Ambiguous Loss: The Long-Term Effects of a Present-Absent Father on the Children of Prisoners Of War (POWs)

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“Then we played on the carpet. My brother and I stood and allowed ourselves to fall backwards into Dad’s arms. I wasn’t paying attention, and one time I fell backwards. Dad wasn’t there... And at the same time the experience that has been etched in me is actually the certainty that Dad is always there for me ...”
Until the POW returns

Family in waiting
(Hunter, 1983)

Stuck in time
(Hunter, 1988)
Two types of ambiguous loss situations:

**Physical loss** - occurs when a family member is physically absent or when the loss is usually associated with war. In everyday life this type of loss can happen after divorce, adoption, and even emigration.

**Emotional or cognitive loss** occurs when a family member is physically present but absent due to a disease like Alzheimer’s, traumatic brain damage, autism, depression, or chronic or mental illness, (Boss, 2004).
There but not there, here but not here
“I remember the first day: we were just about to go out with Mom to see a children’s play. The phone rang. Mom said we have to wait now... another phone call... and then two of Mom’s friends come and tell her that Dad’s been taken prisoner... I remember that day and I remember the day he came home. I don’t remember anything in between. The first day and the last day are a living, breathing memory for me; I don’t remember the years in between”.
“Mom told me that we were really cute little girls and everybody loved us. Actually, everybody raised us. I have this memory of lots of people raising us, lots of good people. Lots of people going coochie-coochie-coo all day long. It seemed unnatural, it seemed odd, unexpected. You wonder about people, what’s their story, what do they want from me... You don’t understand why they do it”.
Central themes in the interviews

1. Attachment and detachment from the parents

2. Lack of understanding the world
“Simple, everyday things lose their value, and engaging in ‘little’ things becomes meaningless, because in fact, everything is bigger than we are”.
The borders between life and death, between presence and absence, are not clear. Death is impossible to understand and somehow life is also viewed as unreal, made of unstable material.
The Father’s Return – “As if one day a man appeared...

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.
“My dad returned home from captivity and a few days later he was already back in the army. He came back from the photo on the wall over there, but he was hardly ever home.”
“We went the day before as well [to the airport]. Dad didn’t come back because they were only bringing back the wounded. Mom said we would go every day until he comes back.
“After he came back there were more family trips, more visits with friends. I think Mom was happy with Dad, that she was happy he came back and the cooperation between them was good.”
In the present study, the mother’s meaningful presence during the father’s absence is evident, as well as the genuine efforts of both parents to create a support system when the father returned.
“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”.
“For many years everybody tells you how they looked after you and how much they helped Mom, I never felt important enough”.
“The captivity and coping with it and within it accompany us all the time. Everyday things lose their value, everything is bigger than we are. The partner I chose is a different kind of father... in every aspect of his being. He cooks with the children and does things. I think that one of the most important things is to raise the children”.
The ambiguity of the father’s physical absence dissipates when he returns, but for the children psychological absence and ambiguity continue to exist and accompany them into their adult life.