

**Excursions Conference,  
Glasgow December 2011**

***The Missing***

**Hester Parr**

Continuous slide show in background on ppt showing maps, case notes, interview quotes, images of urban landscapes.

**‘Staging’**

***-Hester as narrator at the desk and ppt area in EQ***

***-Two people in suits, representing the police, sitting at a table to the left of EQ central area.***

***-A lectern in the middle is where Sophie will stand. Hester will walk across from the desk to the lectern to ‘become’ Sophie. (symbolically ‘centring her’ and the lectern denoting authoritative speaking).***

**(Narrator):** Patrick Lewis has recently asked (2001, p506) ‘If ‘story’ is central to human existence and understanding, why, in the research world, is there not more storytelling, particularly in the social sciences?’. He goes on: ‘Where are the places and spaces for storytelling in research? Can research create a space for the storyteller and her story? Can a researcher become a storyteller? Can storytelling become research? Is it enough just to share the story? Is the story the thing or is it the telling?’

These questions frame our own contribution, as we share a sort of story with you, a story of a journey, one heard in a research interview with a girl called Sophie, and then *creatively re-composed* for today. In the last decade forms of storying, narrative and creative scholarship have increasingly been utilised as ways to augment and destabilise the construction of grand truths in a variety of fields. Caleb Johnston and Geraldine Pratt (2007) have also argued that the stories that we tell as academics have effects, and that we might want to experiment with different stories in different ways to have different kinds of effects. These same authors have worked with testimonial play amongst other acts, in part to create a new kind of encounter with research narratives, other voices, collected in academic research, but for public audiencing. We want to use some of these academic-creative inspirations as a push to try and work differently with some recent research work – recorded interviews with *returned* missing people and police officers involved in searching for those who go missing.

This work emerges from the start of an academic research project about the *geographies of missing people* funded by the ESRC. Particular police forces and the Missing People charity are committed working together with us to help ‘story’ missing people and their journey-making in new ways: *our* role is to help articulate these stories to and between different audiences of interest for different purpose. Today we are nervously playing with the dominant ways in which policing research portrays missing journeys via statistical geographic behaviour profiling. This tends to be based on fairly bland spatial plot lines – if you’ll forgive the pun. That this ‘quantitative geography’ represents missing people’s journeys to the police, and indeed is the evidential basis of specialist search strategy, is

curious. It is curious because policing involves intense forms of informational work and we know that:

*'Narrative and storytelling play an important part in knowledge management in policing contexts. Officers learn to gather intelligence by listening to the stories, or whispers, of criminals and members of the public. They spend numerous hours on patrol swapping work stories with colleagues and learn to give narrated evidence in court. Policing is a narrative-bounded activity'* (Burnett et al, 2011)

Storying missing journeys, then, is another way to understand more about missing people's experience, and augment policing knowledges, and so we are experimenting with this form of information sharing, perhaps for police training purposes. As academics we are also interested in the phenomenology of the journey, of *going* and *being* missing and searching for the missing. Police and indeed academic research has never included the voices of returned missing people in particular and we are unsure of the effects and the affects involves. So storying missing journeys feels like unstable work.

Since May this year we have begun to talk to police search officers and to people who have been previously reported as missing, and in the latter case deliberately asking them to focus on their missing journey, in that we concentrate on the telling and re-telling of that particular embodied geography. Before we introduce Sophie's story; police voices will help us set the scene:

**2 'police officers' wearing suits are sitting to the left of the narrator: perhaps in front of a map, or leaning on a table with a map on it. They talk to the audience.**

**(Police voice 1):** 'The Association of Chief Police Officers define a missing person is *'anyone whose whereabouts is unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well-being or otherwise established'*. 350,000 adults get reported missing annually in the UK. Nearly 2,000 people remain outstanding a year after being reported missing and approximately 20 missing people a week are found dead. The impacts on police resources are significant and growing.'

**(Police voice 2):** 'The data shows that if a misper is known to be suicidal, and they've parked their car they will be found within 900 metres from the car. That is just the most accurate one of them all, and I've found that from personal experience. The statistics tell us that 99% of suicidal males that park their car are found within 900 meters of it: and *that's how I organise my search strategy'*.

**(Police Voice 1):** 'Take depression, one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health problems. Depressed people often simply desire time alone, many are found walking in the street, with the majority found in a rural environment. The second most likely place is walking in city centres. Profiling statistics tell us that 80% travel no further than 9KM from their home.

**(Police voice 2):** If the female misper is high risk, I need to be aware that the most common method of suicide for a female aged 18-30 is by 1) hanging or overdose, 2) jumping from a cliff or bridge or building 3) by a train 4) by car exhaust. Over 30 years old and overdose is the main method. Over 50% of suicidal mispers are found 1.5km from their home.

**(Police voice 1):** ‘You ideally don’t want to have a lot of high risk mispers, because they need enquiry teams, POLSAs, intelligence. A lot of resources: an SIO, a detailed search. For example, a POLSA will go in and do a detailed search looking for paperwork, suicide notes, mobile phones, diaries. You’ve got an enquiry that’s looking into her bank details, looking into her personal life, that’s looking at her work life, that’s tracing her ex-boyfriend, that’s looking at the phone data, and feeding that in. The searches are getting evidence from the house, and speaking to the family. You might have 60, 70 tasks up and running on Crime File.

**Narrator:** Missing journeys are storied predominately by the police as a sequence of search tasks spread across data-base and a series of officers in physical spaces, Missing people are ‘mispers’ and constructed through predicative distance-behaviour profiles, time-away and risk status. Our police voices are clearly deliberately selected for how they convey particular representations of missing searches; our continued and current interviewing of officers is hoping to disrupt these associations and connect with other sorts of policing narratives around missing situations. We are not sure what storying missing people in different ways might ‘do’ for and within professional knowledges, but the police and the charity want to experiment with us in order to try this. Let me turn now to Sophie’s story; one deliberately not carved up for social or policing science, but recomposed for telling in the context of this meeting.

*(Hester walks over to the lecturn to ‘become Sophie’)*

**Sophie:** I suffer from depression and I was going through a really bad episode, everything was a bit much, things just got pretty over the top and I took a huge overdose and that’s what made me go missing, because I sent emails out to lots of people while I was under the influence of a lot tablets and some red wine. Like my mum and my boss and some of my friends, my sister. When I realised I was still alive, it was a working night, it was in the middle of the week and people were going to start to waken up and get their emails and I thought ‘I’m going to disappear’, so I just sort of took my iPod and left my phone at home and just like decided I would go ... that was really the reason how I ended up being reported missing because I left my phone and everything at home and I didn’t show up for work. I spent a lot of time vomiting, but I was aware by four in the morning that I was still alive, and very much still alive, and people were going to start getting the letters and I had not planned to still be around, so I had to go somewhere until all the tablets did their worst and that was my thinking. I got dressed for the weather, I don’t know why because if you think you’re going to die why do you bother? but it’s just a thing you do I guess, I also wanted to be wearing dark things so I wouldn’t be easy to spot and I’m blonde. I knew where I was going from when I left.

... that would have been about four or five o’clock that morning. I don’t know why, but it was kind of like a light bulb came on, I don’t know *why* I thought of that place - it was kind of perfect because it wasn’t far away. I didn’t think I was going to be a missing person, but I know I didn’t want to be found. I wanted to be missing for long enough for the tablets to do their job, after that it didn’t matter. I wanted to be dead so I needed a certain amount of time for the poison to take effect basically, so I knew that I had to be well hidden.

I used to run by the building, that’s how I knew it. I don’t know what it used to be, it’s beside an old mill, like what’s left of an old mill on the river. It’s kind of *in* the bank, and there’s a path that goes alongside it and then steps upwards. A lot of it is derelict now, it’s full of leaves when it gets windy, it’s very well hidden and you can’t see it from the road or anything.

It was winter so I put extra jumper on and a jacket, something with a hood so I could just put it over my head and sort of hide as well, it's all kind of about hiding. I was listening to Nirvana which is very good when you're in that mess because of, you know, obviously he suffered. So that's why I took the iPod with me and I'm pretty sure the other thing I took was my house key and the bottle of wine...

I could only get there by foot. I remember it was pretty quiet, I walked alongside the parked cars, so if I did stumble I wasn't very obvious. I was aware that if a police car was going past or even a taxi driver, somebody might have spotted me and just sort of 'there's something really not right with that girl', and that would have spoiled my plan as well ...

... it was like being really drunk, I remember my vision, it was like everything was kind of in slow motion, I took a mixture of things, paracetamol and pain killers and sleeping tablets and you know just anything I could get my hands on. I was aware that I was sort of weaving about and I was trying not to trip or fall or anything ... my eyes ... I was probably closing and opening my eyes a lot ... you know it probably just wouldn't have looked right. I do remember about two cars passed me because the headlights ... I was trying even harder to sort of stand up straight and not stumble and not to look at them as well. I remember being quite focused on my walking. I was thumping my feet down, it was very deliberate, everything was very deliberate. I remember I was then walking fast, definitely, 'cause I was nearly there and then I sort of hold myself a little bit to stop that, especially as I got to the roundabout because it's more lit up again there.

There are a lot of places I could have stopped if I was struggling, I could have stopped and probably found somewhere to hide, but because a lot of the buildings were being demolished, there were workmen going about during the day and they probably come quite early. ... I just had thought of this place and I was focused on getting there.

So I cut from where I was, diagonally across the little roundabout to the path along the Don. It's only a matter of a few hundred yards to that building and even though I was struggling, I just jumped in it because I didn't really care if I hurt myself. It's about a six foot drop, so I jumped down, but the wind meant that there was a lot of leaves build up on it, so it's quite soft in there, so I just kind of crawled into the space, put my iPod on and sat there. I didn't take my phone because I watched police programmes and they can track you with your phone, so that was in my mind ...

... so I just went like right in the corner, so you would have to put your head in to see me and the wall is granite, the wall was thick. There was the shelter and seclusion 'cause you know I just wanted, I didn't want to have to face what I'd done in the emails. I just thought I was safe, I just thought, well that's me, I'm safe you know.

(pause)

and then as daylight was coming and I was still alive, that was sort of when I started to panic ... I couldn't face drinking anymore but I was trying ... trying to drink more wine so that I could maybe make the whole cocktail work, but I had like a few mouthfuls maximum. I just kept putting my entire collection of Nirvana on repeat, listening to it all the way through and closing my eyes and hoping that you know they wouldn't find me.

**(Nivarna track plays over sound system for 30 seconds)**

I know I was thinking about my family.

I was sort of curled in a ball, I wasn't lying down but I was sitting like holding my knees with my back against the wall. I had to move a few times 'cause I was sick. Like I tried to move away from where I was sitting because it was quite a prime spot. I was sick further away and I covered it with leaves but sometimes it was just like too quick. I mean I didn't move very far, I just shuffled along little bit further but mostly I was just sort of curled in a ball, 'cause it was pretty cold. My head felt quite wobbly. The whole point is when it gets to the end you would lose consciousness, I just sort of remember kind of coming out of something, like snapping my head up and then realising that I had probably slept or just or been unconscious or something and then sort of check the light and then just like close my eyes again, just listen to the music. ...

**(Nivarna track plays over sound system for 30 seconds)**

I didn't think I would become a missing person as such.

My mum goes to work at eight, so she would have been the first one, she starts at eight, so she would have been the first one to get her email.

I really didn't hope for any of that, that I was going to be a missing person or any of that sort of business or that they would phone the police. When you're in that depressive state you're very self-involved to a point you can't really think about anything outside. I was on a mission that was going to end all that for me.

I wasn't alert when she shouted my name, it was like "oh Sophie thank god just stay there, just stay there I'm coming down, I'm coming down" and she had like my stepdad with her. She did the jump, like the six foot jump, because she was so worried that I would run away or something. My friend had mentioned my running route and they'd worked it out and just gone looking.

They were at the hospital soon after I arrived there, the police. I was emotional ... I felt guilty that I didn't deserve treatment because I did it myself. I remember they stayed with me for ages. They asked me questions about what had happened and why I ended up missing and like sort of, was I going to, would I be doing it again kind of thing ...

(pause)

It ... was like two months, three months later that I went back there to that place and I went on my own. I was quite emotional at the start. I was really nervous and anxious about going in. I was on quite high levels of anti-depressants so I couldn't cry, there wasn't any of that. I didn't stay there long ...

I haven't thought about being reported missing that much, I never really considered myself a missing person, even speaking to the police. I never really thought of myself as a missing person, although that's what they classed me as at the time. That just sort of enhanced the sort of severity of it and the waste of resources, because I've done it myself, even though I

was ill. I was a depressive who attempted suicide, a vulnerable adult – that was the label that the police gave me as well I think. I think I'm that more than a missing person.

**(Sophie becomes Hester as she walks back to desk).**

**Narrator:** More than vulnerable, more than missing, Sophie's story helps to depicts her as a nuanced journey-maker, thoughtful and careful, even in the midst of an over-dose. The related rhythms of her walk to her suddenly chosen death-place are told with attention to visceral detail as we co-construct her missing story. The spatial plot-lines of Sophie's missing geography – at least those that seem to matter the most to Sophie and now to us through her story – are not those of the police, as they were voiced previously.

**Police voice:** 'Statistics are fine, but you always have to link that into the strategy - the search strategy - any POLSA worth their salt will tell you that - otherwise the stats are a waste. We're always listening to what might help the search'.

**Narrator:** Her story is embodied and emplaced, not about just distance from her home, but about exact streets, cut-throughs and river-paths to weave along, unsteadily but purposefully: spatial vectors leading towards an envisaged conclusion – her intended conclusion. These are about sight-lines and their disruption, about using everyday spaces – parked cars, sunken walkways, darkened corners – to hide in, avoid attention: to make absence. The sounds, lighting and layout of the night-time city are important in her story-telling, as is her pacing, her clothing, balance, excretions and uncertain consciousness of these elements. These are momentary inhabitations, retold as a repertoire of possibilities upon which Sophie draws on, and decides, as she makes her journey through a familiar store of places that she knows. She is attentive to small spaces and how to *be* in them in and for her absence-making, or at least she is in the re-telling – perhaps rendering her relationship with them more deliberate than it really was in the *doing* – which is not to deny their profound centrality to what unfolded. Her spatial plot-lines are not stark topologies, but emotional topographies of substance, a tensely navigated excursion of no intended return.

In this geography of absence-making, Sophie is a key witness to a crisis mobility barely understood and not always known. It offers us more than trace evidence of the uncertain-real, it helps fills-in lines on the map, confirms more than 'average mileage' for her age and status; checks our assumptions about missing behaviour, tells us the value of lateral thinking around routes and spatial decision making by families as well as missing people. Her story is a denial of her missingness in more ways than one.

The journey of the research project has only just started, but we want to tell stories – we want 'the misper' to be heard as a *person* reported as missing. There are lots of stories to be told; and Sophie's is just one of these. We use her words, and recompose her interview testimony into a story to be listened to, because we are also engaged in an exercise of filling in lines; of 'colouring in' absence. Like Johnston and Pratt who work via monologues from interview testimony we want to avoid:

'extracting small portions from interview transcripts and reading across different people's experiences, [but instead] to come to know individuals in some of their specificity' (Johnston and Pratt 2010, p123)

'Mispers' are often and necessarily 'generalized as a type or a situation' in police practice (ibid, p123); and we are not sure about what creativity engaging with individual stories will do, but as De Certeau argues "stories offer their audience a repertoire of tactics for future use" (p. 23). To also return to Patrick Lewis, he *hopefully* propositions that 'it is in *the stories of our every day being*, in our trying to *live well* with the challenges of *being*, that we may engender some insight'. This is one point of trying to listen differently to Sophies' story.