building a life routine that does not freeze in place, but continues during the father's absence and after his return.

Keywords Ambiguous loss · Children of POWs · Present-absent father · Absent parent

The state of captivity, in all its complexity, has preoccupied society throughout history. In numerous stories in the Old Testament (e.g., Numbers 21:1–3; Deuteronomy 20, 24:5, 10–14), the taking of prisoners is shown to constitute grounds for war, and redemption of captives is considered a commandment that takes precedence over others. In the early nineteenth

century, international entities began to acknowledge the notion that soldiers who fall into enemy hands deserve legal protection. This shift ultimately led to the creation of a special of Prisoner of War (POW) status for soldiers captured by the enemy. Regulations pertaining to the treatment of POWs were first formulated in the Second Hague Convention in 1899 and were also included in the 1949 Geneva Conventions (Gavriely 2006). The United Nations and the Red Cross have since made it a mission to take care of captives whose human rights have been denied.

The literature on POWs usually focuses on the prisoners' biographical stories and the political and strategic aspects associated with their release. It is only in the last 30 years that research attention has shifted toward the families of POWs. Hunter and Boss (Boss 1999, 2004, 2006; Hunter 1986) established much of the research on psychological and familial reactions surrounding a father's absence from his children's lives during his period of captivity and in the first year after his release and repatriation. The POW's family has been described in the literature as a '**family in waiting**' (Hunter 1983) that exists between hope and despair (McCubbin and Figley 1983). The POW father is '**present-absent**' in the family's life, since although he is ostensibly part of it, in everyday life he is actually absent. Boss (1999) termed this situation '**ambiguous loss**', since the family member is 'there but not there', 'here but not here.' In many cases society expects the family of a POW to enter a state of mourning; however, people cannot begin mourning when there is ambiguous loss; rather they are stuck in limbo between thinking their loved one might not come back and hoping for and anticipating his return (Boss 2014). The family experiences a sense of having no control and seemingly freezes (Boss 2006; Huebner et al. 2007), a state that Hunter (1988) describes as being '**stuck in time**.' Another outcome of ambiguous loss is the creation of **boundary ambiguity**, which family members

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describe as a situation of not knowing who is in and who is out of the family (Boss 2006). A clear-cut death is undoubtedly painful, but funeral rituals can take place when there is a body, and family and friends come together to re-affirm that the person has died.

The absence of a parent in war-time has detrimental behavioral and emotional effects on children. Jensen et al. (1996) studied the effects of a parent being stationed in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm on American children, and found that more than half the parents who had remained at home (usually the mothers) reported that the children experienced sadness, displayed behavioral problems or encountered difficulties at school. Six percent of the children displayed difficulties that necessitated treatment. According to the researchers, the most influential variable on the children's emotional state was the functioning of the remaining parent, who, during the period of the other's absence, is forced to function as two parents (Hunter 1988; McCubbin and Figley 1983). Indeed, McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson & Robertson (1976) have shown that when mothers use denial, depression or apathy in order to cope with a father's absence, their children feel abandoned.

In their study, Jensen and colleagues (1996) noted that many children who did not experience behavioral problems exhibited 'inwardly'-directed symptoms, such as depression and prolonged sadness. The researchers contend that these children may have wanted to 'protect' the remaining parent and to avoid hurting her further, and consequently internalized their emotions instead of manifesting them behaviorally. When the absent parent returned, and the situation was ostensibly restored to its 'previous' condition, behavioral problems and displays of venting anger and frustration appeared. Similarly, Hunter (1988) found that children of POWs or fathers reported as missing in action (MIA) took on roles characterized by a maturity exceeding their years. The children observed their mothers' behavior, internalized it and, in most cases, avoided sharing their own feelings with their mothers in order to avoid causing them pain. This pattern may have been exacerbated by mothers' perceptions that their children were vulnerable and needed to be protected from trauma, as a result of which they sought to spare their children from needing to talk about their absent fathers (Campbell and Demi 2000). Some of the mothers were unable to fully assess their children's emotional needs, and as a result, did not acknowledge that they were in need of therapy. In these cases, the mothers' concern for their children's health intensified, and they were more likely to seek medical help for common childhood illnesses or minor injuries (Hunter 1988).

The POW's return home—an event commemorated, in many cases, by national celebration—is the fulfillment of the family's hopes, and marks the end of the prolonged period of anticipation. Yet, the POW who returns to his family is not the same man who left it. By the same token, in many cases the family home does not resemble the home the POW left.

For example, Hezi Shai, an Israeli soldier captured by the Syrian army in June 1982, recounts returning to a child who had been born during his absence: "I had a new daughter and I had to learn all about her and not see her as something alien" (Aharonivish, 2010). Upon the POW's return, resumption of routines is attended by psychological obstacles, which include personal and familial obstacles, as well obstacles deriving from the family's surroundings, in addition to the POW's post-traumatic reactions (Solomon and Dekel 2006).

The POW's post-traumatic experiences are particularly likely to impair the repatriated POW's ability to maintain meaningful intimate relationships and fulfill close and committed emotional roles as a father and husband (Ohry et al. 1994). Even captives who have been treated in accordance with international law are likely to have undergone traumatic experiences, such as witnessing the deaths of their comrades or experiencing physical injury, and the sense that their lives were at risk. Clearly, trauma may be even more severe among captives who are subjected to systematic torture for the purpose of extracting information or breaking the prisoners' spirits. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common outcome of such traumatic experiences, and is characterized by multiple symptoms: nightmares, emotional avoidance, loss of interest in the activities of daily life, and hyperarousal (Hunt 2010; Keynan 2015).

. Any one of these symptoms is likely to have detrimental effects on a marriage or family life. The POW who returns from captivity tends to be highly self-involved, to avoid sharing his feelings or to engage in intimate exchanges and is unable to moderate his responses to interpersonal conflict. Thus, PTSD can reduce the ability of a POW to readapt to the intimacy of marriage, impairing his sexual function and increasing the likelihood of violence in the relationship (Dekel et al. 2008).

As the research discussed above suggests, the manner in which a family is affected by a parent's absence in war-time and by the parent's subsequent return has been explored to some extent. Yet only recently are we beginning to hear the grown children of POWs speak about the long-term effects of the captivity period from their perspectives as adults (Shalev and Ben-Asher 2011).

The present study seeks to shed light on this issue by listening to the voices of 13 adults, from 7 different nuclear families,¹ whose fathers were Israeli POWs in Egypt when the participants were children. The POW fathers were absent from the home for periods ranging between one-and-a-half and 4 years, from the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt to the Yom Kippur War (1969–1973). Testimonies of Israeli soldiers who were taken captive in these wars (Lieblich 1989) describe the typical treatment of Israeli POWs in Egypt:

¹ Owing to confidentiality considerations, we cannot specify how many participants were in each family.

6 months of interrogation and harsh torture, followed by a period of stabilization, during which the physical and emotional abuse to which prisoners were subjected was far less severe.

Almost four decades after their fathers' return from captivity, the study participants reconstructed their experiences as young children; from the moment they received the news, through the captivity period, to the period following their fathers' return to Israel. The study examines the significance of this period in shaping participants' perceptions and beliefs, and the manner in which it affected their identities and the choices they subsequently made in their lives. More specifically, we seek to examine how children as adults describe in retrospect their experience of a father's absence during the period of captivity until his return home, as well as the long-term effects of this experience, and whether the period of the father's absence left a post-traumatic imprint on the children's lives. We note that our observations and conclusions are likely to be limited to the unique case of families of POWs or of parents who are absent during war-time. Subsequently they return, and may not be comparable to other scenarios of loss or presence-absence, such as divorce or the terminal illness of a family member.

Method

The research paradigm draws on two theoretical approaches: qualitative and narrative. We identified 14 adults who were children (kindergarten age or above) when their fathers were taken captive in Egypt during the War of Attrition. Of those, 13 participated in focus groups (one was out of the country), while 8 agreed to be interviewed one-on-one. (The relatively small number of children did not constitute a purposeful sample, but was aimed at the inclusion of all the adult children.) At the time the study was conducted, 38 years after the fathers' repatriation, the participants were aged 40 to 56. We carried out the one-on-one interviews and used them as a source for obtaining open personal narratives of the interviewees' life stories. Most of these narratives begin close to the time the father was taken prisoner, and end with a description of the participants' formulated identities as adults. Qualitative material was obtained in two focus group sessions, also facilitated by the authors. This material is more concise and was also influenced by the reactions of other group members to the issues raised by the participants. All the interactions were recorded.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed employing a categorical and holistic approach. In the analysis, we addressed all the data as a whole, and did not differentiate between the material

obtained in the personal interviews and that obtained in the focus groups.

Ethical Issues

As with any narrative study, it was necessary to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees. In keeping with stringent ethical principles, we provided all participants with an opportunity to read a draft of the present article and obtained their consent for its publication in accordance with a predetermined set of limitations. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and the quotations presented in the article are faithful translations of the words of the participant with the name cited.

Limitations of the Study

An individual's interpretations of the long-term effects of an event are subjective, based on his or her 'inner truth', which includes beliefs, values, worldviews, attitude to self and others, and preferred modes of action. It is impossible to isolate the effects of the period of the father's absence from the effects of other life components: successes, failures, healthy and satisfying intimate relationships, or additional family losses. Despite this, we believe that the material we obtained and its methodological analysis can significantly contribute to an understanding of the unique psychological state of a child whose parent has been taken into captivity as a POW.

Participants' Reports

Analysis of the material reveals six principal themes along which the experience of the father's absence is constructed: (1) the moment news is received of the father being taken prisoner: the moment the world changed; (2) the captivity period: waiting and moving on; (3) the father's return home: from dream to the reality of the adjustment crisis; (4) growing up in the shadow of the legend of heroism; (5) the silence following the family's reunion; (6) effects into adulthood of a parent's period of captivity.

The Moment News is Received of the Father Being Taken Prisoner: The Moment the World Changed

Although individuals differ in their reactions to bad news, all such reactions are characterized by a clear memory of the moment the news was received (Snyder and Ford 1987; Buckman 1984; Karnieli 2006). People who have suffered trauma, loss or other dramatic events are typically able to accurately describe the moment the world stopped revolving on its axis, after which nothing would ever be the same.

This observation is true for all study participants, all of whom were of kindergarten age or higher when their fathers were taken prisoner. Participants' accounts suggest that their memories of the moment of receiving the news of their fathers' captivity are seared into their consciousness and feelings. That fraction of a moment is vibrantly commemorated in each of their stories, and the character of the relayed memories is almost uniform in the concentration of senses that were simultaneously in play. Participants' responses indicate, as Miller (2008) suggests, that the moment of receiving the bad news was a defining event that clearly distinguished the beginning of a new period.

All the participants described how other details, no matter how important, were erased from memory, whereas the memory of the moment the news was received remains alive: "I remember receiving the news as if it was yesterday. And when Mom told me 'Dad's been taken prisoner', I actually remember my mouth opening to cry, heartrending sobbing." [Mor]

Each participant's accounts also attributed importance to the person who delivered the news and the extent to which the messenger was emotionally close to the recipient. This is also the nature of accounts of individuals who have received news about the death of a loved one (Buckman 1984). "I remember when the kindergarten teachers came up to me [in the kibbutz] and got me up from my afternoon nap, and took me outside for a minute, and sat with me on this swing, and told me." [Lior]

The clear memory of the moment the news was received, or the short time following it, is striking in contrast with 'forgetting' the time that elapsed until the father's return. Normal time continuums come to a standstill on the day the father's absence begins. Ambiguous time is a central component in the experience of the father's absence, and its existence is evident in the peak moments of receiving the news of his captivity and the moment of repatriation: "I remember that day and I remember the day he came home. I don't remember anything in between." [Na'ama]

The Captivity Period: Waiting and Moving On

The first reactions following a shocking event are often an indicator of what will happen in the future. Seligman (2002) describes people's ability for 'hedonistic adaptation', wherein they resume their regular life routines while adapting to changes (good or bad). Virtually all the participants' stories refer to their own first reactions, or to the first actions taken by the adults around them. These initial responses set the tone for the families' subsequent modes of behavior during the period of the father's absence. Some families, for example, entered a 'frozen' state—wherein all family and personal activity stopped in anticipation of the father's return—whereas others chose to continue living life. Such decisions are expected to be crucial to the family's functioning.

Five respondents refer to the sensory experience of the captivity period as an experience of being in a fog: "a black cloud that envelops everything" [Yael]. Such sensations are common in people who have experienced loss and bereavement (Braun and Berg 1994).

It may seem obvious that all participants would remember the captivity period as a difficult time (Campbell and Demi 2000). However, in Israel, the Ministry of Defense is responsible for offering support to families of POWs, and a corresponding sense of responsibility seems to have permeated the communities in which the families lived. Thus, each of the participants also mentioned feeling enveloped and protected during the fathers' period of captivity: "Our fathers were considered heroes among the children. Everyone looked after us and took care of us and surrounded us with a lot of warmth and love, we really lived in an incubator." [Tamar] The help extended to the families was manifested in small things, such as making a ramp for a baby buggy, arranging transportation to after-school classes, and celebrations of different kinds at the army base, festivals, holidays, and trips.

In some cases, involvement of people from outside the family blurred the family's boundaries, making it unclear who the regular attachment figure should be. This scenario was observed primarily among participants who were young (under the age of 10) during the period of their fathers' captivity. Two male participants who were of kindergarten age (living in different towns) during that time described being assigned a 'mentor', a young man whose presence was intended to provide them with an adult male figure in their lives. One of these participants described his mentor as a type of older brother with whom he enjoyed playing. The other, in contrast, described his mentor as a bearded, threatening man, and recalls not understanding what the stranger "wanted from [him]." One female participant described a memory of being ill, and someone (not her mother) giving her medicine; she did not even know who had volunteered to take care of her.

Despite the social enveloping of the POWs' families, each participant described the period of his or her father's absence as 'wasted' time. From participants' accounts, it is evident that all the children received a rich and full upbringing, which included after-school classes and activities with their respective age groups; and yet on an emotional level they felt as though they were hovering in mid-air and experienced similar states to those described in the mourning process (Rubin and Katz-Dichterman 1993; Rubin et al. 2012). One participant described her feelings, stating, "It's not worth making an effort to do things at school. Everything is overshadowed by this black hole that just swallows people up. Takes them into captivity." [Yael] The children felt that their environment expected them to fully adapt and function, without addressing the shocking emotional experience they were undergoing. In particular, the children experienced anxiety, which was often manifested in attention and concentration difficulties at

school, or in a preoccupation associated with the father's absence, such as intensively reading books on POWs.

At times, when children visibly function well, both scholastically and socially, the adults around them do not perceive difficulties, and even think that they have 'overcome their loss', failing to realize that deep down the children might be preoccupied with the figure of their father (Shalev 2014). Yet, preoccupation with the father's disappearance was an integral part of all the participants' lives: "I was scared of dying. I said I didn't want to grow up so I won't die. Every single night I had to be assured that if I died, they'd put an artificial heart into me. The issue of death preoccupied me a great deal." [Mor]

The POWs' children felt that the adults around them lacked the ability and strength to maintain a stable and secure living environment for them. The captivity period undermined their confidence in adults: "It's like being abandoned in an incubator." [Na'ama]

The Father's Return Home: From Dream to the Reality of the Adjustment Crisis

In each of the participants' accounts, the memory of the father's return remains etched and imprinted to the smallest detail, just like the day on which they heard 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." [Na'ama] In some cases, the father who returns is unfamiliar, even a stranger: "As soon as the car stopped, Mom goes up to Dad and they hug and they kiss, and I'm like looking at a stranger with a big Egyptian moustache, with a paunch, a limp... It was very strange. Very strange." [Ofer] "It's like all of a sudden a man appeared." [Dafna] Yet the father's return does not immediately diffuse the experience of his absence. One participant described continuing to feel this absence during celebrations of her father's arrival: "The house was full of people, and I couldn't find myself, and I felt really alone and sat in a corner and no one looked at me, so I just went out to my friends." [Mor]

The returning father had to resume his relationships with his children from a different point in time from that when the period of his absence began, with children who had grown and matured during his absence. Ten participants from six families indicated that their parents initially made an attempt (consciously or unconsciously) to ignore and deny the lost time, as in the case of Rotem, a female participant:

I was already ten and my Mom sent him to shower us because he was in charge of giving us baths when he was taken prisoner. But excuse me! I'm 10 years old, and I've been showering myself for about 4 years now.

There was something a bit embarrassing about it all. [Rotem]

The repatriated POWs were preoccupied with their personal, physical, and psychological rehabilitation, and were barely able to spare the energy for their families, who had imagined their return as the end of a journey of separation. For example, three of the fathers required intensive medical care following their return, and spent extended periods of time in the hospital. Five fathers, two of whom were Air Force pilots, immediately returned to an intensive work schedule, perhaps in order to restore a sense of competence and self-sufficiency. Thus, although the period of physical absence ostensibly ended with the fathers' repatriation, these fathers continued to be absent from their children's lives, causing them to experience further loss: "Dad didn't see me when I lost him, and he was very busy building himself up." [Mor] As a result, most of the participants (10 of the 13 participants) felt that the father's presence in the home was not self-evident, and that they had to create situations that would 'necessitate' and validate his presence: "I used to invent homework in math just so he'd sit with me, help me, it was as if that time was very precious." [Dafna]

Seven participants, who came from three different families, stated that their repatriated father did not physically distance himself from the family; rather, 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" [Roee]. However, even in these cases, the inner sense of the present-absent experience remained: "Sometimes he's there, and sometimes not" [Na'ama]. Some of the POWs' children described how even after many years of living with the father who had returned, he was sometimes still an inner representation for them of a 'picture', "there but far away" [Dafna].

The children's perceptions of their fathers' continued absence may have stemmed in part from their own difficulties in accepting their fathers' unfamiliar presence in the home. Assaf and Dalia said that, during the initial period following their father's return, every time they went home they would be surprised to see him there and would wonder (silently) what this stranger was doing in their house. Na'ama recalled how her father's presence was actively ignored: In the kitchen 1 day, one of her siblings opened the refrigerator and called out to the mother, who was at the other end of the room, asking whether there was any milk—despite the fact that his father was standing right next to him.

The children also found it difficult to rebuild trust in their fathers and to relate to them as close family members. Dafna described playing a game with her father in which the children had to fall back and the father was supposed to catch them. In one case, her father did not catch her, and for her that was proof that he could not be trusted. Another participant, Lior, talked about not being able to tell her father "little everyday

things, because an ex-POW father is only supposed to be told important things.” Whenever her father asked her how she was doing, she became embarrassed and avoided responding directly. Yael discussed refusing her father’s help in mathematics, a subject in which her father excelled and had even practiced while in captivity. She did not express her lack of interest in the subject to her father, as she felt he would not be able to understand.

One of the principal themes emerging from the accounts of all 13 participants in this study is that the period following the father’s return was experienced as a family crisis. The POW’s wife and children had adapted to a different way of life in his absence, and the father, in some cases, seemed to be struggling with the feeling of being left behind, and with the question of how to re-integrate into the family.

I think there were moments when he didn’t forgive her for everything that happened to her during the captivity period, that she went on with her life. He’d accuse her: How come you remodeled the house? As if he was complaining: How come you didn’t wait for me? [Rotem]

The big crisis point came with their return. They had to decide to live together again. Like two completely different people meeting again after 4 years and having to decide what happens now. [Chen]

The relationship problems took place ‘behind the scenes’ in each family on its own: “My parents separated for a year, and then they got together again, and then they split up again. That went on for 3 years.” [Chen]

At the time, none of the families knew that the other families were experiencing similar crises of readjusting to the parents’ intimate relationship following the long separation. As adults who are now older than their parents were at the time, some of the POWs’ children wonder about the lack of awareness and the lack of support they received given the complex situation in which they found themselves following the captivity period and the POWs’ repatriation.

Despite the challenges associated with their fathers’ absence and subsequent repatriation, the majority of participants (10 out of 13) described feeling that their fathers’ return restored stability to their lives. Mor, for example, stated that “... after Dad came home we didn’t concern ourselves anymore with the time when he was gone, in captivity [...] I felt like there were so many things to do and now it was as if everything was okay.” All participants graduated from high school and, subsequently, from higher education institutions.

Growing Up in the Shadow of the Legend of Heroism

During the captivity period, and even more so after the POWs’ repatriation, the children had to contend with the image of

their fathers as legendary warrior heroes behind whom the entire nation stands united, and who consequently become national symbols. Ten participants described developing their personal identity through their confrontation with the notion of their fathers as legends. Some embraced the heroic image and, at least as children, enjoyed the benefits it provided them: “At that time, when we were children, our fathers were heroes in our eyes. We would walk around the military base and everyone took care of us and gave us special treatment, and surrounded us with warmth and love. We were the hero’s daughters” [Rotem]. “I had my seventh birthday when Dad was in captivity, and they threw me a big party and brought in a magician and white mice... Dad wasn’t home, but he was present, as a hero” [Chen]. Others viewed it with more ambivalence: “I was afraid of the legend. Of the legend taking over our lives [...] Because after all, what could be the contribution of a small child compared to the importance of the state’s unimaginably epic legend?” [Yael]

The notion of their fathers as legends continued to influence the children into adulthood. One female participant described searching for a pilot as a romantic partner, seeking someone who would be as heroic as her father. Later, following a process in which she developed her self-awareness, she decided to find a husband who would be as different as possible from her father’s heroic image: “a computer guy, far away from the military world” [Mor]. Another female participant described the relief she felt when she got married and changed her name, and could no longer be instantly associated with “Dad’s tale of heroism” [Chen]. In contrast, another participant stated that when she got married she chose to keep her maiden name, in order to continue to be identified as the daughter of the heroic POW [Na’ama].

The Silence Following the Family’s Reunion

One of the main recurring themes in the participants’ accounts (all participants in the focus group, and six of the eight interviewees) was the parents’ silence concerning the captivity period. After the POWs’ repatriation, the children’s parents tried to continue their lives, at least externally, as though repatriation had canceled out and erased the period of captivity: “We don’t talk about this subject at home, it’s pretty taboo” [Rotem]; “They were reticent on the subject” [Nurit]; “No one ever told me” [Mor]; “It’s like a subject that has a title, but it’s totally hidden.” [Chen]

As a result of the fog and ambiguity they had experienced with regard to the captivity period, more than half of the respondents (seven) conducted an independent self-inquiry of this ambiguous loss period later on in their lives: “My preoccupation with the subject has been going on for many years. I’ve been ‘delving’ into the subject for at least 10 years.” [Tamar]

The families' silence on the topic of the father's captivity is somewhat in keeping with the concept of the 'double wall', a term coined by Bar-On (1994:25) to describe the silence of Holocaust survivors: the parents do not tell, out of a desire to forget and to spare their children the harsh memories, and their children do not ask, out of sensitivity to their parents' need for silence.

Effects into Adulthood of a Parent's Captivity

Studies that have dealt with personal growth after a traumatic experience have found that loss and absence can impair self-image (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Rubin 1999; Malkinson & Rubin 2007). The participants' accounts refer to the manner in which, according to their perceptions, their fathers' absence influenced various aspects of their adulthood: self-identity formation, the ability to make decisions at important crossroads in life, perceptions and beliefs about life, self-image with respect to sense of competence and developing perceptions and views (emotional and cognitive) concerning their role as parents.

The accounts of the participants in the present study reveal that they currently experience anxiety about changes 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" [Na'ama]. The 'ordered world' that was disrupted during the 'present-absent' experience in childhood remains vague and ambiguous, despite the adult's cognitive understanding and knowledge.

About half the accounts reflected an experience of difficulty in coping with life choices, owing to a lack of basic stability provided by the family. In particular, several participants reported difficulties in committing to a particular partner, stating that they perceived intimacy as something dangerous that should be approached with caution or even avoided: "It's important to leave the [intimate] place so it's not too costly – if he leaves" [Na'ama].

The other participants seemed to attach considerable importance to their own roles as parents, expressing a strong desire to experience raising their own children. They hoped to 'correct' their own childhood experiences, to experience pleasure from seeing their own children grow 'before their very eyes' without disruption, and to build broad and deep relationships uninterrupted by external factors.

Notably, six of the accounts also reflect the discovery of strengths, in line with previous observations that defining events can bring about positive transformation and development (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004): "When I look back at this whole event, I feel good about it. It's an experience of 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. In retrospect I can possibly say positive things, some of which were also built from the traumatic

experience [...] It strengthens my self-confidence and my confidence in the people around me." [Roee]

Discussion

The Experience of Ambiguous Loss

Boss (2004) describes ambiguous loss—whether physical (e.g., due to captivity or divorce) or emotional/cognitive (in which the 'absent' individual continues to be physically present but is emotionally absent, e.g., due to a disease such as Alzheimer's)—as an experience that is first and foremost attended by clear, sharp pain. The world, which prior to the loss had been safe, familiar, and stable, becomes the past, while the present and the future are enveloped in a fog of unknowing. This experience was reflected in the responses of the 13 participants we interviewed, 40 years after their fathers were captured as POWs and subsequently released.

Current models that deal with loss and grief can only partially be applied to the psychological processes associated with the ambiguous loss experienced by families of POWs. In what follows we discuss two models that may provide general frameworks for understanding these processes.

Bowlby's (1980) Stages of Grief We propose that Bowlby's (1980) model of the stages of grief corresponds in many ways to the experiences of families of POWs (in spite of the fact that, in recent years, researchers have raised reservations with regard to Bowlby's model, pointing out that the process of grief cannot necessarily be delimited; Rubin 2000). In particular, the first stage of Bowlby's (1980) model, *numbing*, seems to be applicable to the families of POWs, who respond to the news of the parent's captivity with shock and non-acceptance. This stage is characterized by outbursts of crying, intense tension, feelings of anger and panic. In this stage, the family may cling to routine behavior, or, conversely, may undergo extreme changes in behavior and functioning (Rubin 1992).

The second stage, *searching*, also corresponds to the experiences of the families of POWs. Yet, whereas individuals who are grieving the death of a loved one are eventually likely to accept the finality of the loss, and to search for that person less and less over time, families of POWs are likely to engage in an intensive, prolonged search process, which, in many cases, is accompanied by an urge to engage in intensive public action. Although the intensity of the search process may eventually diminish, this diminishment occurs very slowly and is accompanied by doubt and ambiguity (Dempsey and Baago 1998).

Although the trauma that the POW's family encounters lacks the 'legitimacy' of the final loss experienced with death, these individuals are still likely to experience the third stage of grief, *disorganization*. This stage is characterized by despair

and disintegration of the individual's internal order. At this stage, the grieving individual begins to realize that the loss has indeed occurred. This stage is characterized by a sense of emptiness, apathy and depression, which result from the need to depart from existing patterns of thought and behavior. The individual who has parted from a loved one experiences pain and longing, but these sensations differ from those experienced in previous stages; they become part of the griever's new routine (Rubin 2000).

The last stage of the model, *reorganization*, is where grief for the death of a loved one is likely to diverge from the ambiguous loss experienced by the families of POWs. At this stage, the mourner learns to take on new roles and forms a new worldview in order to adapt to the loss. For families of POWs, the ambiguity of the loss may prevent this type of transformation.

In some cases, the uncertainty that a loss has occurred may even prevent the family from grieving at all (Boss 2010). Rather, the families coping with the knowledge of the captivity harbor hope that the situation will be reversed and "one fine day" everything will go back to the way it was. Yet, as participants' accounts suggest, the hope that the fathers' return will erase the period of their absence is never fulfilled, but remains a fantasy: First, the father the POWs' children remember is not the same father who returns ("...a stranger with a big Egyptian moustache..."). In this respect some children of POWs may experience a renewed sense of loss over the fathers of their memories, who, they ultimately realize, will never come back. Second, when the father returns, he often remains physically or emotionally absent, e.g., because of a need to undergo intensive physical rehabilitation, or because of a struggle to reintegrate into a family of people who may now essentially be strangers.

Complicated Grief The framework of complicated grief may also shed light on the experience of ambiguous loss of a parent who has been taken captive. Complicated grief (DSM-5 diagnosis: Other Specified Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorder, 309.89, example 5; American Psychiatric Association 2013) is generally described as a situation in which the normal grieving process is interrupted, such that an individual who has lost a loved one cannot move on with his life. In particular, the bereaved cannot accept the fact of the loved one's death, is unable to trust others following the loss, avoids closeness with people with whom he was close in the past, and feels that life is meaningless and that the future is closed off to him. There are several risk factors that may influence the likelihood that a child who has lost a parent will develop complicated grief: the child's relationship with the parent who has died, the circumstances of death, experiences of multiple losses, and the child's own strength of character. The child's social support system also has an important influence on the development of

complicated grief (Shear et al. 2011; Dyregrov and Dyregrov 2013).

Similarly to children who experience complicated grief (see Nader and Salloum (2011) for a summary of complicated grief responses in children and adolescents), those who experience ambiguous loss feel prolonged sadness, embarrassment, anxiety and uncertainty; their loss is ongoing and remains unresolved, without closure. The grief is 'frozen' in place. In the case of ambiguous loss, however, these experiences occur in the absence of definitive information on the death of the loved one (Boss and Yeats 2014); in fact, this lack of clarity, and the expectation of return, are what thwarts the grieving process, preventing the children from moving on with their lives. In the case of ambiguous loss, the entire family may become 'frozen' and unable to move forward, and communication among family members may be blocked; thus, the child may lack an adequate support system (Boss 2010). Boss and Carnes (2012) found that children experiencing such loss have strange, repetitive dreams about their missing loved ones. In light of these qualities, we suggest that ambiguous loss is a special case of complicated grief, one that comprises traumatic elements. In a study of complicated grief, Boss and Yeats (2014) identify six principles that may assist families who have experienced ambiguous loss: finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment and discovering hope.

Factors Influencing the Family's Ability to Rehabilitate

While the POW is in captivity, both he and the family may fantasize about a perfect reunion, but the reality is more complex. Reasons for this include disappointment, culture shock, the continuity of the home life, the reasons for the war, integrating back into the family, continued routine, and the changes undergone by both parents. Families need to take time to reconnect with one another, get to know one another again, renegotiate the division of roles, and manage mutual expectations and independence. Likewise, the repatriated POW's psychological and physical condition affects the family's ability to rehabilitate itself (Hunter-King 1993). Some of the fathers of participants in our sample, for example, were in need of intensive medical care when they returned and were required to spend a great deal of time in hospitals, and thereby continued to be absent from their children's lives. However, the present study shows that although at times the father's return led to a degree of destabilization of the balance developed during the period of his absence, by his family, in general, and especially his children; his return was an essential variable that 'erased' the ambiguity in the child's life. This outcome is supported by the work of Hunter (1982), who observed that after their fathers' return, children of POWs adjusted well at school and in the community, and they displayed a higher

level of independence than children whose fathers had not returned.

Despite the positive outcomes associated with their fathers' return, the study participants described the reunion and their fathers' subsequent reintegration into the family as highly complex. Such complexity is expected to be particularly enhanced if a new baby has been born during the POW's absence, or an infant has grown and matured beyond recognition. These children who grew up during their father's absence often inhabit a world of their own reality in which the father has had no part. In such cases father and children face each other as strangers and have to contend with the challenge of getting to know one another, becoming close, and creating an emotional bond (Hunter 1988; McCubbin and Figley 1983). In the present study the older children, too, described feelings of alienation and spoke about needing many years to get to know their fathers again and see them as permanent figures in their lives.

Naturally, the community plays an important role in providing support for the mother and children during the father's absence. Notably, although support for the family seems an obvious need, several researchers (Shalev 2014; Spooen et al. 2000) have found that bereaved individuals who seek out comfort and support from the community may become dependent on the support, and thus find it more, rather than less, difficult to function.

Ambiguous boundaries are also prominent in families in which a parent is absent from the home for prolonged periods due to his job, e.g., military personnel stationed overseas for prolonged periods (Boss 2006; Huebner et al. 2007). In these cases the extended family rallies to help the family, and it is difficult to mark the distinction between the nuclear family unit and the extended family (Boss 1999). In our sample, participants reported an experience of ambiguous family boundaries, referring to mentors and caregivers who entered their lives and whose roles were somewhat unclear in the eyes of the children.

In Israel, families faced with the trauma of captivity instantly become a national legend. Their affairs are discussed in high places, in every living room they are 'one of the family', reporters 'paint' their portraits as heroes, and the public imposes this image upon them. These families also lack the legitimacy accorded to mourners, whose loss is final, of holding ceremonies to mark the POWs' absence (Erim Balayla [Awake at Night]).

In the present study, participants' reports further show that, even after the father's repatriation, the legend of heroism continues to accompany the family. In some cases, children embrace the legend and their father's fame; however, life 'in the shadow of the legend' can also make it difficult to resume everyday activities and engage in the little things.

Taken together, the observations above suggest that, although the father's eventual repatriation and his return to the home alleviate the ambiguity in the children's lives and enable

the family to reintegrate into the community, the period of the father's absence continues to resonate in the children's lives after the captivity period ends. Difficulties in the POW's process of reintegrating into the family—e.g., in reestablishing relationships and parental authority—pose further challenges to the children's ability to 'return to normal'.

Notably, the present study also provides evidence that some of the participants (9 out of 13) experienced the period of the parent's captivity as a catalyst for personal growth ("... It strengthens my self-confidence and my confidence in the people around me..."). Indeed, Hunter (1983) finds that some families describe the captivity period as an opportunity for growth, for strengthening mental fortitude, and for functioning more independently and maturely. This is consistent with the concept of 'post-traumatic growth', which occurs when a person who has experienced a severe crisis feels a sense of possessing high personal and spiritual functioning abilities. This growth is paradoxical in nature: it appears in the aftermath of prolonged pain and suffering, which are not denied, and also presents the individual's ability to recover and accord new meanings for himself. This sense of personal growth is attended by feelings of strength and value. In her study, Ramon (2008) extensively describes a variety of post-traumatic spiritual transformations following loss, which are manifested in seeking new challenges and in deriving satisfaction and pleasure from previously unfamiliar spheres.

Practical Implications

Several practical implications emerge from the experiences related by the participants in this study. First, participants reported a perception that, despite offering instrumental support in the period immediately following captivity, the people in their environment expected them to continue to be fully functional. Yet these children were experiencing emotional difficulties during the period of captivity and afterward, which were often reflected in difficulties at school. National support programs for families of POWs should take these challenges into account, and provide schools and communities with the resources to assist these families. Such resources might include specialized training for teachers of students whose parents have been taken captive.

Additional considerations that national support programs might address include the need to inform families of the specific challenges that are expected to be associated with the POW's reintegration—that is, to attempt to prepare them in advance for the fact that the reality of the absent parent's return will not match the fantasy. Psychological assistance can assist family members in coping with these challenges when the POW returns home (Maguen et al. 2010; Charles, Castro, Messer, McGurk, Cotting, & Koffman, 2004). Likewise, such programs might assist families in dealing with being in the

public eye, and in reconciling the image of the parent with that of the famous 'war hero'.

Moreover, it is notable that, throughout the periods of captivity and reunion, none of the participants' families were aware that the other POW families were undergoing similar experiences. It may be beneficial for support programs to introduce such families to one another, and thus to enable them to feel that they are not alone in their trauma.

More generally, several practical recommendations arise from the ever-increasing body of research on ambiguous loss: Ambiguous loss should be recognized as a stress situation, with professional and social assistance made available to family members. It is of utmost importance for family relationships (including inter-generational relationships) within the family to be strengthened, and at the same time for new relationships outside the family to be formed. Family members can be encouraged to find meaning in the ambiguous loss (one possibility is to engage in work for charitable causes on behalf of others who are undergoing similar experiences), and to create ceremonies and rituals that build and maintain regular family and social references (e.g., celebrating events and holidays; Boss and Yeats 2014; Rubin et al. 2012). Notably, however, some youth may find these approaches trying and might benefit more from individual therapy or from dyadic interactions, for example, with a parent or peer. Boss (1999) emphasizes the practicality of learning how to live with uncertainty, of avoiding self-blame and blaming others, and the power of positive thinking. While the father is absent it is also important to strengthen the mother's position as a mediator, and to establish as normal a life routine as possible. In this context, it seems that the mother's functioning and its implications for influence on the children during and following the absence period merit further research

Three directions of emotional support can be recommended: (1) creating familiarity with reactions associated with the stress of absence; (2) offering help in establishing new routines that are adapted to the new situation; and (3) encouraging families to seek out support from non-formal systems. Supportive interventions can encourage the remaining parent to talk with the children about their concerns and the difficulty of coping with the changes associated with the period of absence. In particular, the remaining parent must be made aware of the many and varied ways in which children can display and express their feelings, and view it as healthy behavior. The remaining parent is also likely to benefit from therapy, which might reinforce her ability to serve as a model for self-help with stress reactions, so that the children do not feel responsible for her emotional reactions to the situation. Finally, parents should be provided with guidance regarding the importance of placing scholastic demands on the children, as well as the importance of maintaining work and family responsibilities, while creating a sense of control over the surrounding life space.

Conclusions

This study focused on describing the experiences, from an adult perspective, of the children of Israeli POWs who returned from captivity. Notably, previous literature suggests that the phenomena discussed by participants might occur in families of soldiers returning after prolonged deployment in enemy countries (who were not taken captive)—a similar, albeit less extreme form of ambiguous loss. In particular, although every culture is characterized by a specific pattern, the families described herein share many similarities with the families of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, in terms of their emotional states and the practical challenges they face (Hoge et al. 2004; Maguen et al. 2010). We believe that future studies can reveal a more detailed picture of families' responses to such situations of ambiguous loss, and to the treatment they may require in order to cope.

The examples in the present study suggest that even when the experience of absence has ended and the family has been reunited, the children and other family members need help and monitoring. Participants' responses further suggest that as a consequence of loss of control, ambiguity, freezing, and uncertainty, as well as the stresses of single-parent-family existence and then those of reintegration, these children may also experience ongoing difficulties in academic, interpersonal, and psychological functioning. We recommend further research to examine the findings obtained in the present study in order to gain a greater understanding of the long-term inner processes that take place in children who have experienced a parent's prolonged absence, and of the possible ways of helping them and their families during and after the event.

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