Missing women: policing absence

Olivia Stevenson[1], Hester Parr[2] and Penny Woolnough[3]

This paper considers the neglected mobilities associated with a sample of UK women reported as missing. Refracted through literatures on gendered mobility and abandonment, the paper argues that the journeys of these women in crisis are not well understood by police services, and that normative gender relations may infuse their management. By selectively exploring one illustrative police case file on Kim, we highlight how reported and observed socio-spatial relationships within private and public spaces relate to search actions. We argue that Kim's mobility and spatial experiences are barely understood, except for when they appear to symbolise disorder and danger. We address the silences in this singular case by using the voices of other women reported as missing, as collected in a research project to explore the agency, experience and meaning of female mobility during absence. We argue that women reported as missing are not abandoned by UK policing services, but that a policy of continued search for them may be at risk if they repeatedly contravene normative socio-spatial relationships through regular absence mobilities. By way of conclusion, we address recent calls for research that explores the relationships between gender and mobility.

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[1]Office of the Vice Provost Research, University College London, London WC1H 0BT
[2]Geographical and Earth Science, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ
Email: Hester.Parr@glasgow.ac.uk
[3]Division of Psychology, School of Social and Health Sciences, University of Abertay, Dundee DD1 1HG

Introduction

How might we talk and write of missing women? What are the salient geographies of female absence? These terms perhaps immediately evoke juxtaposition. '*Missing* women' and 'female *absence*' are uncanny and un-like categories that invite response. 'Going missing' involves movement, a journey away from 'located' presence in place, and a process often constituted as a crisis-led mobility (Parr and Fyfe 2013). 'Being absent' via going missing implies a deviation, the lack of a presence that others may find disturbing. What, though, of its gendered dimensions? The mobility of women is often (mis) understood as a threat, both historically (Cresswell 1999; Domosh 1991; Kimber 2010) and more contemporaneously in the 20th (McDowell 1996) and 21st centuries (Hanson 2010; Silvey 2004). While geographers have charted the mobility of female travellers through diaries, letters and films (Blunt 1994; Domosh 1991; Maddrell 2009; Robinson 1990; Russell 1988), less has been said of more deviant female mobility (but see some examples in the work of Casey *et al.* 2007; Cresswell 1999; Rowe and Wolch 1990). In seeking to contribute to broader understandings of the relationships between gender and movement (Bowstead 2015; Hanson 2010; Uteng and Cresswell 2008), we provide critical commentary on the unusual mobilities of temporarily missing women in the UK, elaborating more general geographies of

'missing experience' as discussed in Parr *et al.* (2015). Our focus is primarily on how temporary female absence is policed and experienced, in and through particular spaces.

This paper responds, in part, to Hanson's (2010) call for more detailed work on the gendered meanings and power relations embedded in various forms of mobility/ immobility in various social and geographic contexts. Hanson argues that there is a lack of engagement with more nebulous and hard to grasp gendered processes constituting the power dynamics that produce mobility. Recent literature on forced migration and domestic violence (Bowstead 2015; Brickell 2012; Mountz 2011; Pain 2014) illuminates a previously neglected range of women's migration and mobility decisions and circumstances. Bowstead (2015), in particular, highlights under-recognised processes of 'forced migration' for women and their children in the UK as ones intimately connected, not only to common drivers of domestic abuse, but also to the agency of women. She argues – through multi-scalar analysis – for recognising the distinctive nature of women's forced migrations, partly because of their segmented and disruptive nature. Such work is helpful in reminding us that gendered mobility is multi-dimensional in how it is produced, driven and experienced.

Our paper is based on research not straightforwardly concerned with 'forced migration' in quite the manner

implied above, but with women who nonetheless feel it critically important to be temporarily mobile for a range of reasons – including mental health issues (represented as a primary factor by 80% of our respondents), relationship stress (but not necessarily violence) with partners and children, drug and alcohol addiction, and workplace pressures – in order to absent themselves from usual places of residence and domestic lives. In Pain's (2014) view, such spatial movement (especially 'leaving') might be construed as a form of 'activism', a notion explored further below, as a point of connection with literature on domestic violence. The paper is thus situated in an emerging field of scholarship that thinks critically about women's mobility (and for a review of related recent scholarship, see Brickell and Maddrell 2016). In elaborating our own distinctive account of gendered mobility, we evoke three important frames for understanding the geographies of missing women and their 'missing journeys' addressing

1   how female absence invites regulatory policing and yet *also* ironically risks forms of abandonment by policing services;
2   how policing may render absent women as at-risk 'female object subjects' to be 'returned', rather than women to be 'engaged' as 'body subjects' (after Young 1990 in Cresswell 1999), because of how they seemingly disrupt normative geographies of the public and private; and
3   how we might counter the relative invisibility of missing women in policing guidance and research and better recognise their agentic geographies of absence.

We elaborate these frames below, contextualising our evidence and argument, before turning to our own empirical materials, gathered as part of an ESRC-funded research project on the geographies of missing people (www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk). While these original materials are particular (they relate to a small UK case study and qualitative data) and are limited in terms of their extensiveness, we are able – via exampling a police case file on one mobile missing woman, Kim – to consider how complex layerings of policing action inform concern for female absence away from home. In elaborating Kim's case, we build in qualitative data from 20 in-depth interviews with returned missing women to understand more about their experiences of absence from 'the inside', and to address the silences apparent in Kim's case. Through this structuring of our materials, we do not claim to evidence *all* of the drivers or dynamics of missing women's mobility in UK society, but are able to suggest lines of critical argument and evidence that shed light on temporary female absence and policing practice, both of which are neglected in the

geographical literature. We conclude by making clear our distinctive contribution to current research on gender and mobility.

Abandoned missing women

> Policing proves but one material manifestation of the work done by states. (Mountz 2011, 384)

In one of the few pieces of writing in the geographical canon addressing the lives of missing women – in and of Vancouver's lower East Side – Pratt (2005) appeals to Agamben's ideas about 'bare life', as a strategy to expose more about their absence by exploring the racialisation and feminisation of 'states of exception'. Her writing on female absence is framed by thinking about *abandonment*. Pratt relates the horrific story of 69 women, including sex workers and aboriginal women of colour, who disappeared over a 20-year period as a result of what turned out to be an infamous series of abductions by a male killer. What marks out the story as unusual is the scale of the disappearance and the lack of police search, at least initially. Civic officials in charge at the time when the disappearances were gaining more public attention stated that the police were not 'a location service' – a comment, Pratt argues, underlying incorrect assumptions that 'typical' drug-addicted women and sex workers are highly, yet elusively, mobile. In the Vancouver case, it was likely, in the view of civic and police services, that these women had simply moved elsewhere to work or to check into treatment facilities. The high level of assumed mobility was thus considered deviant but normal for these particular women, and such assumptions, alongside gendered racisms, infused a lack of search activity. A missing persons enquiry or investigation did not seem necessary to Vancouver's police force, their spatial assumptions serving to 'undergird legal abandonment' (Pratt 2005, 1059); and so the police here did not carry out their duty to respond and protect by searching for these particular women, thus rendering them as 'bare life' (after Agamben 1998).

In Pratt's arguments a 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005) was exercised via the lack of action by the Vancouver police – the police *excepted* these women from their usual search processes – and there was thus an abandonment of these particular women – precisely because they were conceived of as deviant or in some way as being worth less than wealthy or mainstream white Canadians, whose absences would have gained more attention and police resource. Here Pratt argues that it is possible for the state (via policing as a manifestation of the work of the state) to let some women die via their abandonment, or, if not die, then at least to be absent without trying to locate them. Pratt asserts that such abandonment is not easily understood and comprises a complex, relational process in which

the moral worth of certain women citizens comes to the fore. She thereby highlights the under-researched gendered dimensions through which women become missing, cautioning that we need to understand versions of abandonment 'as an active and relational process' (Pratt 2005, 1054) – and women's absence – as occurring through a complex layering of geographies of the public and the private. This is because any discourse and police action around Vancouver's missing women actively referenced normative domestic lives in private space and normative mobilities in public space. Pratt rightly states, 'it is inconceivable that these processes work in a uniform way for men and women' (2005, 1056).

While Pratt focuses on the lives of missing women from Vancouver's East Side, we transfer her concerns to the context of UK women reported as missing. In this paper, we are similarly concerned with the problematic dynamic between the public and private lives of women and their abandonment or otherwise in context of their absence. We recognise below how the apparent mobility of the UK's missing women tends to be predominantly understood as a risk and a threat to both themselves and, perhaps more broadly, the normalised and gendered constitution of public/private spaces. In the cases highlighted below, and in contradistinction to Pratt's empirics, the missing women are arguably *not* abandoned, but rather they are actively pursued by state agents (the police) licensed to protect life and to ensure safety. While this pursuit is undoubtedly related to their location and ethnicity as predominantly (but not solely) white women born in the UK (ethnic minority disappearance is under-reported in the UK; SOCA 2013), it may also be related to a particular relationship between male-dominated police forces and gendered understandings of female absence in public space. We do not reject Pratt's observations about bare life and abandonment, but rather are inspired to use this and other work to understand more about the complex ways in which geographies are integral to the relational dynamics constituting gendered mobility.

Policing missing women in the UK

Quite unlike the policing of Vancouver's already abandoned women through which (certain) women's absence was produced as deviant but normal, the examples of policing depicted below render predominantly white, UK female absence as problematic and as a sign of potential disorder. This rendering is partly related to the reporting of such absence as 'out-of-character' by family members and significant others,[1] and also to how such absence is subject to police risk assessments, these arguably framed by more general gendered understandings of the place of women as

mobile in public space. In domestic violence research, abusive family members who report absence – and police officers responding – might be understood as being complicit in co-policing the 'spatial activism' of escape (Pain 2014), although this was not obviously the case in our research.

In unpacking the complexity of police response to women's absence below, we engage the narratives of police officers, police case notes and women's voices in order to show how the UK women we discuss are not abandoned, but are pursued by police as (presumably) worthy citizens. However, we argue that there is still *potential* for them to become abandoned as their traces in domestic and public spaces, and through the words of others, effectively lay their lives bare (and possibly worth*less*) in ways then available for reconceptualisations through powerful representations in police case files. In the very attempt to locate women, new risks may arise that their lives become understood as characteristically deviant or mis-managed, with attendant implications for *future* intervention or search if the missing episode is repeated by the same woman, as it is in over 38 per cent of all cases and 18 per cent of adult cases (NCA 2015; Parr and Holmes 2016).

This issue is particularly salient given new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' in UK policing governance (ACPO 2013; see Figure 1), whereby those deemed categorically 'absent' rather than 'missing' may not be actively searched for by police officers in some English police forces. In UK current policing practice in England and Wales (but not Scotland), if 'absence' is suspected, then it is recorded as such, risk-assessed and becomes subject to review over time. It does not mean that any one absent person will be automatically, actively searched for by police officers.

The definitions in Figure 1 are thus controversial, and the charity Missing People states:

> We are concerned about the use of the term 'no apparent risk' which is part of the definition of absent … most children and adults who disappear are vulnerable before they go, and at higher risk of crime and exploitation when they are missing and hidden from help. (Missing People 2016, np)

Missing People is also concerned about the lack of accurate national data on who 'absent people' are, a concern compounded by the inability of the UK Missing Bureau to provide accurate national (and gendered) figures on 'absent', given problems with data and reporting mechanisms across police forces.

There are parallels with Bowstead's (2015) concern for the limited visibility of complex and fragmented domestic violence migration. Indeed, the national police lead for missing persons in the UK wrote a publicly available letter to all officers in 2014, noting difficulties with the national application of the absent

> **Missing:** anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject to crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.
>
> **Absent:** a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.
>
> The 'absent' category should comprise cases in which people are not presently where they are supposed to be and there is no apparent risk.

Figure 1 Definitions of missing and absent in the UK (ACPO 2013, 5)

definition in policing practice and citing 'examples of both adults and children who have been inappropriately treated as "absent", such as a young female with warning markers for CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation)' (ACPO 2014). Here vulnerable women come in for particular attention, as a group who may be at risk in this new definition. We suggest, then, that this definition and concern about its application in policing practice may have implications for the abandonment of women by policing services.

How much is known about missing women by police services in the UK more generally? All police forces in Britain provide an annual figure for the total number of missing persons incidents recorded. For the last available report (2014/15), 210 632 missing person incidents (from over 280 000 calls) are recorded for England and Wales and 39 926 in Scotland (NCA 2015). For the three-year period 2009–11 (the time period relevant to this paper), the data provided by all police forces suggests that approximately equal numbers of men and women go missing (52% and 48% respectively), broadly consistent with the make-up of the general population of the UK (49% male and 51% female) (NPIA 2011; ONS 2015; SOCA 2013). Beyond the predominantly 'gender-neutral' headline figures, women's missing experiences are largely hidden, and their subjectivities are subsumed in a homogenised 'missing' category (Mountz 2011 makes a similar point about women refugees). As a result, the only overt mention of gender appears in two operational guidance manuals for police search: the former Association of Chief Police Officer's *Search guidance for police search advisors* (ACPO 2006) and police guidance resources for responding to missing persons (Gibb and Woolnough 2007). The police response guidance, based on UK police data regarding usual distances travelled in time and stratified by gender and other factors, suggests that missing men and women differ in their geo-spatial behaviour profiles. For example, an absent woman who travels on foot to 'intended suicide' (one key driver for missing in the guidance) is likely to travel further than a man (e.g. 95% are located within 8 and 4.10 kilometres respectively). This difference, according to Gibb and Woolnough (2007), is related to means and method, with women more likely to take an overdose or drown themselves, which can require further travel to locate a body of water, whereas men may choose 'more' violent methods such as hanging or shooting, which may allow greater spatial choice and shorter travel distances (and see Stevenson 2016 for more on 'geographies of intended suicide'). Such assumptions, evidence and suggested patterns are the only gender-relevant spatial guidance for tracking missing people's mobility. While ostensibly the purpose of spatial behaviour profiles is to shape officers' awareness of gender-specific norms to support search, a potential unintended consequence is that, on their own, these resources reify male/female behavioural difference rather than illuminate gendered experiences.

Academic and policy research on missing people is limited, but what does exist suggests that 'gender and time missing are significantly associated with one another, but only for shorter absences of up to six months' (Biehal *et al.* 2003, 51). In Biehal *et al.*'s study, young women (under 24 years) were more likely to be found than men, but it is unclear as to why this is the case. However, men, over the age of 24 years, were more likely to be traced within one month than were women. This study suggests such patterns reflect the fact that older women are more likely to leave as a result of relationship breakdown or to escape violence, and that they tend to remain missing longer, perhaps because of complex migration journeys, as suggested by Bowstead (2015).

A small number of studies into police cases reveal the risks to women who go missing. Newiss (1999) suggests that, when a missing person is found dead, the risk of a woman being the victim is over seven times higher than that of a man, with the risk being particularly high for adult women as they are more susceptible to homicide. As a consequence, beyond being represented as potential victims of homicide, women's missing experiences are largely invisible and barely understood. Curiously, more may be understood about the reasons for particular ethnic minority female absence in the UK than for that of White British women. This is as a result of a recent police, policy and research focus on absences of young women of Asian origin relating to honour-based killings and forced marriages, notwithstanding under-reporting of such absences from within the communities in question (Eshareturi *et al.* 2014; Meetoo and Mirza 2007).

Researching missing women

We seek to counter this gendered lacuna using materials from our own research on police case files and from interviews with 20 previously missing adult women aged between 20 and 78 years. In the wider ESRC-funded study, partnered by police services and the Missing People charity, 45 people, women and men, were interviewed via the sampling of resolved missing person reports over a two-year period from two different police forces, a recruitment strategy framed by University Ethics Committee approval and Police Protocols (see full technical details in Stevenson *et al.* 2013). The women were predominantly White Scottish or White English (80%) and occupied a range of class positions and occupations from higher managerial and professional roles through to unemployment or retired status, and just under half of the women did not have children (45%). The majority were reported missing from home (65%) or hospital (including psychiatric units) (20%). In contrast to Biehal *et al.*'s (2003) findings, the women in our study tended to feature in shorter missing incidents, reflecting their 'crisis-led mobilities' (Parr and Fyfe 2013), and over 50 per cent were missing for less than 48 hours with a longest absence of seven months. In common with over 90 per cent of UK missing persons cases, and the reason we were interviewing these women, they had *returned* after being reported. Only one interviewee disclosed abuse as a reason for leaving, while for the remainder mental health issues (clinically defined and self-diagnosed) and a variety of social and financial pressures were referenced as key drivers. As a result of our joint agreements with police and charity partners, interviews focused on collecting in-depth narratives of both the journeys undertaken during absence and the aftermaths of their missing incidents.

Below, we present data connected with one police missing case file drawn from 12 analysed across two UK police forces. Cases were selected on the basis that they offer qualitative insights into different types and the range of investigation, rather than being representative of all types quantitatively. The cases we consulted varied by risk (low risk and high risk); whether the case occurred in a single police force or involved multiple forces; whether the cases were short term, with the person missing for a few hours, or long term, running over several months. These case files gave us access to a range of missing incidents and exposure to different kinds of actions taken by the police officers involved with them. Twenty-one key officers involved with the reconstructed cases were interviewed, and these ranged from Police Constables to Senior Investigating Officers (SIOs) and Police Search Advisors (PolSAs). All the cases we consulted

related to missing person investigations that took place between 2006 and 2011.

In the paper, though, we select a single illustrative case because it involved a woman, Kim, and contained explicit comment on her domesticity and significant levels of police search. Kim's typed case file highlighted the 'informational setting' (written task data) through which decisions about the particular search practices happened. It should be noted that any case file (including this one) is accompanied by verbal 'handovers', and that it may or may not record all outcomes of technical enquiries like CCTV evidence, bank transaction data, mobile phone records and physical search. A case file is essentially a task list – augmented by evaluative comment – incrementally entered into an electronic recoding system by different officers on the case, varying by shift patterns. Below, we look specifically at how the search for Kim developed through time using selected excerpts of case file task data[2] and via officer interviews. Our reading of this singular case is contextualised by interviews with three officers who worked on the case and who compared it with others known to them. We limit the claims that can be made on just one case, but use it to illustrate an example of the policing of mobile women and to help justify the inclusion of multiple women's voices later in the paper. Although single case studies are limited in how they can be formally generalisable, they offer nuanced learning opportunities about practised reality and therefore are an acceptable basis from which to theorise (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Kim's case

> The problem with her was that she was moving about, you know. We had sightings of her. (PC Roberts 2011)

As the case notes relating to 'Kim' open, she was recorded simply as a female who is 'depressed and suicidal, wearing blue glasses, slim build, pale skin, possibly wearing a black jacket and boots and carrying a holdall' (case file notes, accessed 2011). The basic case file then reconstructs events and statements relating to a missing female, Kim, who was missing for seven days in an English city before being located as 'alive and well' close to her home. She was reported missing by a council official, initial enquiries marking her as a high-risk case early on in the core software system (see Figure 2 for an example) and the officers concerned responded to that risk category by working hard to ascertain her location and safety – she was *not* abandoned.

The first 'task entries' in the case file set the scene: all the italicised data in quotation marks are taken directly from the case file[3] – from typed entries – written by different police constables who first searched Kim's dwelling and who were involved in the first stage

Figure 2   **Exemplar data entry page, police case file system. [copyright: www.wpcsoft.com]. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]**

of the missing person investigation (ACPO 2006).[4] 'MP' in the case notes refers to 'missing person'[5] (Figure 3).

This initial scripting of Kim in the case file defined the enquiry and, quite rightly, was read as a worrying context for someone going missing. Kim's associates are repeatedly questioned on her character, her known past-times and favoured locations for these (Figure 4). These witnesses appeared to know little about her but effectively evidenced the initialisation of basic search activity:

Kim's dualistic (dirty–clean) and dysfunctional relationship with domestic order and cleanliness in her work and home-space was noted in the case file on days 1, 2 and 3 (Figure 4 is an exemplar). Day 2 (Figure 5) further establishes her character as isolated and 'odd'. This picture is reinforced by her mother's assessment, reminding officers that she had been missing before.

Kim was said to use mobility defiantly to deal with her perceptions of authority and in order to impose her will. She was arguably represented as a dysfunctional daughter and attributed child-like responses to authority; an interpretation provided by her mother, who has no contact with her. The 'facts' of Kim's faultiness become established over time, and her personality and behaviours are recorded in repeated interviews.

By day 3 (Figure 6) it is revealed that Kim had recently quit her job and was assumed to be suicidal in the PolSA (specialist search officer) review, which suggests this likelihood by combining the attributed

characteristics, observations on her home and her mobile phone screen displaying a message of 'goodbye world'. This latter 'fact' is later clarified as a joke made in a verbal handover between officers, but here it is unintentionally recorded as factual in the case file review. Such a joke suggests that the officers were actively constructing Kim as suicidal and journeying to her intended death. Following the review, the search is intensified with helicopter and dog searches. Confusion about Kim's intentions and status seems to be have been present, however, as there are unconfirmed but suspected sightings as the case moved towards a surprising conclusion on day 7 (Figure 7).

This is a brief selection of evidence from a long and detailed case file, in which Kim was incrementally recorded as: isolated, dirty and yet unreasonably clean at work, petulant with authority, someone who cries easily, is anti-social and friendless with no hobbies and interests. Repeated visits to her home result in constant comment about its (dis)order in the case file and shape police arrangements for Environmental Health to clean the dwelling. Intensively interviewing and re-interviewing people associated with her constructs an authoritative 'mapping' of Kim's character (yet all the 'witnesses' admit to having hardly any contact with her). Kim's risky self and possible deviancy is transparently constructed in the case file and it is also noted that she has disappeared before. The intensive search process that results seems at odds with Pratt's description of the lack of search for deviant women, despite

> 'The [dwelling] was in a poor state with rubbish everywhere'.
>
> 'Colleagues said she was stressed at work'.
>
> 'MP has a history of mental health issues and has attempted suicide in the past'.

Figure 3   Initial officer summaries, day 1

> 'Home address found to be extremely filthy, excrement in bath, bags of rubbish floor to ceiling. Kitchen full of rubbish, with baby wipes, apparently used for toilet purposes piled high'.[4]
>
> A work colleague states: 'MP has no friends that she is aware of, no car and she never mentioned anywhere special'.
>
> Witness statements point to a life pattern revolving around work, shopping at [supermarket] and home.
>
> 'MP was constantly disinfecting her workspace and would get upset if people touched or moved her things out of place'.
>
> MP is 'described as hard worker but with obsessive behaviour'.
>
> Brother provides statement: 'states he is estranged from his sister and has had no contact for 10 years'.

Figure 4   Summaries of witness evidence and police observation of dwelling, day 2

Kim's deviancy being established in nuanced layers and confirmed by the joke relating to her 'final' mobile phone message.

In order to explore this matter further, we refer to interviews with key officers reflecting on the case, specifically on how Kim's domestic situation and reports of her character fuelled particular responses. PC Smith, one of the first to respond to the enquiry, relates:

> Her pet was within the [dwelling] and the [dwelling] was untidy and not fit to live in … and going by the state of the dwelling, it was clear she might not be of stable mind … it just builds a bigger picture … a bit more of a concern.

> Her own dwelling was very untidy, however, at her work address it was established she was immaculate, she kept her desk pristine, which I found strange.

The faeces around the house were mentioned in both interview and case files as particularly significant, the implication being that Kim was inappropriately toileting in the dwelling and using baby-wipes. Only at the end of the interview, and after being prompted to reflect on the files again, does the PC admit that the faeces on the carpet and in the bath were probably from the pet that had been locked in the dwelling for the few days of Kim's absence. The dwelling, clearly untidy and chaotic, was nonetheless strongly constructed by adjectives like 'desperate', which were deployed by officers when writing their notes. Such observations helped to picture a dysfunctional woman, although the PC insisted 'we only work on facts'.

Witness testimony helped to maintain the risk level, extending the search resources and parameters: 'Speaking to neighbours, speaking to the ex-boyfriend, by the end of that shift, I was thinking this person would be found dead in the next few days' (PC Smith 2011).

These readings of Kim by the search officers, coupled with witness statements, led senior investigating officers into resourcing a more complex enquiry, one functioning like 'a kind of major enquiry … like murders, rapes, serious assaults' (DC John 2011). The woman's absence here became a potential crime, with the missing person occupying an uneasy position of possible victim or key protagonist (see also Newiss 1999). As PC Roberts (2011) added, Kim was unsettling, as 'the problem with her was that she was moving about, you know. We had sightings of her'. Kim's intentions, her dualistic domesticity, her absence and her missing mobility were problematic for officers; and even after the case was resolved, 'I don't know what her intention was' (PC Smith 2011).

In Kim's case, we suggest that the dynamics of case construction rested *partly* on gendered responses to particular kinds of sociability, domesticity and mental health issues, and that duly Kim emerged as 'disgusting' and 'socially odd' in written and oral case work by the officers involved. These responses structured a geography of search that was predicated on an understanding of a deviant and probably suicidal woman, her unbounded home environment and over-regulated work desk demonstrating her unusual femininity and heightening the risk status. We might interpret the surprising conclusion of the case to be a statement of Kim's

> GP review notes:'*the MP is very vulnerable with poor self worth'*.
>
> MP described by associate as being: '*a quiet person who was shy around others'*.
>
> Mother interviewed and states MP has: '*chip on her shoulder when it comes to dealing with authority'*and has been known to disappear before as a result of what she perceives to '*being bullied in a corner and not getting her own way'*.

Figure 5   Witness statement summaries, day 2

> A former friend said '*MP was very quiet and did not make friends easily'*.
>
> PolSA (specialist search officer) note: '*The[se] possible factors should be considered as possible triggers to pushing the misper[5] to commit suicide: misper has left her mobile telephone at home; she has no job, having quit her job; she has recently been contacted... regarding the state of her* [dwelling].
>
> '*On switching on her mobile phone screen it displays a message 'goodbye world'*
>
> '*Associates described her as being [low mood] and [emotional]'*.

Figure 6   Witness statements and PolSA review, day 3

unknowability *and* paradoxical mobility, since she was found and located 'alive and well' (case notes). Arguably, though, she still remained absent. She was finally assessed by a police doctor as not suicidal nor depressed, but simply out of place in her mobility. The police 'search cancellation form', recording information about the missing incident, returned the only 'fact' emerging from Kim as a key witness to *her own* uncertain mobility: 'I don't know, I just started walking about'. It is thus unclear from the case notes and police interviews whether Kim was exercising any form of 'spatial activism' (Pain 2014) in her absence: 'I think that's where we are letting people down ... It may be the aftercare' (PC Smith 2011). Since Kim's case, the 'absent' category has been established. Given the uncertain police readings of Kim, the lack of knowledge about her intentions or difficulties, her characteristic disappearances and apparently unusual lifestyle, it may be that in future she risks not being searched for in such intensive ways, if at all. While this outcome might be appropriate for Kim, it also might not be.

Women's narratives of *being missing*

In an attempt to shed further light on what is missing from Kim's file – grounded, experiential insight into missing women's mobility – we draw on some of our 20 interviews with women who returned after being reported as missing. Although some of the women interviewed had difficult personal circumstances, including alcohol dependency, mental health problems, family relationship breakdown and abuse (in one case),

for many the mobility embodied in their absence was discussed as an empowering action, if one forged in traumatic circumstances:

> I wasn't even bothered how people felt ... it was like I don't care anymore. I need to go now. The urge to go was stronger than the urge to think what everyone else was thinking. (Trish, missing for 16–48 hours repeatedly)

> [I]t is liberating to make that decision to leave. Where am I going to go and can I start afresh? (Rachel, missing for 7 days)

> I felt free when I left. As soon as I walked out the door I felt free. (Rhianna, missing for less than 24 hours)

In the narrative excerpts above, 'going missing' is constructed as a coping strategy and even a liberating decision. In Pain's (2014, 144) terms, their conduct may equate to a 'quiet' form of 'spatial activism' or 'agency', although it is difficult to trace clearly how such absences enable personal development or touch any wider political relations, especially since these women returned relatively quickly. However, thinking about this kind of women's missing mobility as 'agentic' is a helpful depiction that contrasts with how it is usually understood as either deviancy or as high-risk vulnerability. The women here are more than victims in their absence: they are its architects, albeit uncertain ones, perhaps with 'faltering' and 'messy' agency (Pain 2014, 144). We have written elsewhere about the characteristic features of missing journeys and their discordant emotional logics and rhythms (Parr *et al.* 2015), but by paying particular attention to the women's narratives,

> *Mr X [member of the public] called to advise he 'saw a person ...on rough land between Canal X and Y. Google maps consulted and co-ordinates recorded. Misper traced alive and well at [time given] within [name of structure] at the [place name] canalside'.*
>
> *MP assessed at [police station] by Dr X who stated she was not clinically depressed or suicidal.*
>
> **Cancellation of search notes**: *MP not sure why she went to the place. MP statement: 'I don't know, I just started walking about. I wanted to stay off the road'.*
>
> *'MP will be allowed to return to her dwelling after clean-up operation is complete by environmental health officers'*

Figure 7   Concluding the case: selected task data

we can see that they correctly anticipate and are conscious of the intensity of concern about their absence:

> You don't want people worrying, but how do you make people sure or convinced that even if you have disappeared that you're safe, that you can look after yourself ... I knew I had to stay away from authority, and I had to stay away from people I knew because they were already looking for me. (Wilma, missing 16–48 hours, repeatedly)

Wilma notes that she could be safe in her absence and knowingly stayed away from authority (the police) as she used her mobility to cope with her situation. She confidently took backstreets rather than main roads, 'almost putting the police off the scent', and she dumped her ID. Going absent was deliberate for Wilma, even if short-term, and she embodies her absence with strategy and conscious thought. Rhona and Trish also narrate a different version of missing mobility than the ones often emerging from case file data:

> It's quite fun. It's what happens. I went to a place where they would never come looking for me ... you've got to think smart when you go missing. (Rhona, missing 7 days–6 months, repeatedly)

> I know it sounds stupid but it was like an excited feeling ... it would be somewhere new and nobody would know me, you know, it would be a fresh start. (Trish, as above)

Here the experience of being missing is represented as a lively geography of concealment that was pleasurable in part, at least for a while. Such understandings are wholly absent from police case files, analysis and research. In reflecting on their absence-making, women also discuss stepping outside of usual caring roles and sensitivities to other's feelings as they use their mobility to privilege *themselves*:

> I really didn't want to be contacted and I didn't care that people were worried. ... I just wanted to protect my own head and ... [it] was completely selfish but I didn't want to have to think about anybody else's thoughts apart from myself. (Rachel, as above)

I've had enough of me handing myself out to everybody and nobody being there for me ... and so it was just like I can't cope with this, I need time and space for myself. (Trish, as above)

> If I want to go away for a few days and not let people know ... what I am doing, then I should be allowed to do it. (Megan, missing 48 hours–7 days)

Rachel, Trish and Megan centre themselves, exploring their ability to *stop* caring for others and to embody absence in proactive ways, rather than assuming any victim-status in the risky public. Megan feels that she has the right to go without prior explanation (and see Parr *et al.* 2015 on 'rights-to-be-missing'), and Rhona (missing repeatedly) talks about her alternative cartographies of city public space:

> Sometimes it can be really comforting. I mean waking up in a new city, it feels like home.

For some women, then, the public spaces of the city offer alternatives to private domestic geographies that are too full of pressure or violence or responsibilities (Brickell and Maddrell 2016; Pain 2014). Radically, we might interpret them as resisting the usual 'gender divisions of urban space' (McDowell 1983). However, even on the streets, others produce gendered readings of them:

> I had tramps that were very concerned about me on the streets. ... It was just two nights but that was enough. (Jas, missing 7 days–7 months)

Many of the 20 women reported staying local and visiting (mundane) familiar places, but also engaging in myriad tactics to remain 'in *public* place': Julie moved around the city, never daring to rest for long, Wilma drew on the urban commercial environment for washing and to change clothes, and Trish altered her physical walk (see Koskela 1997) to move confidently *through* city spaces when coming across police officers:

> I just needed to start walking again because if I sit down for too long I start to become self-conscious if I'm there without any bags. (Julie, missing 16–48 hours)

I went into that café and got changed and had a wash and stuff [but] I might [have been] behaving differently and acting strangely. (Wilma, as above)

I walked past a place that had loads of police cars and that was quite nerve racking. I thought, 'someone is going to notice me, they are going to see me'. I couldn't let them see me … I tried to walk like it wasn't me so I wouldn't be recognized. (Trish, as above)

Moving, stopping, washing, changing clothes and employing disguise to aid mobility in and through city spaces challenges any assumptions built into gendered police search logics, as well as into wider 'cultural scripts' of women's fears in public space (Pain 1997). Instead, interviewees highlighted their resourcefulness, their useable bodies and spatial confidence in ways that effectively resist *only* 'disorderly' readings of them.

In our study most of the women had experience of policing, in that police were involved in the return experience. Here there are mixed responses, some finding the police to be non-judgemental and helpful, but others perceiving police handling as a more sensitive affair:

I remember one of them saying 'oh you're a care assistant? and I said 'yeah' and he said 'well, you should be more responsible'. I just thought come on give me us a break. … I felt a bit intimidated. (Angela, missing 16 hours)

The officers locating Angela arguably drew on stereotypical female traits – of being responsible – related to her feminised profession – in an attempt to regulate her behaviour with intimations of expected gender performance. Such interactions might be experienced as versions of masculinist policing, as too in Amanda's example:

The police … appeared to have no understanding of how to treat me … [I]t was like 'right this is a success, we have found her, let's get her back to the ward' without finding out why I had done what I had done or anything like that. (Amanda, missing 16–48 hours, repeatedly)

Here the police exercised strong territorial authority in a remedial 'spatial fix', and in Amanda's view this accomplishment was more important to the officers than the context of the absence (its drivers, her intentions and purpose). Amanda feels that the police had 'no understanding' of her experience. This lack of empathy, enquiry and relatedness at the point of 'being found' was common, and often left women feeling disenfranchised by the version of community policing that they encountered. Some go on to suggest that, as a result, they would avoid the police, no matter what the circumstances:

I'd give the police a wide berth … for the rest of my life! If anything does go wrong … I wouldn't turn to them. That's what I've had through my experience with them. (Rhianna, missing 6 hours)

The police had stereotyped me if you like [Jas identified as Black British]. They were just following procedure not really seeing what they were seeing. … I didn't feel like they treated me like a human, like a person. They just didn't care. (Jas, as above)

What we begin to glean from these women's narratives, then, is that their missing mobility was driven by a range of difficult circumstances, but was occasionally (if briefly) embodied as a joyful coping mechanism and infused with conscious concealment strategies and nuanced spatial tactics. Women often returned with the assistance or management of police officers, a professional contact often characterised as brief, lacking in empathy and understanding, and leaving women feeling misjudged or uncertain by the interaction. These are insights that we might apply to Kim's case, although we do not have access to her personal story. We do know that some literature identifies a 'differential' policing of women, with regards to their gender, colour and whether or not they are perceived to have drug and alcohol problems. It is here that 'subtle nuances of sexism and racism … infuse police–citizen interactions' (Robinson and Chandek 2000, 55), and similar attitudes may also be helping to produce the experience of UK women in the above accounts.

Conclusion: the abandonment of mobile women

Our paper has argued that missing women's absence is characterised in particular ways through complex interactions arising in policing practice. Unlike in Pratt's empirics, the UK missing women profiled above are not legally abandoned in states of exception that render their lives bare – as not worth searching for. While these women are traced – at least initially – often in intense and concerned ways and with significant public resource, there remains a curious absence in understandings of their lives and mobilities. We understand little of Kim's motivations from police records, and hear complaints from other missing women about the lack of understanding from the police. As officers routinely admit to being unaware of the drivers or purpose of missing mobility, those who are reported as such may remain deviant in the minds of officers. There may be a consequence of this, as the 'quiet activism' (Pain 2014) of briefly leaving is not understood or is *mis*understood, since there is no professional follow-up or intervention after women are located. We might argue that missing women in particular are at risk of being policed through nuanced gender dynamics and unconscious bias, through which their domestic and social lives in private spaces can be normatively defined by authoritative others as exhibiting signs of deviant disorder (as in Kim's case) and in

ways that have consequences for their presence in public spaces.

The first consequence is that masculinist police interactions at moment of location and return can produce deeply unsettling experiences, leaving women reluctant to turn to the police in the future – or indeed any other professional services – as they can feel criminalised at worst and guilty of time-wasting at best. These relational issues on return may compound women's sense of isolation and difficulty. It may not be a police responsibility to follow up the social situations of these women, but it is their responsibility to manage returning women in ways that do not further alienate or isolate them. The second consequence may be related to the 18 per cent of adult missing persons cases which result in future incidence, since a proportion of women reported as missing may indeed repeat this spatialised coping mechanism. As a result of current UK governance of missing and the use of new 'absent' category, there is a real risk that women who are repeatedly reported as missing but who are understood as (usually) deviant in their lifestyle or character, may be re-categorised as absent, and hence may not be subject to active search effort.

In such cases, there is a risk that Pratt's thinking about abandonment and the mobilisation of states of exception via policing practice (or non-practice) may indeed become entirely relevant for the UK (and see Shalev Green and Pakes (2013) for evaluation of the 'absent and missing categories' in operational practice). The ACPO (2014) letter of warning, cited earlier, and the women's voices above are reminders about how such scenarios may play out. The drivers for women's missing journeys are likely to be missed in the particular policing scenarios that we have represented, but as women repeat their journeys their risk of harm increases (both in public and private space). Missing women in the UK are not abandoned but they may *become abandoned* if more is not done to recognise their circumstances and the reasons for their frequent disappearances. Policing services are currently stretched in terms of public protection and the safeguarding of missing persons, and it may be that other professional services need to step in at point of return in order to listen and act in response to the 'quiet activisms' exercised by discordant and brief missing mobility (and see Parr and Holmes 2016, on a call for action in this regard).

By drawing on and highlighting one case study and related female narrative accounts of going missing, we are trying to address Hanson's (2010) call for new understandings around gender–mobility relations and specifically to tackle some of the nuanced power relations and dynamics that underlie general mobility patterns. We have suggested that missing women are often architects of their absence (even in crisis), their subsequent mobilities involving deliberate decisions and resourceful spatial action in ways that chime with, and yet remain distinct from, the mobilities of homeless women (May *et al.* 2007; Radley *et al.* 2006) and women of forced migrations and domestic violence (Bowstead 2015; Pain 2014). We have also begun to engage with what might constitute a deeper understanding of the cultural and gendered frames of policing (missing) women, but this matter needs more research in a geographical context (Herbert 2001 is an exception).

Finally, the paper tries to counter the notion that missing women are merely 'object-subjects' out of place via their movements in the public domain who should be subject to gendered regulation and relocation (Cresswell 1999; Parr and Fyfe 2013). The experiences of missing women – produced as agentic and emotive 'body subjects' – should be discussed, so as to aid their recognition as 'complicated and multifaceted layers of living bodies refusing to submit to bare life' (Flurie 2012, 44–5). Such suggestions challenge us to understand more about missing women's journeys – and not just the drivers for those journeys – but as comprised of spatial actions that seek to change *something,* if only the unbearable trauma of *not moving*. The agentic geographies of missing women – and others – could thus be recognised and mobilised in order to respond to their absence in multiple ways. It may be, then, that small individual actions could help to engender wider change or activisms at other scales, partly enabled in and through feminist research (Pain 2014; Parr and Holmes 2016).

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 In our research a range of individuals reported our respondents missing, including family members (parents, siblings and partners), workplaces, hospitals, friends and social workers.

2 To date most police research by geographers has focused on observing the '*doing* of police work', mostly by using ethnography to reconstruct the time–space choreography of police work to make sense of the territoriality of policing (Fyfe 1992; Herbert 1997; and for other work see Yarwood 2007 2012). However, police work is also a *textual* as well as a *practical* activity. Police officers draw on texts to inform and shape their work but also *construct* texts in the form of case files to document activity. Case files both assemble and deploy 'information' and 'knowledge'. We are thus attentive to ideas of 'case constructivism' (Innes 2002) in order to argue that particular knowledges about missing people might be accumulated and stabilised via the written word: even via just the briefly noted 'task-data'.

3 The comments not in italics are summary notation of the case file content made by the researcher.

4 Notes in the task data are narrative and also contain quotes and summaries from witness statements. There is no one 'style' as it is an electronic task space populated by multiple officers.

5 Misper is a police notation for 'missing person'.

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