

Supplements

Supplementary Table 1.1: Descriptions that sustain personal attitudes towards the loss and attitudes towards other people (131 topics)

Supplementary Table 1.2: Topics identified as "traumatic episodes", according to their content and intensity (42 topics)

Supplementary Table 2: Intercoder reliability coefficient in view of the relationship with the missing or identified person aiming to screen for statements with a higher reliability (23 Topics meeting the minimum lower limit of Krippendorff's alpha requirement of ≥ 0.50)
Sorted by characteristics of the Fathers'/Mothers' stories.

Supplementary Table 3: Intercoder reliability coefficient in view of the person still being missing or already being identified aiming to screen for statements with a higher reliability (N=23 Topics meeting the minimum lower limit of Krippendorff's alpha requirement of ≥ 0.50)
Sorted by characteristic parent's story about phenomenon of disappearance and identification of mortal remains of son.

Supplementary Table 1.1: Descriptions that sustain personal attitudes towards the loss and attitudes towards other people (131 topics)

1. <i>Son's motives to join the war</i> (6 topics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He left because he loved this Croatia; - You can now put the flag on your house, you can go to Church, you can celebrate Easter and Christmas; - They got the "uniform and the rifle", and no one could change their mind; - The missing sons and their peers imagined that the war was like in the films; - He left to defend his village, his country, his town; - Parents see the son's death as his readiness to die for his mother: "He would never admit that he'd die for me, and I begged him to go to the doctor, not to go to war. No one could stop him" [weeping].
2. <i>Sacrifice</i> (9 topics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - War is senseless, and so is his sacrifice; - The missing son sacrifices himself for his married brothers so that the family line can continue; - The mother fears that her son's sacrifice was in vain, because they make no distinction between the offender and the victim; - She thinks that no one cares whether her son returns or not; - The mother is disappointed with the government which sets free the offenders; - The mother looks at reconciliation and forgiveness as a way to humiliate her son and the pressure on parents to forget the victims; - She feels guilty for having agreed to receive reimbursement for the loss of the son, because this is the price put on his life, and therefore a humiliation in itself. The mother cannot accept that her sacrifice was in vain, considering what she has been through since the son has gone missing; - The mother feels that others have sacrificed her son and his brothers in arms.
3. <i>The meaning of "a man has gone missing"</i> (6 topics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sees the son's missing as a cancellation of his existence; - Missing as an act of God, because this is not a common human experience; - For the mother the term "missing" is confounding, shocking, and inconceivable: "How can a man go missing?! Was he wounded? Did he die? Was he captured? The news that a man has gone missing strikes fear among combatants; - The most prominent is helplessness, inability to describe it with words; - The mother is tired of searching; she needs a formal confirmation that she has done everything in her power to find the missing son.
4. <i>Son's missing as a social stigma</i> (6 topics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother is the only person among friends and neighbours whose son has gone missing; - She avoids contact with other people, crowds, gatherings, and so on;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother has a feeling that other people avoid her; - She has lost confidence in other people; - She does not ask other people to help, but refers to God and the priest; - No one can understand her pain, not even her own mother, only someone who has had the same experience and Virgin Mary, who lost her son too. All this is so painful that no one can understand it.
5. <i>Reasons for abduction (1 topic)</i>	Hatred hatching since WW2, about which the mothers learned from their parents.
6. <i>Profile of the missing son (8 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The missing son was the most vulnerable child in the family; - The missing son was a sickly child, prone to injuries, and was put in mortal danger more than once in the childhood; - The missing son was more attached to the mother than the father; - The mother and the son shared secrets. One mother did not want to admit to the father that the son has gone missing because she feared his reaction; - The missing son was quiet, the least demanding, and loved by his peers; - The missing son was not ostentatiously brave, but a bit stubborn, naïve, and amenable; - The mother was more concerned about him than other children when he was a child; - The mother had always feared that something terrible would happen to him.
7. <i>Messenger (2 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother has always been suspicious about the news brought by the messenger - she has always looked for flaws in their stories that would diminish their credibility; - She blames the witnesses and the messenger and chooses to believe to stories that kindle her hopes that the missing son is alive.
8. <i>Culprit (7 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She does not consider the entire Serbian ethnicity responsible but the offender alone; - She blames herself, because she failed to stop him from joining the war; - She blames her husband for not protecting their son; - She blames her son for not having listened to his parents who told him to flee; - She blames herself for having taught him to love Croatia; - She can not point a finger at a culprit; - The culprits are the people who are not giving her the information about her son.
9. <i>Belief that the missing son is alive (5 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother has information that some of the missing persons have returned; - Meetings with other parents of missing persons kindle their hopes that their son is being kept in captivity (a camp, mine, abandoned places); - If the information received goes against their hopes, the parents take search in their own hands;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging a clairvoyant increases their hopes that the son is alive; - Anonymous calls from persons who claim to have seen their son strengthen their beliefs, because they know the name of the missing son or the name of a family member. These calls take place before or after prisoner exchanges, exhumation or some similar event.
<i>10. Waiting for the son to return (8 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dog barking or a knock at the door raise mother's hope that the son has returned; - The mother believes that the son will return soon and buys things he likes. She hides those things in special places, known by both mother and son; - Maintains "contact" with her son in dreams and when she has hiccups (her son is thinking of her); - Evening delusions about son's return; - Keeps son's things, washes the laundry, makes bed; - Maintains contact with his friends and ex girlfriends; - Hopes that when her son returns, he will continue where he left off; - Looks forward to son's return, but with apprehension that he will not be the same.
<i>11. Fear of forgetting the son (7 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother fears that she will not find her son for the rest of her life, and that no one will look for him after she is dead; - Nobody ever mentions the missing ones, as if they have never existed; - The mother keeps talking about the missing son at home so that he is not forgotten; - The mother keeps son's personal things in an attempt to preserve the illusion of his existence's continuity; - She is keeping leftover food in case the son returns, so that he can see that he has not been forgotten; - She keeps his place empty at the table.
<i>12. Multiple traumas of the mother and their condensed experience (5 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother condenses the events related to his son's disappearance and other family traumas into one event; - She looks at his disappearance as one in the series of traumatic events ever since her childhood - blends the current trauma with the earlier ones; - The mother has several traumas: her own life was in danger, she lost her home, her close friends died, her parents died, her husband died, a family member is ill, she is ill; - There was already a missing person in the family; - Looking at her own life through the misfortunes that happened to her, the mother believes that she has been destined to suffer since her childhood.
<i>13. Attitude toward families of the missing persons (5 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents of the missing sons see them as friends who understand their suffering without having to explain; - They all share the same predicament; - With them they do not feel stigmatised, because they are not the only ones who have had this experience; - They identify with the group, use the pronoun "we", share

	<p>the same views about the government, war, information withholding by the government, sacrifice, etc.;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They assume their experiences in treating and complementing the information about the missing son.
<i>14. Fear of losing one's mind (3 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother admits to fear that she will lose her mind; - She is afraid of being delusional and seeing her son when she is alone; - She has the feeling that the son's photograph is alive and that he watches her and moves his eyes or his lips move.
<i>15. Disturbed family relations (7 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The parent uses the son and his fate to regulate family relations - to control other household members; - The most grieving family member is always the mother; - The mother neglects the living children; - The family has become annoyed with constant mentioning of the missing son and protest openly; - The mother glorifies the characteristics of the missing son in comparison with the rest of the family; - The mother does not allow any changes in the household; - The living children do not accept the position assigned to them by their mother.
<i>16. Memorial candles (3 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother picks a family member, who reminds her the most of her missing son (grandson, granddaughter); - This person is a symbolic "memorial candle", who is not only similar to the missing son in character and behaviour, but also in physical features; - Occasionally the "memorial candle" is the person who was asked/appointed by the missing son before departure to take care of his mother and be of help.
<i>17. Envy (2 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Envy toward unscathed families; - Envy toward people who fled the war and now return with "full pockets".
<i>18. Dreams (5 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dreams reinforce the belief that the son is either "alive" or "dead"; - With time the dreams fade away and the messages the son sends are not as clear as before; - Dreams announcing an imminent reunion with the son; - In dreams, the parent relates everyday family events to the son; - Holds very dear the son's instructions received in the dream and seeks to adhere to them.
<i>19. Son's disappearance as the cause of illness (5 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many parents of the missing children have gotten ill; - Some have died looking for the son, and some after they have buried him; - The mother associates her own, her husband's or their children's illness with war and son's disappearance; - She feels fatigue, pressure in the body, and headaches; - She is afraid that she will die before she finds her son.
<i>20. Faith (7 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God and prayer are the only consolation and relief from heavy thoughts; - Mothers go to church to pray every day;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They go on pilgrimages to Rome and Međugorje; - Confession is a special act of faith; - Sometimes they doubt that God will help "because even God is only a man"; - The priest is helpless in view of the mother's tears; - Some accounts include indications of a curse, or the parents curse and blame, but avoid nominating the object because "cursing and blaming others is a sin".
21. <i>Grave (8 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If her son had a grave he would not be forgotten; - The grave would also acknowledge son's sacrifice; - The grave is a place where the mother confesses her fears and recounts events; - The grave is the central point in the unbroken relationship with the missing son; - "If you saw the graveyard there in Vukovar, your heart would bleed. How many innocent souls lie there."; - "I have no regrets left now, because I know he has been killed, but I only wish to find his bones and bury him and visit his grave on All Saints Day like any other mother, to cry my heart out with him, talk to him a little - this is my only wish!"; - "They say that grave is where you bring your flowers. But we bring flowers with Štefica (e.g. chair of the parents association) everywhere: to the main cemetery, to the crossroads, to the old graveyard. Who knows when they will start to mow that meadow and his bones may lie there beyond Dalj. And we bring flowers for everyone. And this is all right, but we are old, and who will keep on bringing flowers after we die?; - We kept this place (in the graveyard) for him...
22. <i>Rationalisation (4 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The mother seeks to understand why this tragedy has happened to her, who "has not done any evil to anyone, nor has her son, yet this happened to them anyway."; - She does not know why, but God probably does. "God should know how big a cross a mother can bear. I pray to Him not to burden me with more than I can carry."; - She has a feeling that all her misfortunes have been predestined; - She stresses that her missing son has had this stigma ever since birth.
23. <i>Development of the narrative (12 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At the beginning of the interview the narration is scarce; - At first, she seeks to recount the chronology of events, but fails; - Instead she gives parallel accounts of several events that serve as landmarks for setting the central event in the context; - She is excited as she talks, almost entranced; - The interview has no communication purpose, and she rarely addresses the interviewer; - Replies are not related to the questions, but follow a stream of conscience and end returning to the question asked; - The interview is often interrupted by weeping, standing up, wringing hands, as annotated in the transcript;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The narrator roams through events, once as a participant in them, another time as an observer; - Breathes heavily while she/he speaks; - Uses present tense and direct speech for past events; - Narration is full of dissociations, pauses, truncated speech and sentences, sudden shifts, pauses with no communication purpose; - At the end of the interview, the mothers refer to events they have not even mentioned by then.
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Supplementary Table 1.2: Topics identified as "traumatic episodes", according to their content and intensity (42 topics)

Traumatic episodes	Statements
1. <i>The last encounter with the son (6 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She did not experience her last encounter with the son as their goodbye, so she has the feeling that it was not; - She returns to the last encounter repeatedly during the interview; - Before he leaves for war, the son seeks to take care of his parents and encourage them; - During the last encounter there is always someone to console the mother; - Before he leaves, the son appoints someone in the family to take care of the mother and gives her an assignment; - The last encounter is vivid, the participants are agitated and in a hurry, they talk while doing something else.
2. <i>Prisoner exchange (6 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exchange accounts are detailed, with names of the present persons, roll calls, and so on; - Preparations for the exchange are also described in detail, with vivid accounts of excitement among family members (preparations for the upcoming feast celebrating son's return or similar); - Attendance at many exchanges with equal conviction that the son will be exchanged this time; - Imagining to have seen the son; - Dreams before the exchange; - Disappointment after the exchange.
3. <i>News that the son has gone missing (9 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mother relieves the moment when she found out about the disappearance of her son as if it happening right now; - Mother recalls the exact spot where she stood at the moment of learning the news ("I was standing right there..."); - She remembers exactly what she was doing; - Describes the looks of the person who brought the news; - Describes her premonition when she saw him; - Uses direct speech to retell her conversation with the messenger; - Describes her bodily sensations; - Does not remember what followed after she learned the news; - Only from later accounts of others she finds out what

	happened next (depersonalisation).
4. <i>Forensic report about son's death (4 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Son's death described in the forensic report is even worse than the mother had feared; - Mother visualises details about son's death from the report, complementing them with her interpretation of son's suffering and childhood memories of him calling her when he was ill; - She describes son's death as if she was there; - Her accounts of forensic details are accompanied by powerful emotional releases (such as moans).
5. <i>Exhumation of the remains (5 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She has witnessed a number of exhumations from mass graves; - She is scared by the remains; - She fears that her misgivings that her son's remains are there too may prove true; - She remembers bizarre details about exhumation and talks about her morbid associations; - For her, exhumation is a defeat - her sacrifice was in vain.
6. <i>Posthumous identification (13 topics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent doubts that the remains are genuine; - Mother is afraid that she will not be able to identify her son, because his image has faded from her memory; - Her experience of identification is very dramatic and accompanied by a series of bizarre details; - Paranoia that someone else's remains could be planted; - She is afraid that after identification there will be nothing left to bury but "that paper"; - She feels the pressure to accept the results without having a say in the matter ("I accepted whatever they gave me"); - She prepares herself for identification by recalling the specific features by which to identify her son (such as broken tooth or leg); - Blood drawn for DNA analysis is an emotional event, as it implies son's death; - The parent admits to have a problem to associate the remains with son's image; - She had been preparing for the identification process by learning the experiences of other parents who identified their children; - Refusing son's remains equals refusing the son; - "I can only identify him by his clothes and his teeth, because when he went to the primary school he fell and broke his upper tooth on the edge of the bench."; - "No. I am no longer afraid. I only wish to die. I said (usually she speaks through tears) "grant me good health until I find my son, and when I do, I can go (weeps). This is my only wish - to die, nothing else."

Supplementary Table 3: Intercode reliability coefficient in view of the relationship with the missing or identified person aiming to screen for statements with a higher reliability (23 Topics meeting the minimum lower limit of Krippendorff's alpha requirement of ≥ 0.50)

Sorted by characteristics of the Fathers'/Mothers' stories: For full statements see main text Table 2.

23 Statements_Krippendorff Alpha \geq 0.50

Fathers

Statements	Parent	Son	Alpha	LL95%CI	UL95%CI	Units	Obs	Pairs
27	1	2	0,7538	0,5262	0,9342	30	3	30
12	1	1	0,6855	0,5556	0,8096	30	3	90
4	1	2	0,6619	0,4206	0,877	30	3	32
17	1	1	0,6614	0,5132	0,7855	30	3	90
14	1	2	0,5857	0,4294	0,7296	30	3	90
24	1	2	0,5088	0,1951	0,7819	30	3	90

Mothers

Statements	Parent	Son	Alpha	LL95%CI	UL95%CI	Units	Obs	Pairs
6	2	2	0,8155	0,7226	0,8886	30	3	90
2	2	1	0,8108	0,7271	0,8845	30	3	90
20	2	2	0,7774	0,6973	0,8505	30	3	90
29	2	2	0,7749	0,6383	0,8867	30	3	90
19	2	2	0,7264	0,5899	0,8431	30	3	90
8	2	1	0,7177	0,6118	0,8132	30	3	90
5	2	2	0,7153	0,6045	0,8156	30	3	90
13	2	1	0,7028	0,5702	0,8214	30	3	90
28	2	2	0,6961	0,574	0,8111	30	3	90
26	2	2	0,6647	0,522	0,7814	30	3	90
21	2	2	0,6102	0,4825	0,7249	30	3	90
25	2	2	0,5909	0,4355	0,7518	30	3	90
15	2	1	0,5756	0,4088	0,7243	30	3	90
18	2	2	0,5484	0,3644	0,7099	30	3	90
1	2	2	0,5454	0,3497	0,7269	30	3	88
22	2	2	0,5399	0,3577	0,7315	30	3	90
16	2	2	0,5096	0,3099	0,6956	30	3	90

Supplementary Table 4: Intercooder reliability coefficient in view of the person still being missing or already being identified aiming to screen for statements with a higher reliability (N=23 Statements meeting the minimum lower limit of Krippendorff's alpha requirement of ≥ 0.50) Sorted by characteristic parent's story about phenomenon of disappearance and identification of mortal remains of son: For full statements see main text Table 2.

23 Statements_Krippendorff alpha ≥ 0.50

Identified

Statements	Parent	Son	Alpha	LL95%CI	UL95%CI	Units	Obs	Pairs
2	2	1	0,8108	0,7271	0,8845	30	3	90
8	2	1	0,7177	0,6118	0,8132	30	3	90
13	2	1	0,7028	0,5702	0,8214	30	3	90
12	1	1	0,6855	0,5556	0,8096	30	3	90
17	1	1	0,6614	0,5132	0,7855	30	3	90
15	2	1	0,5756	0,4088	0,7243	30	3	90

Disappeared

Statement	Parent	Son	Alpha	LL95%CI	UL95%CI	Units	Obs	Pairs
6	2	2	0,8155	0,7226	0,8886	30	3	90
20	2	2	0,7774	0,6973	0,8505	30	3	90
29	2	2	0,7749	0,6383	0,8867	30	3	90
27	1	2	0,7538	0,5262	0,9342	30	3	30
19	2	2	0,7264	0,5899	0,8431	30	3	90
5	2	2	0,7153	0,6045	0,8156	30	3	90
28	2	2	0,6961	0,574	0,8111	30	3	90
26	2	2	0,6647	0,522	0,7814	30	3	90
4	1	2	0,6619	0,4206	0,877	30	3	32
21	2	2	0,6102	0,4825	0,7249	30	3	90
25	2	2	0,5909	0,4355	0,7518	30	3	90
14	1	2	0,5857	0,4294	0,7296	30	3	90
18	2	2	0,5484	0,3644	0,7099	30	3	90
1	2	2	0,5454	0,3497	0,7269	30	3	88
22	2	2	0,5399	0,3577	0,7315	30	3	90
16	2	2	0,5096	0,3099	0,6956	30	3	90
24	1	2	0,5088	0,1951	0,7819	30	3	90