

‘Going Missing’ as a Maladaptive Coping Behavior for Adults Experiencing Strain

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Abstract:

This study applied the *Threat Appraisal and Coping Theory* to explore the mechanisms influencing a person to go missing. We examined the negative emotions and stressors – proximate stressors/stressful events, underlying life stressors, emotional states, and other dysfunctional behaviors – of adults who were reported as missing from 2013-2018. Our results indicate that missing persons experience significant underlying life stressors, stressful situations, and proximate stressors that trigger a missing episode. We also found that most missing adults are described as facing negative emotions, such as anger, and engaging in maladaptive behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, that are related to these events. These findings, we suggest, highlights that affectual and individual-level mechanisms are influential factors contributing to why adults go missing. Lastly, it was revealed that missing adults are commonly reported as experiencing strains and stressors in their personal relationships, indicating that this phenomenon may be attenuated through social support as an adaptive coping resource. Through these results, we can begin to understand missingness as driven by a negative event, stressor, or emotion in which the person engages in the maladaptive coping behavior of ‘going missing’ as a way to escape the situation and achieve some level of emotional or cognitive distance.

Keywords:

Stress; Coping; Maladaptive Behavior; Emotion; Missing Persons

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Each year, millions of adults across the West will be reported as ‘missing’ to authorities (FBI 2015; U.K. Home Office 2010; CCIMA 2019; MCSC 2019; NMPCC 2019). The overwhelming majority of these individuals will return of their own volition or be otherwise located alive and well (Payne 1995; Henderson, Kieran and Henderson 2000; Hayden and Goodship 2013; Harris and Shalev Greene 2016). However, there is often enormous strains associated with these incidents due to the varying reasons for why people go missing and the myriad of factors contributing to these episodes (Gibb and Woolnough 2007). As a result, families, local communities, and police and social welfare resources are often negatively impacted (Fyfe, Stevenson and Woolnough 2015; Wayland, Maple, McKay and Glassock 2016; Lenferink, van Denderen, de Keijser, Wessel, and Boelen 2017). For example, Shalev Greene and Pakes (2013) found that, in the United Kingdom (U.K.), the cost of responding to missing person reports for the police alone across ten separate locations per year equates to somewhere between £482,250 and £879,060, which estimates to approximately \$830,230 to \$1,513,340 in Canada. Despite this, very little is known about a phenomenon that is actually a significant social problem (Tarling and Burrows 2004; Stevenson, Parr, and Woolnough 2016).

Of the little that *is* known, researchers have historically focused on understanding why adults go missing by uncovering several risk factors, such as various demographic, health, and mental health issues, that indicate which individuals are more likely to go missing (Kiepal, Carrington, and Dawson 2012; Sowerby and Thomas 2017; Taylor, Woolnough, and Dickens 2018). Other literature, however, has attempted to provide more explanatory approaches by focusing on the social and environmental impacts classified as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors (Tarling and Burrows 2004). Push factors include, for example, life stressors such as relationship

breakdowns, abusive situations, and unhappiness with one's present circumstances (Brenton 1978; Hirschel and Lab 1988; Biehal, Mitchell, and Wade 2003; Tarling and Burrows 2004; Fyfe et al. 2015). Among the pull factors mentioned is a desire to abuse substances and/or participate in illicit activities (Newiss 1999; Tarling and Burrows 2004). As these examples illustrate, what is said to differentiate these two sets of factors are the underlying causal mechanisms: pull factors indicate adventure or fun-seeking, whereas push factors suggest departures caused by emotional stress or neglect (Brenton 1978; Hirschel and Lab 1988). We would suggest, however, that such distinctions are not always so clear cut. Both sets of behaviors can produce what Bonny and colleagues (2016: 299) have termed 'escapes,' wherein individuals react to a crisis or other stressor by “trying to escape their problems.” Such escapes have been viewed "as a form of personal problem-solving," in which the person removes themselves from a stressful situation in order to gain clarity, disengage from a situation, reduce their stress level, distract themselves, blow off steam, and so on (ibid.: 299; see also Stevenson et al. 2016).

The present study explores, in greater detail, the notion of ‘escape’ as a maladaptive coping strategy by employing a perspective guided by Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) *Threat Appraisal and Coping Theory*. This theory suggests that individuals experiencing stress engage in a cognitive appraisal of their current situation, and then evaluate their own ability to respond to their situation before deciding how to react. In the stress-coping model, those who do not feel capable of addressing their situation – perhaps because they have low feelings of self-esteem or feel otherwise helpless to change their circumstances – may be drawn to maladaptive ways of coping in order to achieve some level of emotional and/or cognitive distance. Current scholarship that applies this theory (for example, see Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla 2005 or Moore, Biegel, and McMahon 2011) highlights that the appraisal of the distressing situation strongly predicts the

subsequent type of coping strategy employed. Thus, the assessment of the situation largely determines whether the individual will use problem-focused coping (coping aimed at directly managing what is causing distress) or emotion-focused coping (coping aimed at regulating the associated emotions) (Kelso, French and Fernandez 2005). In this model, examples of ineffective coping include, but are not limited to, substance use and abuse, venting negative emotion, self-harming behaviors, behavioral disengagement, and workplace deviance (Kidd and Davidson 2007; Ferguson, Bender, and Thompson 2015; Black and Hendy 2018; Hendy, Can, and Black 2019; Moore et al. 2011).

Although potential influences on missing incidents have been broadly identified in past literature (for example, see Payne 1995 or Shalev, Shaefer, and Morgan 2008), empirical research connecting this theory to the phenomenon of ‘going missing’ is scarce. As previously mentioned, the focus in previous research has predominantly been on understanding the risk factors related to going missing (e.g., Bonny, Almond and Woolnough 2016; Hayden and Shalev-Greene 2016; Hirschel and Lab 1988; Muir-Cochrane, Moel, Gerace, Esterman and Bowers 2010), such as the characteristics of the missing person, yet scholars have paid less attention to the ‘triggers’ or affective influences contributing to these episodes. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to serve as an initial investigation into the role of stress and coping in the decision to go missing by explicitly focusing on the negative emotions and stressors leading up to ‘going missing.’ Understanding the impact of these precursors is of theoretical and practical interest because considering the mechanisms that influence a missing episode can help advance our knowledge of the process of going missing, which, in turn, can assist with developing prevention and intervention strategies. Additionally, as emotional episodes and their effects accumulate over time, revealing the negative affective influences can educate on effective coping and assist with reducing missing

incidents, ergo lessening the strains and negative consequences associated with these cases (Brown et al. 2005). Lastly, the application of this theory can provide a fuller understanding of what a missing episode entails, which, we argue, can not only result from risk and social and environmental factors, but can also be triggered by negative emotions, stress, and ineffective coping (i.e., emotional and situational factors).

To examine this phenomenon, we draw on a qualitative thematic analysis of five years' (2013-2018 inclusive) from two sets of Canadian municipal police records of closed missing person files of adults aged 22 and over (N=80). This analysis reveals that negative emotions and stressors are often 'triggers' leading to a missing event. Particularly, we found that stressful situations, proximate stressors, and underlying life stressors are strong influencers in the decision to disappear. These findings suggest that affective and individual-level mechanisms also can impact this phenomenon. Subsequently, we suggest that 'going missing' is employed as a maladaptive coping response to the stressful situations and distressing emotions experienced by adults. Such information provides greater and contextual insights into the phenomenon of missing persons.

Materials and Methods

The present study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of proximate stressors/stressful events can be identified within the police data as precipitating or contributing factors in adult missing person cases?

RQ2. Can underlying life stressors be identified from the police data? And, if so, what types of stressors are typically involved?

RQ3. Does the data provide insight into an individual's emotional state at the time they went missing?

RQ4. Can examples of other potential forms of maladaptive coping be identified?

Answers to these questions are provided through a qualitative thematic analysis of selected missing person cases. Qualitative analysis of this phenomenon is important as it allows for a more

in-depth and contextual understanding of the experiences that ‘trigger’ or influence a person to go missing and examines coping in relation to the specific conditions affecting the missing population (de Ridder 1997). As well, while qualitative research is often regarded as less objective and rigorous when compared to quantitative research, this approach provides a systematic way of exploring the complex nuances impacting the incidence of going missing (Kelso et al. 2005), which have impeded on past attempts at studying the phenomenon of ‘going missing’ (Hirschel and Lab 1988). This analysis will provide a richer understanding of the affectual and individual-level mechanisms impacting the decision to go missing.

Data for this study was secured from the record management systems (RMS) of two different municipal Canadian police services. Anonymized data for all closed missing person reports over a five-year period (January 1, 2013, to December 31, 2018) were extracted into *Excel* files. The total number of records for the first service was 9,022, which included occurrence details, detailed reports, and event synopses for each incident. The second service provided 6,003 records, of which only 2,197 contained event synopses. Thus, the total number of records available was approximately 11,219 cases.

For those unfamiliar with police data, each recorded incident produces an occurrence report. This report contains basic information about the event and an event synopsis – that is the officer's report on what happened, what steps were taken to address the issue, witness statements, sometimes statements or comments made by the missing person (if located) and a case resolution, among other pieces of information. As the synopses are primarily intended as an internal record, most contain partial or fragmentary pieces of information that are typically of limited value to the researcher. Further, different RMS programs can be unwieldy to work with in relation to extracting research data. This is evidenced by the fact that one service was unable to provide approximately

4,000 event synopses from their RMS, which meant that these records were not useful, as they contained minimal information on what had happened. The other police service had to splice together five different data sets to provide a complete set of records with which to work. These are characteristic limitations of utilizing police data and can often result in drastically reduced sample sizes.

Starting with 11,000 events with some details present with which to begin a more thorough search, we began to narrow down the number of records by conducting a series of keyword searches, using terms relevant to this study. Keywords used included: ‘stress,’ ‘upset,’ ‘argument,’ ‘argue,’ ‘angry,’ ‘dispute,’ ‘suicide/al,’ ‘distracted,’ and ‘family issues,’ among others. For the resulting records, we then applied the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria:

- the primary record was ‘mispers;’
- the missing person’s age was 22¹ and above (a decision based on the age groups set by one of the service’s RMS program); and
- the record contained sufficient detail to be able to answer one or more the questions above.

Exclusion criteria:

- the incident was flagged as a ‘mental health’ call;
- the incident was flagged as a ‘senility/dementia’ call; and
- the age was 21 and below.

Our focus for this study is adults who the record shows were enacting some form of agency in going missing – whether by deliberately removing themselves from a stressful situation and/or going away to think about their lives and choices. For this reason, we excluded individuals who

¹ Since the bulk of missing person reports involve youth – typically youth who have run away from group homes – applying age criteria immediately narrowed the number of reports significantly.

were flagged as having dementia or a related cognitive issue, as well as those identified as having an active mental health condition – that is, who have conditions that might impair their decision-making.

Once the exclusion criteria were applied, the result was 207 records. These files were then re-reviewed through careful reading and, once duplicate records and/or records with incomplete information were deleted, the final sample was comprised of eighty-one (n=81) records.

Coding

Using an inductive coding approach, we read and coded the event synopses and, where possible, detailed accounts for each of these reports. For this first step, we focused on identifying major themes and sub-themes as a means of clustering the data into meaningful categories. Thus, we used thematic analysis to generate collections of negative emotions and stressors. This inductive approach was employed as it is more flexible – that is, not constrained by any pre-existing theories or ideas, and the themes identified by the researchers are directly related to the data (Braun and Clarke 2008). It was during this step of the process that the possibility of a relationship between immediate stressors and missingness emerged. To explore this potential relationship, we turned to the relevant research literature on maladaptive coping and, in particular, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *Threat Assessment and Coping Theory*. In doing so, a series of sub-themes emerged that formed the basis of the codes used during the second stage of more focused coding of the event synopses data. The results of this inductive, thematic analysis informed the findings below.

Results

Proximate stressors/stressful situations

In almost all of the selected cases, we were able to use the synopses or detailed questionnaire data to identify a proximate 'trigger' that complainants, witnesses, and/or the missing person him or

herself attributed as the cause or reason for the missing event. These ‘triggers’ were categorized into two primary groups: stressful situations and proximate stressors.

Stressful situations are defined here as temporary events that trigger both unpleasant emotions and feelings of stress in individuals. Examples of such events include a family dispute or a spousal argument. While such situations may be the result of underlying issues within relationships or in the home or work environment, this is not necessarily always the case. In many instances, the event was simply the result of situational misunderstandings that escalated. One dispute between two parties in a relationship was over whether to transfer a small amount of funds to the missing person's daughter. Another woman, a member of a tourist group, got into a dispute with other group members and stormed off multiple times. The language used to describe this cause included: “taking off after the argument,” “stormed out of the house,” and “left after an argument.”

In analyzing our data, we found that stressful situations were the most commonly identified proximate cause of someone leaving and subsequently being reported as missing. Indeed, we found this was the identified cause in 56 of the cases studied. Three types of arguments were observed in the data: family arguments (typically involving parents and adult children) (n=8), arguments between spouses and/or partners (n=47), and disputes with social service providers (n=1). Spousal arguments centred on a range of topics, from accusations of infidelity to arguments over childcare, family tensions, finances, and barking dogs. For example, one individual left following an argument about being woken up by the family’s dogs. Another dispute was triggered when a wife refused to provide her husband the keys to the car after he had been drinking: “SHE DID NOT ALLOW HIM TO DRIVE VEHICLE HOME.” Family disputes were also over a range of conflicts, often involving adult children living with parents. One family dispute began with a

daughter "scolding" her father "because of his behavior," causing him to be "upset" and leave home. Similarly, a separate incident in which friction between an adult daughter and her mother sharing a small living space, spilled into a disagreement over "making too much noise."

The second cluster of proximate causes were life stressors that complainants or other witnesses identified as triggering or substantially contributing to the individual's decision to 'go missing.' Several of the cases examined also included information on one or more of these life stressors, which were identified as precipitating causes: work stressors (n=2), health stressors (n=4), relationship stressors (n=3), and criminal justice-related concerns (n=4). Concerning work stressors, individuals were said to be under financial or other pressures because of problems at work, including disputes with a boss or the inability to take time off work when needed. Criminal justice stressors included outstanding warrants, and, in one case, someone having had a search warrant executed at their home. Health stressors can impact both the individual with the health concern and their caregiver. In our sample, two individuals were dealing with significant health concerns – one leaving the hospital prior to surgery and another bolting after being called in by her doctor to receive the results of an HIV test. A third was said to be in pain from diverticulitis, which was contributing to his stress levels. Yet another individual was struggling with taking care of his mother during her terminal illness. He was described as "stressed about his mother's illness." Relationship stressors included lingering feelings over break-ups and unresolved tensions within relationships. One individual was stressed with not only work and relationship issues, but also a "new house."

Underlying stressors

In the previous section, we identified a series of life stressors that witnesses and complainants suggested triggered or helped to trigger a sense of crisis in the individual missing person, a crisis

to which they responded to by 'going missing.' In many of these cases, police interviews also uncovered underlying life stressors that were believed to play a role in the event. For example, spousal arguments regarding spending, or in at least two cases, money lost at a casino, were linked to ongoing financial tensions within a relationship. For this cluster of stressors, the data fell into six basic sub-themes: financial issues (n=14), relationship strain and/or breakdown (n=13), family issues (n=11), health-related concerns (n=6), and what we have termed 'other' (n=3).

The most commonly cited life stressor was financial strain. Individuals were variously said to be under stress as a result of "finance difficulties with lawyer," "financial losses in the stock market," and "bank funds and how we will pay our bills." To illustrate, one individual was said to be distraught over a recent eviction from her home, which influenced her to 'go missing' to 'escape.' Interestingly, in several instances, missing persons were dealing with multiple significant issues at the same time, including financial stressors. A notable example is a woman with "terminal cancer" "undergoing painful treatment," who is also "a single mother of two" and "having some financial hardships."

Tensions within and/or the breakdown of intimate partner relationships was the second most frequently cited underlying stressor in a missing person event. Police reports variously mentioned examples of angry spouses, sexual issues, divorce, and infidelity as underlying causal factors. One complainant revealed that she and her partner had been in a series of arguments over him "not being happy" before the event. Another man disappeared from a homeless shelter, where he had been staying after his "wife kicked him out," and he was unable to "contact children." One man left his family a note before leaving, complaining that he was "feeling like he's not important" and that his wife "had forgotten about him." Infidelity and/or accusations of infidelity were an issue in at least three cases, one of which turned out to be accurate. A woman reported her partner

as missing following a series of arguments over "his good friend." When subsequently located by police, he was found at the home of this friend. In a handful of instances, serious health concerns were seen to create relationship stress, leading to domestic arguments. This was the case for at least two couples where one of the spouses was dealing with cancer. One man departed a cancer facility following a spousal argument, while his wife was waiting for her final treatment.

Ongoing family issues were also seen to be a cause of personal strain. For a handful of individuals, this stress was caused by family members who were undergoing significant health issues, ranging from dementia to terminal illness. One individual was reported as feeling pressured by "domestic issues," including an illness within the family, that led to him leaving home after an "emotional day visiting sick family member." The stress of dealing with his father-in-law's dementia, and his refusal to visit the father-in-law, caused arguments in one household that resulted in the male partner leaving. Others were upset with their children. One man, who was described as "angry with wife and disease," was also "complaining about son" before he departed. Custody issues were another concern for at least two of those reported missing, both of which involved the courts.

Less frequently cited as underlying contributing factors were health and 'other' issues. Cancer and other serious illnesses – either of the individual or a close family member – were typically noted. One woman was said to have been experiencing difficulties with coping with the loss of her mother: "her mother was ill and was living at a Hospice for the last 2.5 weeks of her life until she passed 3.5 weeks ago." Placed within the 'other' category were two cases of individuals who were said to be dealing with significant stress over gender identity issues. One wife described her husband in the following terms: "our relationship is suffering as a result of everything, parents and other underlying ... [the husband] has always felt like he should have been

born a female and considers himself to be transgendered.” Another individual was said to be having difficulties “coping with the death of his aunt who had been murdered in November 2015 by the subject's cousin.”

Emotional states

Through data provided from interviews with complainants and witnesses, and then recorded in event synopses or as answers to questions posed within an agency's risk assessment tool, we were able to extract some indication as to how others characterized an individual's emotional state immediately before they were deemed 'missing.' In a handful of cases, the missing person supplied this information when police located them; however, in most instances, firsthand accounts from the individual were unavailable from police reports. As a result, we can only provide information on their emotional condition based on a handful of self-reports and others' perceptions.

In terms of their emotional states, how were these described? Keeping in mind that the majority of individuals were described in terms of two or more simultaneous emotional states – such as ‘angry and upset’ or ‘upset and overwhelmed’ – the most frequent responses were ‘upset’ (n=25), ‘angry’ (n=18), ‘stressed/overwhelmed’ (n=4), and ‘agitated’ (n=3). Seventeen (n=17) states were coded as ‘other,’ consisting of those themes with low cell counts (i.e., ‘suicidal’).

Merriam-Webster (2019) defines ‘upset’ as “to trouble mentally and emotionally.” Whereas, in some instances, upset may be assumed to include anger or an angry response, this is not necessarily always the case. In our data, individuals could and were sometimes described as being simultaneously ‘angry’ and ‘upset’ - that is, in terms of not one synonymous state but rather two different ones. As a consequence, we separated ‘anger’ from ‘upset’. In doing so, we saw that most people for whom we had some information as to their emotional state prior to leaving were described as ‘upset,’ ‘very upset,’ or ‘distracted.’ For example, one person was described as “upset

and crying," because, as they told a witness, they believed "my life is falling apart." Another was said to be upset because his wife had experienced a recent assault at her workplace. One woman, when she contacted her mother, advised she had been upset because she did not feel supported by her family.

Eighteen (n=18) individuals within our sample were said to have been 'angry.' Perhaps not surprisingly, the bulk of these individuals were said to be angry as a result of a dispute. As noted earlier, one was described as "angry" and "storming off." One husband, who was said to have been both 'upset' and 'angry,' was deemed angry with his wife as a result of ongoing family issues. Another man was 'angry' over his wife's perceived infidelity. He stated he "couldn't take it anymore and left."

Less frequently, missing persons were documented as 'stressed/overwhelmed' or 'agitated.' When police located one individual who had been reported missing, he self-described as "suicidal" and "stressed." As he told police, "he has been under tremendous stress at work, and that the recent relationship issues with [his girlfriend] have been adding to that stress." One of those described by a social worker as 'agitated' was waiting for information on being discharged from an addiction facility. He was worried he would be released to a homeless shelter, which caused him to leave the facility in an 'angry' and 'upset' state.

The 'other' category included a diverse range of emotional states that ranged from 'normal,' to 'confused' to 'suicidal.' For example, one individual was described as feeling "very alone" and another as neglected by his wife. Yet another individual was described as being "very quiet," his behavior as "acting very docile just not saying nothing at all." Sometimes descriptions of others' emotional states were clearly contradicted by their subsequent behavior. To illustrate: one person's

emotional state before leaving was described as "fine," although that was not the case. His wife subsequently acknowledged he had been worried for several weeks over risks to her pregnancy.

Other potential examples of maladaptive coping present

To more fully explore the concept of maladaptive coping in this context, we also searched our data for other possible examples or instances where a missing person engaged in behaviors that might be seen as a non-utile or dysfunctional response to immediately stressful situations and/or to underlying life stressors. Drawing on the relevant literature (e.g., Turanovic and Pratt 2013; Black and Hendy 2018; McDermott-Levy and Garcia 2016; Ross 2011), we searched for terms such as 'gambling,' 'pornography,' 'drugs,' 'alcohol,' and 'drinking.' We also looked to see whether there were any previous reports of the individual being reported missing².

Of the behaviors examined, the most commonly noted was a previous episode of having been reported missing. Fifteen (n=15) of the individuals in our sample had had a prior missing episode reported to police, one of whom was tagged by police as someone they considered a 'habitual/chronic' missing person. It would be understandable to assume that the 'chronic' missing woman might be homeless – as previous research we have conducted shows that shelter reporting practices increase the number of reports for individuals within this population (author cite) – however, she was not. Instead, this was a woman in the 30 to 49 year age group with stable housing. Two years previously, she had suffered an injury that placed her on disability and felt she was not sufficiently supported by her family, causing family disputes.

In relation to other behaviors observed in the data, drug and alcohol use was also cited (n=14). Five (n=5) witnesses stated a missing person was an active marijuana user, three (n=3) were variously described as "drinking," two (n=2) were crack cocaine users, two (n=2) were said

². Unfortunately, in relation to histories of individuals being reported previously missing, we only had partial data upon which to draw, as one of the services did not provide such information.

to be using "drugs," and two (n=2) were using opiates. As well, two (n=2) were reported as gambling. One spousal argument that precipitated a missing person report began at a casino with a wife who had "been drinking and lost money." Another episode began when a husband "started gambling." The most clear-cut example of the use of maladaptive coping comes from the case of a missing woman who had recently lost her mother. As a result, she was said to be "attempting to cope with the loss," by having "turned to morphine for relief." These findings highlight that several other maladaptive coping behaviors are utilized by those adults reported as missing and experiencing strain, suggesting that not only is 'going missing' a form of 'escaping,' but so too are several other dysfunctional behaviors. It can be said, therefore, that ineffective coping is prevalent among this missing population. As such, offering adaptive coping resources could be one such way to reduce missing incidents among this group after one missing episode is reported.

Bringing it all together

Table 1. Maladaptive Coping Themes and Their Frequencies (N=81)

| Theme | Frequency (%) |
|---|----------------------|
| Proximate Stressors | |
| <i>Stressful Situations</i> | 56 (69.1) |
| Arguments between spouses and/or partners | 47 (58.0) |
| Family arguments | 8 (9.9) |
| Disputes with social service providers | 1 (1.2) |
| <i>Life Stressors</i> | 13 (16.0) |
| Health stressors | 4 (4.9) |
| Criminal justice-related concerns | 4 (4.9) |
| Relationship stressors | 3 (3.7) |
| Work stressors | 2 (2.4) |
| Underlying Stressors | 47 (58.0) |
| Financial issues | 14 (17.3) |
| Relationship strain and/or breakdown | 13 (16.0) |
| Family issues | 11 (13.6) |
| Health-related concerns | 6 (7.4) |
| Other | 3 (3.7) |
| Emotional States | 67 (82.7) |
| Upset | 25 (30.9) |

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Angry | 18 (22.2) |
| Stress/overwhelmed | 4 (4.9) |
| Agitated | 3 (3.7) |
| Other | 17 (21.0) |
| Other Maladaptive Behaviors | 31 (38.3) |
| Prior missing episode | 15 (18.5) |
| Drug/alcohol use | 14 (17.3) |
| Gambling | 2 (2.4) |

Table 1 displays the key themes revealed through inductive thematic analysis as discussed above. The most common emotions and stressors leading to a missing episode uncovered were negative emotional states (82.7%) and stressful situations (69.1%), specifically arguments between spouses and/or partners (58.0%) and being ‘upset’ (30.9%). As shown, a vast majority of adults that go missing do so because they are triggered by various strains and stressors that are often interrelated and/or layered. For example, several emotional states were described in relation to the stressful situations and proximate stressors prior to a missing episode. What this suggests is that both affectual and individual-level mechanisms have considerable impact on arriving at the decision to go missing. Interestingly, we found that the presence of other maladaptive coping behaviors, such as using substances and/or gambling, less frequently resulted in a missing episode, but were mentioned in relation to them, relative to other negative emotions and stressors. This finding is in contrast to existing literature on the reasons for ‘going missing’ or factors influencing people to go missing (e.g., Brenton 1978; Hirschel and Lab 1988; Biehal, Mitchell, and Wade 2003; Tarling and Burrows 2004; Fyfe et al. 2015). Taken together, these findings highlight that going missing may be less to do with the ‘risk factors’ currently identified in existing literature. Instead, this phenomenon may also involve escaping certain strains and stressors, such as stressful situations, and as a way to achieve some level of emotional or cognitive distance.

Due to the attribution of these negative stressors and emotions leading to a missing episode (i.e., storming off) noted throughout the adult missing reports, the phenomenon of ‘going missing’ appears to be partially explainable as a coping response utilized by the individual experiencing strains and stressors as a way to manage the problem (problem-focused coping) and regulate their emotions (emotion-focused coping). Additionally, the previously mentioned negative individual and social consequences highlight that this strategy is likely to be widely viewed as maladaptive. That is, ‘going missing’ can be viewed as a maladaptive coping behavior. The current understandings provided in research for what influences one to go missing thus cannot provide a complete understanding as it appears as though identifying the social and environmental factors affecting these incidents (i.e., risk factors, push and pull factors), along with the functioning, day-to-day difficulties, and stressors experienced by the missing offers a greater and deeper understanding of the processes leading to a missing episode (Kelso et al. 2005).

Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to apply Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) *Threat Assessment and Coping Theory* to examine how negative emotions and stressors might impact the phenomenon of ‘going missing.’ Through qualitative thematic analysis, we attempted to provide a deeper understanding of the processes contributing to the decision to go missing, thereby revealing some of the affective and individual-level reasons for why these incidents occur that have not yet been considered in the existing scholarship. Overall, our results highlight that negative emotions and stressors can act as ‘triggers’ for these episodes, and, as a result of ineffective coping, ‘going missing’ can be a maladaptive coping response employed as a way to manage these issues. Taken together, these findings contribute to the limited body of literature that provides some insights into why people may go missing. Below, we discuss several new insights presented regarding the

mechanisms influencing these incidents and the impact of negative emotion and stress and ineffective coping tactics on adults who are reported as missing.

First, this study provides critical insights into the common experiences of negative emotion and stress encountered by missing adults. To expand on this, many of the distressing triggers influencing the decision to go missing involved personal relationships (i.e., family, spouses, etc.). What this suggests is that a shared experience by missing adults experiencing strain is that distress within and related to personal relationships are major triggers for 'going missing.' Given this finding, and that many of the adults in this study went missing multiple times, the incidence of missing persons, therefore, may be attenuated by intervening on family and social tensions and breakdowns, and other personal relationship issues, as well as providing social support options for the missing after the first episode occurs. This highlights the importance of social support both prior to and after a missing incident, whereby it can act as a buffer to the distress, a mediator in tensions and/or breakdown, and/or a coping resource when faced when negative emotion and stress instead of escaping or avoiding the issues. Therefore, future research and intervention efforts should include families and social networks as factors for examination as they can influence this phenomenon and should focus on family and personal relationship adaptive coping efforts.

Second, in almost all of the included cases, stressful situations and proximate stressors were common triggers leading to a missing episode. Within this theme, arguments between spouses and/or partners over a range of conflicts emerged as the most significant influence on this phenomenon. While these situations and stressors may be related to underlying issues, most instances were resulting from escalated situational misunderstandings. Overall, most individuals were found to cope ineffectively by avoiding the negative emotions and stressors instead of managing the problems at hand, which are often arguments or tensions. As well, many people

reported as missing were dealing with significant underlying life stressors at the time of the incident, such as cancer, single motherhood, terminal illness, and infidelity. Financial strains and relationship strains and/or breakdowns were the most commonly cited life stressors leading up to a missing episode. Taken together, these individual-level influences appear to partially explain some aspects of the phenomenon of ‘going missing’ as these reasons are often attributed as the motivation for disappearing. Viewed through this lens, it can be said that missingness can sometimes be a choice made by adults experiencing strain, which, while it may not contribute to their well-being, provides a temporary ‘escape’ from the situation or emotion and provisionally reduces the strains and stressors one is being subjected to. These findings reveal a promising avenue for further investigation. Specifically, they support research into coping mechanisms as an avenue for exploration to reduce the prevalence of missing person reports.

Third, at the time of being reported as missing, the individual was most often described as upset and angry. There were no positive emotional states reported, and the negative emotional states were usually disclosed as resulting from the stressful situation and/or proximate stressor. These findings provide first insights on the affective influences regarding adults who are reported as missing. Along with this, many of the individuals were reported as missing previously before and using drugs and alcohol. The confluence of several ineffective coping mechanisms being present and array of negative emotional states suggests that missing adults are more likely to use avoidance coping by distancing themselves from the sources of strain and stress through these missing episodes (Nandkeolyar, Shaffer, Ekkirala, and Bagger 2013; Peltokorpi 2017). Overall, however, the maladaptive behaviors commonly cited in the present literature as risk factors (i.e., substance abuse and gambling) were cited as a reason for the missing episode less than the other negative emotions and stressors found in this study. That is to say that not only are there a myriad

of factors contributing to these episodes, as found in previous literature, but there are also several emotional states and personal strains and stressors present that impact the decision to go missing. Further research on these would be beneficial as such examinations could help expand the knowledge of the likely behaviors exhibited by adults leading to a missing event for the development of support, interventions, and preventions.

Lastly, although our work draws on a limited sample, it strongly suggests that ‘going missing’ is a maladaptive coping behavior employed by some adults experiencing strain. To connect this to the theory, according to the *Threat Appraisal and Coping Theory* (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), individuals exposed to various life stressors and negative emotions may sometimes respond with adaptive coping behaviors that make them both feel better immediately and strengthen their later well-being and ability to reduce or resist the life stressors, such as seeking out social support (Bergland, Thorsen, and Loland 2010; Budge et al. 2013; Chen and Feeley 2014). However, none of these coping responses/behaviors were discovered in our sample of missing persons. Instead, the individuals experiencing the negative emotion and stress responded with ineffective coping that served to immediately distract them, vent their anger and frustration, and perhaps make them feel temporarily in control of an affectual situation. That is, ‘going missing’ can be viewed as a maladaptive strategy to cope with stressful situations or negative emotions. Thus, facing strains and stressors without the knowledge on effective coping tactics impacts the incidence of going missing, whereby those experiencing these issues are more likely to go missing as a way to ‘escape’ or cope with the situation or their emotions. The findings imply that coping behaviors may be important mechanisms of change that affect the occurrence of going missing. Missingness may, therefore, be reduced not only through developing interventions for or preventing those that have been identified as at risk, as recognized through “risk factors,” but also

by educating individuals on the impact of 'going missing,' both at the individual and social level, and on other adaptive ways to cope. For example, Bonny et al. (2016) suggests that educational work on how “going missing” can escalate family worry and stress and the importance of communication in personal relationships may potentially reduce the number of missing adult reports.

In this study, the application of qualitative methods provided a deeper understanding of both the complexities associated with what influences a person to go missing and the strategies employed by those reported as missing in the coping process. Current literature examining the reasons for why people go missing do not currently account for these affective mechanisms influencing this phenomenon. What this suggests is that qualitative methods can provide context that is not presently existing in scholarship on missing persons. While this may be the case, there are some limitations to this study that should be noted. First, we included a smaller sample size for analysis. As with most police data, there were a large number of missing values, which resulted in the exclusion of several cases from the analysis. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to all of the located missing adults experiencing strain. Future research could examine more data from other police services to account for this limitation. Another drawback is that these data represent only those who were reported missing and subsequently found. Therefore, those who were not located (i.e., remain missing) or were found deceased are not included in our analysis. This limitation was also outlined by Bonny et al. (2016), who notes that, while this could present bias towards less severe missing person cases, it is a broader issue that has previously been identified when using police data for research purpose (Canter and Alison 2003). Third, some themes in this study were developed through self-reports and others' perceptions of the negative stress and

emotion experienced by those reported as missing, which suggests the results may be less accurate than if we only included self-reported measures for negative stress and emotion.

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