

# Psychoanalytic, Psychosocial, and Human Rights Perspectives on Enforced Disappearance

Edited by  
Maria Giovanna Bianchi  
and Monica Luci

First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-32058-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-32057-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-31264-2 (ebk)

13

## **Traumatic traces of enforced disappearance through generations**

From psychoanalytic theory to a family case study

*Manon Bourguignon, Muriel Katz,  
and Alice Dermitzel*

(CC BY 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003312642-17

The funder for this chapter is The University of Essex

# Traumatic traces of enforced disappearance through generations

From psychoanalytic theory to a family case study

*Manon Bourguignon, Muriel Katz,  
and Alice Dermitzel*

---

## Introduction

Transmission is the inexhaustible fact that provides the continuation of generations and civilizations. Transmitting means being in contact with past generations. In a concrete way, it allows the circulation of things such as family recipes or cultural traditions. Without transmission of knowledge, stories, culture, we would have to start from scratch with each generation. According to psychoanalysts, the human being is also characterized by psychic transmission, which is the basis of the psychic construction of any individual. Whether conscious or unconscious, psychic transmission concerns beliefs, identifications, and myths but also anxieties and defense mechanisms. It has the particularity of linking the members of the same family, and this through several generations. In front of manifestations of collective violence, such as genocide, forced migration, torture, enforced disappearances, mass deportation, and colonial violence, that have always existed but of which we became more aware during the course of the twentieth century, many psychological studies have dealt with transmission of trauma between survivors of political persecutions and their offspring (for example see Grand & Salberg, 2017). As Granjon (2010, p. 37) states, “nothing escapes transmission”. How can the transmission of trauma among the relatives of a person who disappeared in the context of political repression be described?

Cases of enforced disappearances throughout history are numerous and typical in situations of state violence. This crime constitutes a fundamental violation of human rights according to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2006. In a few cases, the disappeared returned; in other cases, their remains are found, but mostly, this crime remains unclear and without resolution for a very long time, often forever. It should be noted that victims of enforced disappearance are not limited to the disappeared persons. Article 24 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance states that “victim” means the disappeared person and any individual who

has suffered harm as the direct result of an enforced disappearance. Thus, families are considered direct victims as well. Relatives of disappeared persons have to endure lifelong psychological torture, living without information about their loved ones and their fate (Adams, 2019; García Castro, 2011). The disappearance of the body deprives the relatives of the funeral rites which socially frame the mourning (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Boss, 2002; Bourguignon et al., 2021; Schaal et al., 2010). Losing a loved one due to enforced disappearance implies coping with uncertainty, but also with legal, economic, and social problems that can be overwhelming for the family of the disappeared (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002).

Insofar as it is perpetrated by agents of the State, this crime forms part of what Puget et al. (1989) termed “state violence”. Official institutions are no longer the guarantors of socially shared points of reference regarding the founding prohibitions (e.g., murder, incest, or cannibalism) (Katz, 2012; Kijak & Pelento, 1986). The State denies any traces of the custody of the victim and their possible subsequent murder, until the denial of the very existence of the disappeared person (Lira, 2016; Strier, 2014). Thus, this barbaric crime is part of what some psychoanalysts call a *social catastrophe* (Amati Sas, 1991; Kaës, 1989): the meta-social framework breaks down, hindering the support of intra- and inter-subjective psychic reality of the guarantors. The trauma<sup>1</sup> induced by enforced disappearance has a psychosocial impact. The psychic repercussions are simultaneously individual and collective.

Despite the importance of the transmission to the future generations, few studies have been carried out to understand the after-effects of enforced disappearance over generations. What is the impact of enforced disappearance on family relatives through generations? How is the memory of the disappeared loved one passed on from generation to generation? What is the nature of the traces transmitted to the next generation? In this contribution, we will explore these questions based on the result of our qualitative study<sup>2</sup> of relatives of disappeared persons and their descendants. The research focuses on enforced disappearance during the dictatorships in Latin America. We interviewed 20 participants from two generations (e.g., the close relatives of the disappeared person and their children) living in Western Europe.

Inscribed in a psychoanalytic epistemology, this investigation was built on the many conceptions of the psychic transmission of unelaborated traumatic material that remain from those experiences (Abraham & Torok, 1978; Ciccone, 1999; de Mijolla, 1981; Eiguer, 1987; Faimberg, 1987; Kaës, 1993). We focus on the manifestation of unelaborated objects in subsequent generations: missed acts, repetition of symptoms, chaotic relational patterns, and even serious mental disorders. In contrast with intergenerational transmission,<sup>3</sup> *transgenerational transmission* – also qualified as “negative” or “hollow” transmission – hinders the process of elaboration of the psychic heritage. Indeed, the heir cannot protect themselves from the shameful traumatic traces because they are unaware of them.

To illustrate this issue, we present a case of relatives. We separately met Emily<sup>4</sup> and her daughter, Carolina, for narrative interviews. Data were collected through individual face-to-face interviews.<sup>5</sup> Emily lost one of her brothers, Miguel, during

her adolescence in her home country in Latin America. Involved in political activism, Miguel was arrested a few times after the military coup. With no news of him, his mother did everything she could to find any trace of her son. The conditions of life under the dictatorship and the threat to the family of the disappeared led Emily and some of her siblings to leave the country and seek refuge in Europe. Ever since, Emily has looked for her brother by any means: searching for people who could give testimony, going to places where he had been seen for the last time, and being witness to trials to fight against impunity and oblivion in the society. Emily's daughter, Carolina, was born in exile. She is the heir of this family history, which was disrupted by the disappearance of her maternal uncle. We will highlight the possible repercussions of an ambiguous loss caused by enforced disappearance on the second generation.

This contribution focuses on three themes related to psychic transmission from one generation to another. At the beginning of each section, we will present a brief psychoanalytic theory as introduction to the theme. We, then, proceed to illustrate the most relevant results of our current study with the family case study, commenting with the literature and research on the specific issue.

### **Passing on the story of a loved one's enforced disappearance**

The family story is an important element of identification within a family group. In this sense, each subject can recognize himself as a link in a genealogical chain. Family and collective history also conveys the "foundational statements" (Aulagnier, 1975), which highlight the values, principles, norms, ideals and myths carried by the family group. The story that depicts the origin of the family group plays the role of a *foundational family myth*, which supports family identity. Investigation in clinical psychology emphasizes the importance of knowing one's family history to promote the process of subjectivation. In fact, the parents usually tell their children the romance of the origins and generations that preceded them. These oral stories are not reduced to narratives of historical events. They are closely interwoven with the affects mobilized by the work of remembering. *What may or may not be said about a disappeared relative within the family?*

At the beginning of the narrative interview with Carolina, we first asked her about the impact of enforced disappearance on her life. She stated:

The impact on my life is that I've always heard about Miguel, one of my uncles, stories about him, his character, his political involvement. I've always seen pictures of him at home. I haven't met him physically but it's like he's always been there actually. For me, I've always had this feeling of having known him. It's pretty weird actually.<sup>6</sup>

Carolina's family is a typical example of a family for whom the disappeared person stays present in his absence. In her family, the missing uncle has an important

place in family narratives as well as inside the home space. For example, many photographs of him are scattered in the house. For the relatives of the loved one, these visual traces testify his presence despite of his absence. Authors point out the symbolic meaning of having photographs of the disappeared at home or carrying them during street protests (Adams, 2019; Faúndez et al., 2018). Photographs make it possible to embody the disappeared ones to make them present and reintegrate their physical presence within the family and social group.

The presence of the disappeared uncle seems so significant in Carolina's life course that she has the *feeling of having known him*, of having met him, when in fact she was born after his disappearance. The story of Miguel's disappearance forms part of the *foundational family myth*. Transmitted through generations, it promotes values of justice and social commitment inside the family group. She argues that it is *weird* for her to feel closer to her disappeared uncle than to her siblings with whom she used to live. Hence, the disappeared person continues to be psychically present even when physically absent, especially because Carolina's mother continues her search for her brother's body or any information about his disappearance. This illustrates the impact of *ambiguous loss* which is "a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution" (Boss, 2016, p. 270). Fifty years after his disappearance, the missing one remains in the narratives and in the minds of his relatives, even of the following generation.

In Carolina's family, talking about the past in the same way with everyone is not possible, as she explained: "The rest of my family has a completely different relationship with my uncle, with his disappearance. One of my aunts really put it all in a little box and she kept it in a corner." The expression 'little box' in relation to one of her mother's siblings illustrates Abraham and Torok's (1978) concept of the crypt. This model is highly representative of the pathogenic dynamics that characterize transgenerational transmission of trauma: an unthinkable secret is unconsciously buried in the psyche of a person and cut off from elements of a shameful past that freezes the process of symbolization.

Carolina continued by sharing her feelings about this heavy silence: "I don't think that's the solution because I think leaving the truth aside makes it even heavier, because it is unspoken. It's like the circumstances of the disappearance become family secrets." Following Abraham and Torok's (1978) lines of thinking we can consider Carolina's cousins the carriers of 'ghosts.' The second generation of relatives are the heirs of *unspoken family secrets* that surround enigmatic raw objects. As these authors state, "A buried saying of a parent becomes in the child a dead person without burial" (p. 297). The ghosts represent traces of the trauma transmission that causes "work in the unconscious of another's shameful secrecy. Its law is the obligation of nescience" (Abraham & Torok, 1978, p. 391), the duty of ignorance. In this case, when Carolina's cousins seek answers to various questions, she becomes the storyteller to the second generation, a smuggler who secretly conveys family stories that have remained hidden from a segment of peers in her family. The 'silence law' is transmitted here through the generations. It is related to the concept of a *denial pact* proposed by Kaës (2009) in the sense that a part of history

seems to be condemned to silence by a common and unconscious tacit agreement in the family group. This form of defensive psychic alliance guarantees the locking up of certain elements of the past to save the family's balance.

It is impossible to talk about the family silence that can surround the disappearance of a loved one without establishing a close link with the socio-political context. In fact, the law of silence was first of all imposed by the dictatorial regime in place with the aim of sowing terror (Puget et al., 1989). This silence aimed to generate and potentiate a feeling of threat among the relatives (Escalante et al., 2014). In this sense, the silence of relatives concerning the missing loved one can be seen as an echo of the silence about enforced disappearance that reigned and partially continued to reign in institutions.

For Carolina, the silence that surrounds Miguel's fate in part of her family could mean that they are forcing themselves to grieve, which is considered by Carolina as *denying the disappearance*. On the contrary, talking about Miguel's disappearance could be a way to participate in the memory work. In fact, narratives contribute to fighting against the impunity, not to condemn her uncle to oblivion, as well as to request more recognition of the relatives' experience. In contrast, keeping the disappearance aside, not talking about him, would contribute to believe the loved one dead or even denying the existence of the disappeared person himself and his or her sufferings. Some mental health professionals have noted that if family members consider the disappeared dead, they feel that they are "killing" him (Blaauw & Lähtenmäki, 2002). Believing him dead would be experienced as a way to make the person disappear again. By saying "forcing oneself to grieve," Carolina points out the complexity of the grieving process for relatives. Grieving someone without the certainty of his fate or his death is considered impossible according to some authors (Féres-Carneiro & Da Silva, 2010) or, at least, as a major factor of complexity (Bourguignon et al., 2021).

Without remains and proof of death, families are faced with an impossible choice: believing that the missing one is still alive or considering him already dead (Kajtazi-Testa & Hewer, 2018). This hard choice can have significant repercussions that stiffen the family dynamic and may even contribute to its collapse (Faúndez et al., 2018). In the case presented, Emily and her husband transmitted to their children that all possibilities remained open. Carolina expresses it as follows:

I have the feeling that all my life I could imagine all the scenarios because, luckily, I think that my mom, she never expressed a specific possibility to me. In fact, she never told me "he's dead" or "he has completely lost his memory, he's somewhere else". She has always taught me the fact that because he is disappeared, all of these possibilities are valid, the sordid as well as the joyful.

This extract aligns with Cerutti's (2017) idea that factors which could explain the different types of transmission inside a family are the hopes and beliefs concerning the fate of the disappeared loved one. What is the impact for the second generation who inherits scenarios that can ambiguously be as *sordid* as *joyful*? What are the implications

of being confronted with multiple versions of the story without being able to choose? Believing that everything is possible also implies that a family is overwhelmed by fantasies of what could have happened to their relative (Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Lira, 2016). This ambivalence – between believing them dead or alive – is maintained until they find traces of them. The uncertainty remains and persists over generations. The most distressing thing for the relatives is to realize that the hope of finding them depends on their willingness to look for them and to believe them alive; as if the death of the loved one was a decidable private fact, nullifying reality and the responsibility of perpetrators, ultimately the state (Lira, 2016). We can see here the extent of the responsibility of the relatives to keep him “psychically” alive.

When we asked Emily about the way she speaks to her children about the disappearance, she explained that she never hides the family past. Nevertheless, she realizes today that stories of the past are also violent: “When I found out that my family past is a weight for my daughter, Carolina, this hurt me because we want the best for our children and then giving them such a weight made me angry.” Emily pointed out the difficulty of finding the right balance, as parent, in the transmission of the family past: on one hand, the transmission of a principle of justice and social values, and on the other hand, the desire to protect her children from the violence of the past.

Authors claim that, generally, silence seems to prevail within families (Brinkmann et al., 2009; Haq, 2020; Hofmeister & Navarro, 2017; Kordon & Edelman, 2007; Kordon et al., 2011). In this case, no single type of communication was observed: Carolina’s close family openly talks about their disappeared relative, whereas in the extended family, silence seems required. However, due to the ambiguity of the loss caused by the enforced disappearance – as well as the sorrow and the fear relatives have experienced – communication may be troubled within the family group differently and over several generations.

### **The traces of trauma in the family and collective history**

When we focus on the transmission of enforced disappearance through generations, we must consider the context in which this terrible crime has happened. The context of state violence induced by political repression generates feelings of fear, threat and persecution anxiety in families as well as in society. These anxieties spread within the family and across generations. *Which traces of this traumatic past are passed down within a family group that experienced political repression?*

In our qualitative study, most of the descendants reported having witnessed strong persecution anxiety in their parents, such as fear of being spied on, fear of being prosecuted, fear of uniforms and soldiers, general mistrust towards strangers, and a general feeling of insecurity. Carolina shared examples of persecution anxiety in her daily family life:

I realize that in many Latin American families who have experienced repression, there are some strange customs. For example, while speaking normally,



all of a sudden, my parents and my grandparents start whispering to say, “So you see they were communists”. Still here and now! And it’s crazy because it’s really customary, it’s so entrenched! I figured it out quite late. For me it was normal to lower my voice like that. I grew up like this.

Having to whisper within family when naming certain terms such as ‘communist’ is a trace of the dark past which persists, even in exile. Present and past seem to merge, to overlap in a confusing way: the family remains immersed in the terror of yesterday. Its actions reflect the degree to which they are haunted by the unelaborated traces of the persecutions suffered under the dictatorship. Enforced disappearance seems to petrify the trauma experienced by the relatives and heirs to equal degrees as impunity prevails.

Carolina directly pointed out the link between parents’ anxieties and their experiences of political repression under dictatorship. Parents who are victims of collective violence demonstrate an attitude of mistrust and insecurity in the family home; it is as though they were still dealing with the traumatic past which, if not carefully elaborated, does not pass; instead, they live a form of “unpast” in the words of Scarfone (2012). Carolina described her mother as psychically absent – engaged in a continuous search for her disappeared brother – and injured by her traumatic past: “She’s very involved in her investigations, which I leave to her completely. I support this because I feel she needs it a lot”. This continually sustained search for whatever trace of a disappeared relative to explain to oneself their absence is something very demanding and impacts the quality of life. The investment in the disappeared says that the process of mourning is undermined, hindering at the same time the investment in the present life. As Carolina expresses it, her mother has been so absorbed in the search of her brother that it is possible she was distant with her own children. According to Lira (2016), when parents are consumed with investigating the disappearance of a person, it is difficult for them to provide an adequate protective environment for children’s physical and emotional development. The investment in parenthood is therefore undermined. The perception of the anguish, helplessness, and desolation of adults usually has also emotional effects on children, and in many cases, it has traumatic effects (Lira, 2016). The psychic absence of a parent and the depressive nature of the family circle participate in the transmission of the trauma in the families of a disappeared person (Edelman & Kordon, 2006).

Many relatives of the disappeared were also direct victims of political repression (kidnapping, arbitrary detention, torture, threats). It was the case for Emily, Carolina’s mother. This double experience – having a relative who disappeared and having directly endured political repression – can trouble the ability of parental figures to provide the security and holding capacity necessary for children’s development (Winnicott, 1971). This may be mediated by psychic suffering due to the loss and the traumatic experiences (Bourguignon et al., 2021). In this sense, for the second generation, the trauma can be considered double: the one linked to the traumatic experiences endured by their family and the one experienced directly through the parents, i.e. living with a distressed parent. This highlights the continuous character



of the crime. Even though it happened 50 years ago, the impact of enforced disappearance has left its mark on what is passed down through the generations, but also on parent-child relationships in the present. In this case, Carolina's mother seems to struggle with the haunting past: searching for traces of her brother and fighting against her anxieties coming from the dictatorship.

Carolina explained that this past "puts a certain tension in the body and also in private life". The tension in the body mentioned by Carolina, which is the burden of the collective and family history, reminds us of the break-in of the "protective shield" which produces the psychic traumatism (Freud, 1920, p. 29). When the event is unthinkable, the body can then take over to welcome the traces of what cannot be thought, as for example the death of a close relative which is not certified. This formulation shows how the trauma of the enforced disappearance spreads in different spaces: in the psyche, in the body and in the social group.

About her anxieties and those of her parents, Carolina also tells us: "I think there is still this fear that it can happen again, as it's often said. I mean, memory work is there so that it may never happen again." The *memory work* for all the disappeared persons involves, among other, participating in street protests, making documentary, biography, and so on. It is seen by this heir as a way to struggle against these anxieties, and therefore against the risk of repetition. Moreover, being active in the memory work could also be seen as a reaction against the passive position in which the repression could relegate. In fact, at the emotional level, the feeling of guilt in victims of trauma is frequent (Cicccone & Ferrant, 2015). In the case of enforced disappearance, authors point out the *survivor guilt* (Biedermann, 1991) expressed by the relatives: guilt for not having been able to protect and preserve the lives of the loved ones ("What could I have done to prevent this from happening?") (Féres-Carneiro & Da Silva, 2010) or even the guilt for having angry feelings towards the disappeared (Lira, 2016; Pelento, 2009).

In the context of social violence, the feeling of guilt also propagates in society generating *social guilt* (Puget et al., 1989). Because state authorities deny responsibility for the disappearance or deprivation of liberty of the disappeared person, impunity creates scapegoats (Kaës, 2000). Those close to the disappeared bear a guilt that is not recognized by the authorities.

Taking an active position in the social sphere through the memory work can help relatives to deal with these paradoxical feelings of guilt of uncertain origin which may also be the consequences of impunity.

Importantly, some authors point out that are not only the memories of the traumatic event, but the responses to a traumatic event to be passed down through the generations (Waintrater, 2011). Carolina went on to express her astonishment about some family customs. Since childhood, she has been used to this particular way of doing and living of other family members not asking themselves questions. In reference to her family past and the political repression they suffered from, Carolina tells us:

When you grow up in exile, you don't imagine that it is possible. I think there are traumas that follow the life of these people. It's a way of functioning: 'You

have to survive, hang on and move on no matter what.' I grew up with this stuff and, it's funny, I figured that out because I do the same in my adult life.

As an adult, Carolina became aware of the content of this traumatic family inheritance of which she is the guardian. She gradually realized she reproduced her mother's survival *modus operandi* that comes "from all this violence that happened during the dictatorship." The reproduction of defense mechanisms as a kind of fixed temporality is common in a 'surviving family' (Waintrater, 2004). The frozen past invades the present. We observed that participating to creative activities (the making of documentaries or the writing of auto-biographical books) is a helpful resource both for the first and the following generations: it can be a powerful tool to communicate when content is difficult to share within the family group.

The second generation can express anxieties that stem from the extreme experiences endured by their parents under dictatorship, among which the *ambiguous loss* of a relative, but they may also be related to other traumatic events (before the coup, or in exile) that belong to the family history (Bourguignon, 2020). What other objects of transmission from the family and collective past are transmitted to the next generation?

### **The transmission of values and duty to the memory of the disappeared**

For psychoanalysis, the baby inherits a double mission: as the bearer of parental narcissism, the child is responsible for making it last, but they also carry the mission of 'fixing' the history of their parents, which may be dotted with parents' unrealized desires and dreams (Ciccone & Ferrant, 2015). This inheritance – which could be sometimes a heavy burden aggravated by trauma – becomes the basis of the child's psychic constitution. Thus, the subject's subjugation to the ascending group ensures the transmission of fundamental prohibitions and, at the same time, offers *identification markers* (Kaës, 2009) for the subject. These markers are foundational statements, values, ideals, and myths. They are signs of recognition, a means to 'identify others, be recognized by them and self-identify' (Kaës, 2009, p. 76). Thereafter, each subject has an active role in trying to take their place in the family group and to give meaning to these determinations which precede them. Through these mutual movements of recognition (to be recognized and to recognize oneself as a member of a group), the identification markers define the boundaries of a group. In the psychic transmission, each subject thus tries to make their unconscious identifications coincide with the requirements demanded by belonging to the family group, on the one hand, and their socio-cultural group, on the other. Transmitting values within the family contributes to the identification with the family group.

*In the context of enforced disappearance, what kind of values are transmitted?*

In Carolina's case, family narratives highlight various values and principles related to the commitments and the beliefs of her parents, but also the militancy of the disappeared relative and their fighting attitude for social justice. Regarding the

transmission of values in her family, Carolina told us: “Having heard from my parents and grandparents all the values that Miguel had, that triggered in me the need to defend certain causes.” She then shared her questions about the reasons for her commitment and the links with the disappearance. Is it a mark of loyalty to her parents’ struggle or to her disappeared uncle? Is it a duty to honor Miguel’s memory and make him alive through her personal values? About this topic, she said, “I think that all my political notions are based upon his disappearance. I’ve never really thought about this before actually, but it’s true.” The interview led this descendant to realize that her uncle’s disappearance shaped her way of thinking and acting. This takeover testifies to Carolina’s ongoing appropriation of her uncle’s values in the process of subjectivization. Our observations converge with other studies on this topic: passing on the memory of the disappeared can also involve passing on their political ideology (Díaz & Madariaga, 1993) and passing on role models – a set of rights and obligations – within the family (Biedermann, 1991).

The various objects of transmission that evoke the disappeared person raise questions. First, there is the question of the representation that the descendants form of the disappeared person without having met them. Second, we can question the impact of these objects of transmission on their psychic development and their identification. In Emily and Carolina’s family, the similarities between Carolina and her uncle Miguel were often highlighted: “My grandparents often said that I look like Miguel in my way of being, in the character rather, in banging my fist on the table while defending my ideas.” In addition, Carolina added with a laugh, “It’s very odd to talk about this with someone I don’t know at all because I’ve never told anyone actually.” Carolina gradually became aware of the content of the pact in which she is involved; that is, the pact to pass on the memory of her uncle to keep him alive in everyone’s mind. While the members of the family search in vain for his physical traces or documents that objectify the facts regarding his disappearance and his death, Carolina tries to honor his memory as a way to respect family principles. This is in line with Cerutti’s (2015) work on the duty the second generation feels to transmit the memory of the disappeared. We see how much the research interview can be a place of elaboration where the subject becomes aware of the alliances in which they are caught, and they realize what they are reproducing from their ascendants as well as the links that bind them to the former generations. In this way, the network of implicit connections within the family context is brought to light.

Beyond the family’s discourse, the legacy of the family’s traumatic past is observed. According to Bekerman et al. (2009), the resumption of the fight is in connection with the idealization of the disappeared person. Many studies focusing on the process of construction of the figure of the disappeared person<sup>7</sup> point out a risk of idealizing them (Alvis Rizzo et al., 2015; Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Lira, 2016). Idealization is common for children of disappeared persons (Bekerman et al., 2009), and it could be an obstacle in their psychic development (Busch & Robaina, 2006). In our case, Carolina seems to idealize the fighting figure of her uncle Miguel. As the disappearance shapes the foundational family myth, it can

be one of the causes of the idealization of the disappeared. Although she is not the daughter but the niece of the ‘disappeared,’ we note that a similar psychic process is underway. In our view, this shows the extent of the transmission through generations, even in exile.

Some children – consciously or unconsciously – feel that following their parents’ investigations is their mission. Emily is still deeply involved in the search for any trace relating to her brother. She tries in vain to respond to questions that have haunted her since her brother’s disappearance: *Where? How? Why?* This commitment is part of her personal and familial life; every free moment during weekends and holiday is devoted to find clues. It seems important to highlight the role played by families: by continuing the investigations, relatives allow the disappeared to continue to exist in the social environment (García Castro, 2001). On the contrary, giving up the investigations could be experienced as a murder of the loved one. Even if Carolina understands her mother, she realizes that her mother’s investigation and the family past invade her private sphere. The shadow of the past seems to overwhelm the space of intimacy; which raises questions about her possibility of individuation.

Carolina shared her wish to find answers to these questions:

I just wish I will have some news someday. Whether it’s from him, from others or from a piece of bone or whatever. It’s not so much for me but more for my mom and my grandparents. Funny but, it’s like a duty but I don’t take it as a burden or something heavy. It’s not at all. I really think it’s a matter of memory work, common to society. Some people have to take care of that. So, that’s also why I don’t take it lightly. It’s gonna be a full-fledged job.

She asks for answers not so much for herself, but for previous generations and for society. The memory work is a principle for which to fight in her family, and in being part of it, she will pursue this struggle. According to Faúndez et al. (2018), “The unsuccessful investigation for the disappeared relative is a painful burden that is constantly passed on to subsequent generations” (p. 98). Carolina underlines the pride felt in having such parents – who are in exile but continue their commitment to fight against political repression – but she also points out the fear of not corresponding to the ideal conveyed by her parents, of not being up to it.

Carolina expressed that she feels invested in such a mission: “I always have the feeling that, one day or another, it is me who will take the torch, and I must not be unprepared.” She believes she must *take up the torch* by taking over the investigation that aims to shed light on Miguel’s disappearance, for which her mother is currently the guarantor. When Emily is no longer there, Carolina will make it her mission to ensure the continuity of these investigations. Caught in an unconscious pact – which she does not question – this heir considers that perpetuating such a work of memory goes without saying. She therefore considers herself a link in her family’s struggle against injustice and impunity. She has to work in turn against the pact of common denial (Kaës, 2009) and of silence established within the social body.

Our observations attest to the shadow that enforced disappearance casts over the second generation as well as the descendants' identification movements towards the family identifying marks. In a 'surviving family' (Waintrater, 2004), differentiation is a threat to the survival of the group. This is also the case for the second generation of relatives of a disappeared person. What is the possibility of differentiating oneself from the family group when the mission of perpetuating the memory of the disappeared is established in the family?

Considering the articulation between a single traumatic event and collective history sheds light on the complexity of trauma transmission in the case of the family of a disappeared person. In fact, as mentioned above, transmission links us to others and it connects an individual story with the history of a group and society.

## Conclusion

Enforced disappearance blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, life and death, past and present. In absence of a body, the relatives of a disappeared person are endlessly confronted with uncertainty which is exacerbated by impunity. Moreover, this crime takes place in a context of state violence – a climate of political repression and confusion, in which families face not only the disappearance of their loved ones but also the threat against their lives, as well as other traumas (Haq, 2020). This highlights the pervasive traumatizing effect of criminal politics perpetrated by its leadership on a society. The denial of deprivation of liberty of the disappeared person by state authorities is an integral part of the legal definition of the enforced disappearance (International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006). Without a trial, the truth, even relative, cannot be re-established and the relatives face with a denial of justice (Kaës, 2000). This deprives the family of the support of those institutions that are supposed to set and ensure the founding legal framework of basic guarantees and prohibitions.

During social disasters, the collapse of the *social meta-frameworks* destabilizes *meta-psychological formations*, which are both the conditions for psychological life and well-being, and for its transmission (Kaës, 2009). The mutation of the meta-framework reverberates through the relationships in the familial, social and institutional contexts. Within these contexts, the psychical transmission from one generation to another is divided into both a positive and structuring slant, but also a negative and desubjectifying slant. The latter concerns the elements that could not be symbolized (Kaës, 2002). These negative objects of transmission can be passed on through generations.

We illustrated the multiple faces of trauma transmission by means of a family study: Emily, the sister of a disappeared person during a Latin American dictatorship, and her daughter, Carolina. Traces of the dramatic past can be expressed through various paths: the complexity of communication, anxieties and identifications. First, we presented the complexity of the transmission story concerning the disappeared loved one and the familial alliances at stake. This family case

illustrates two opposite types of relationship with the past: on one hand, an open sharing of memories of the disappeared relative with in the family, on the other hand, imposing the law of silence. Traces of the traumatic past are also manifested as persecution anxiety in the second generation, who realizes they reproduce the same survival-based mode of functioning of their parents. Concerning identifications, we observed that Carolina identifies herself with her uncle's political values and commitment, but also with her parents': she feels it is her mission to follow their investigations to search for the disappeared loved one. In that way, the second generation finds itself as guarantor of the memory work for the disappeared.

The second generation's difficulty in elaborating this kind of ambiguous loss may be linked to the impunity that persists to this day. Not prosecuting and punishing the perpetrators hinders, not only the recognition of the crime, but also the work of recognition and reparation for victims and relatives (Kordon & Edelman, 2005). Time remains suspended. Moreover, impunity can also be considered a form of retraumatization and a source of fear, mistrust, demobilization, and social exclusion (Bekerman et al., 2009; Busch & Robaina, 2006). It would be interesting to explore further the impact that living in exile has on the relatives of a disappeared person: to what extent does living in exile support loss and trauma elaboration? Or does living away from one's family accentuate the feeling of threat and exclusion?

We consider that the 'ambiguous loss' (Boss, 1999) due to enforced disappearance in the context of state violence generates a traumatic effect on the close relatives (spouses, siblings, and parents) of the disappeared which is transmitted through generations. The second generation tries to find their place in the family chain through an awareness of certain dynamics in adulthood, or through the choice – being it conscious or not – to follow the mission of pursuing research and/or the struggle for justice. This struggle may, however, be colored by the traumas of the past. Concerning the impact of enforced disappearance on the second generation, most of the studies have been conducted on children of the disappeared person. In this family case of a niece of a disappeared person, we show that enforced disappearance can travel farer through family relationships. Our investigation could benefit from exploring other family cases to consider the impact of exile, as well as the relational bond of the close relatives with the disappeared. How does the degree of kinship (be a mother, a child, a sibling, etc.) and the type of relationship one had with the disappeared affect the transmission of trauma to the second generation? Through the generations, traumas and questions are passed on, as well as the task to struggle for the right to truth and justice in memory of the disappeared.

## Notes

- 1 In the context of enforced disappearance, loss and trauma can be combined given the sudden loss (Mormont, 2009), the complexity of the 'complicated' grieving process (Bourguignon et al., 2021) and the traumatic context of state violence in which the loss is experienced.
- 2 The project "From enforced disappearance of persons to the victims' relatives' complicated grief: Observing the historicization process" was conducted by the authors at the

- Institute of Psychology of the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) and was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The project was approved by the UNIL Investigation Ethics Commission (CER-UNIL).
- 3 We make here a distinction between *intergenerational* and *transgenerational* transmission that relies on the definition formulated by Granjon (1987). *Intergenerational* transmission concerns psychically integrable elements (stories, novels, family myths, objects, fantasies,) that favour the processes of identification and integration. This transmission is accompanied by the process of psychic transformation. The heir can take an active position in front of the past by integrating and transforming this heritage by processes of distancing and/or subjective appropriation. The *transgenerational* transmission concerns the transmission of raw objects (Granjon, 1989), of negative and un-representable objects (secrets, unspoken). These objects are transmitted as they are, without transformation or symbolization; they can then become more or less pathogenic for the heir. The prefix *trans* thus refers to objects that pass through the generations.
  - 4 The names as well as some data have been modified to respect confidentiality.
  - 5 Interviews consist in life narratives according to a method inspired by Rosenthal (1993, 2004) and using semi-structured questions.
  - 6 In this article, the extracts from our family case are entirely translated by the authors.
  - 7 We will not develop this topic here, but it would be interesting to explore further the movements of construction and deconstruction of the figure of the ‘disappeared’ in the life course of the second generation.

## References

- Abraham, N., & Torok, M. (1978). *L'Écorce et le Noyau* (Vol. 2). Aubier: Flammarion.
- Adams, J. (2019). “Enforced Disappearance: Family Members’ Experiences.” *Human Rights Review*, 20(3), pp. 335–360. doi:10.1007/s12142-019-0546-6
- Alvis Rizzo, A., Duque Sierra, C.P., & Rodríguez Bustamante, A. (2015). “Configuración identitaria en jóvenes tras la desaparición forzada de un familiar.” *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, 13(2), pp. 963–979. doi:10.11600/1692715x.13229270614
- Amati Sas, S. (1991). “Souffrance, douleur et cadres sociaux.” *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, 55(3), pp. 945–956. Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-psychanalyse-1991-3-page-945.htm> [Accessed 20 September 2021].
- Aulagnier, P. (1975). *The Violence of Interpretation. From Pictogram to Statement*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Bekerman, S., Pezet, Y., Oberti, C., Soutric, L., Mazur, V., & Lagos, M. (2009). “Terrorismo de estado: Segunda generacion.” In B. Brinkmann (Ed.), *Daño transgeneracional: consecuencias de la represion politica en el Cono Sur*. Santiago, Chile: LOM Ediciones, pp. 141–246.
- Biedermann, N. (1991). “Detenidos desaparecidos: Consecuencias para la segunda generación.” In B. Brinkmann, J.M. Guzmán, C. Madariaga, & S. Ruy-Pérez (Eds.), *Derechos humanos, salud mental, atención primaria: desafío regional. II seminario de la región del Maule*. Santiago, Chile: CINTRAS- El Centro de Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos, pp. 170–176.
- Blaauw, M., & Lähteenmäki, V. (2002). “Denial and Silence ’or ‘Acknowledgement and Disclosure.” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 84(848), pp. 767–784. doi:10.1017/S156077550010416X
- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.



- Boss, P. (2002). "Ambiguous Loss: Working with Families of the Missing." *Family Process*, 41(1), pp. 14–17. doi:10.1111/j.1545–5300.2002.40102000014.x.
- Boss, P. (2016). "The Context and Process of Theory Development: The Story of Ambiguous Loss." *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(3), pp. 269–286. doi:10.1111/jftr.12152.
- Bourguignon, M. (2020). "Les destins de l'héritage traumatique au cœur du processus de parentalité: à propos de la transmission entre les générations chez les descendants d'exilés politiques chiliens vivant en Suisse." PhD Thesis, Université de Lausanne, Lausanne, Suisse. Available at: [https://serval.unil.ch/fr/notice/serval:BIB\\_B3FA716F9624](https://serval.unil.ch/fr/notice/serval:BIB_B3FA716F9624) [Accessed 18 August 2021].
- Bourguignon, M., Dermitzel, A., & Katz, M. (2021). "Grief among Relatives of Disappeared Persons in the Context of State Violence: An Impossible Process?" *Torture Journal*, 31(2), pp. 19–37. doi:10.7146/torture.v31i2.127344
- Brinkmann, B., Guzmán, J.-M., Madariaga, C., & Sandoval, M. (2009). "Daño transgeneracional en descendientes de sobrevivientes de tortura." In M. Lagos, V. Vital, B. Brinkmann, & M. Scapucio (Eds.), *Daño Transgeneracional: Consecuencias de la Represión Política en el Cono Sur*. Santiago, Chile: LOM Ediciones, pp. 15–146.
- Busch, S., & Robaina, M.C. (2006). *Una Ausencia Tan Presente*. Available at: [http://www.psicosocial.net/historico/index.php?option=com\\_docman&view=download&alias=253-una-ausencia-tan-presente&category\\_slug=experiencias-y-propuestas-de-accion&Itemid=100225](http://www.psicosocial.net/historico/index.php?option=com_docman&view=download&alias=253-una-ausencia-tan-presente&category_slug=experiencias-y-propuestas-de-accion&Itemid=100225) [Accessed 2 September 2021].
- Cerutti, A. (2015). "La desaparición forzada como trauma psicosocial en Chile: Herencia, transmisión y memoria de un daño transgeneracional." *Multitemas*, pp. 35–47. doi:10.20435/multi.v0iespecial.157
- Cerutti, A. (2017). "Fils et filles de disparus en Argentine et au Chili: identité (s), mémoire (s) et résilience." PhD Thesis, Études Ibériques et Ibéro-américaines, Limoges.
- Ciccone, A. (1999). *La Transmission Psychique Inconsciente*. Paris: Dunod.
- Ciccone, A., & Ferrant, A. (2015). *Honte, Culpabilité et Traumatisme*. Paris: Dunod.
- de Mijolla, A. (1981). *Les Visiteurs du Moi: Fantômes d'Identification*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Díaz, D., & Madariaga, C. (1993). *Tercero Ausente y Familias con Detenidos Desaparecidos*. Santiago: CINTRAS.
- Edelman, L., & Kordon, D. (2006). "Efectos psicológicos multigeneracionales de la represión durante la dictadura." *Revista de la Asociación Argentina de Psicología y Psicoterapia de Grupo: Subjectividad y psiquismo*, 29, pp. 67–87.
- Eiguer, A. (1987). *La Parenté Fantasmatique. Transfert et Contre-transfert en Thérapie Familiale Psychanalytique*. Paris: Dunod.
- Escalante, H.S., Guzmán, M.O., Peñaloza, J.L., & Ruiz, S.R.S. (2014). "Condiciones violentas de duelo y pérdida: Un enfoque psicoanalítico." *Pensamiento Psicológico*, 12(2), pp. 79–95. doi:10.11144/Javerianacali.PPS12-2.cvdp.
- Faimberg, H. (1987). "Le télescopage des générations. À propos de la généalogie de certaines identifications." *Psychanalyse à l'Université*, 12(46), pp. 181–200.
- Faúndez, X., Gatica, B.A., Morales, C.B., & Castro, M.C. (2018). "La desaparición forzada de personas a cuarenta años del golpe de estado en Chile: Un acercamiento a la dimensión familiar." *Revista Colombiana de Psicología*, 27(1), pp. 85–103.
- Féres-Carneiro, T., & Da Silva, M.R.N. (2010). "Transmission, honte et mémoire dans l'histoire familiale... des disparus du régime militaire brésilien." *Dialogue*, 4, pp. 93–106. doi:10.3917/dia.190.0093

- Freud, S. (1920). "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1–64.
- García Castro, A. (2001). "Le tiers témoin. Pouvoir, disparitions, représentations." *Diogenè*, 193(1), pp. 86–99. doi:10.3917/dio.193.0086.
- García Castro, A. (2011). *La Muerte Lenta de los Desaparecidos en Chile*. Chile: Cuarto Propio.
- Grand, S., & Salberg, J. (Eds.) (2017). *Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma*. London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Granjon, E. (1989). "Transmission psychique et transferts en thérapie familiale psychanalytique." *Gruppo*, 5, pp. 47–58.
- Granjon, E. (2010). "La famille: un lieu pour s'appropriier son histoire." In P. Delion, S. Missonnier, & N. Presme (Eds.), *Quelles Transmissions Autour des Berceaux*. Toulouse: Érès, pp. 23–47.
- Haq, S. (2020). *In Search of Return: Mourning the Disappearances in Kashmir*. London: Lexington Books.
- Hofmeister, U., & Navarro, S. (2017). "A Psychosocial Approach in Humanitarian Forensic Action: The Latin American Perspective." *Forensic Science International*, 280, pp. 35–43. doi:10.1016/j.forsciint.2017.08.027
- International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance 2006, Ga Res 61/177, 20 December 2006, Un Doc A/Res/61/177 (2006), 14 IJHR 582 (2007), Opened for Signature 6 February 2007, Entered into Force 23 December 2010 ('Disappearances Convention'). Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/47fdfaeb0.html> [Accessed 4 June 2021].
- Kaës, R. (1989). "Ruptures catastrophiques et travail de la mémoire. Notes pour une recherche". In J. Puget, R. Kaës, M. Vignar, L. Ricón, J. Braun de Dunayevich, M. L. Pelento, S. Amati-Sas, M. Ulriksen-Vignar, & V. Galli (Eds.), *Violence d'État et Psychanalyse*. Paris, France: Dunod, pp. 169–204.
- Kaës, R. (1993). *Transmission de la Vie Psychique Entre Générations*. Paris: Dunod.
- Kaës, R. (2000). "Postface. Traduire les restes, écrire l'héritage." In J. Altounian (Ed.), *La Survivance. Traduire le Trauma Collectif*. Paris: Dunod, pp. 181–188.
- Kaës, R. (2002). "Le problème psychanalytique du générationnel: objets, processus et dispositifs d'analyse." *Filigrane*, 11(1), pp. 109–120.
- Kaës, R. (2009). *Les Alliances Inconscientes*. Paris: Dunod.
- Kajtazi-Testa, L., & Hewer, C.J. (2018). "Ambiguous Loss and Incomplete Abduction Narratives in Kosovo." *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 23(2), pp. 333–345. doi:10.1177/1359104518755221
- Katz, M. (2012). "Interdit de l'inceste, du meurtre et cannibalisme sauvage : une trilogie fondatrice?" In M. Vaucher, D. Bourdin, M. Durrer, & O. Revaz (Eds.), *Foi de Cannibale! La Dévoration, Entre Religion et Psychanalyse*. Genève: Labor et Fides, pp. 76–96.
- Kijak, M., & Pelento, M.L. (1986). "Mourning in Certain Situations of Social Catastrophe." *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 13, pp. 463–471.
- Kordon, D., & Edelman, L. (2005). "Efectos psicosociales de la impunidad." In D. Kordon, L. Edelman, D. Lagos, D. Kersner, et al. (Eds.), *Efectos Psicológicos y Psicosociales de la Represión Política y la Impunidad*. Buenos Aires: Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, pp. 125–139.

- Kordon, D., & Edelman, L. (2007). *Por-Venires de la Memoria: Efectos Psicológicos Multi-generacionales de la Represión de la Dictadura: Hijos de Desaparecidos*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo.
- Kordon, D., Edelman, L., Lagos, D., & Kersner, D. (2011). *Sur, Dictadura y Después...: Elaboración Psicosocial y Clínica de los Traumas Colectivos*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Psicolibro Ediciones.
- Lira, E. (2016). "Desaparición forzada trauma y duelo: Chile 1973–2014." In Á.M. Estrada Mesa & C. Buitrago Murica (Eds.), *Recursos Psicosociales Para el Post-Conflicto*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications, pp. 131–168.
- Mormont, C. (2009). "Deuil et traumatisme." *Revue Francophone Stress et Trauma*, 9, pp. 218–223.
- Pelento, M.L. (2009). "Mourning for "Missing" People." In G.L. Fiorini, T. Bokanowski, & S. Lewkowicz (Eds.), *On Freud's Mourning and Melancholia*. New York: Routledge, pp. 56–70.
- Puget, J., Kaes, R., Vignar, M., Ricón, L., Braus de Dunayevich, J., & Pelento, M.L., et al. (1989). *Violence d'État et Psychanalyse*. Paris: Dunod.
- Rosenthal, G. (1993). "Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews." *The Narrative Study of Lives*, 1(1), pp. 59–91.
- Rosenthal, G. (2004). "Biographical Research." In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 48–64.
- Scarfone, D. (2012). "Moments de grâce: Présence et élaboration de l'impassé." In M. Gagnebin & J. Milly (Eds.), *Michel de M'Uzan ou le Saisissement Créateur*. Paris: Champ Vallon, coll. L'Or de l'Atalante, pp. 31–41.
- Schaal, S., Jacob, N., Dusingizemungu, J.-P., & Elbert, T. (2010). "Rates and Risks for Prolonged Grief Disorder in a Sample of Orphaned and Widowed Genocide Survivors." *BMC Psychiatry*, 10(1), p. 55. doi:10.1186/1471-244X-10-55
- Strier, R. (2014) "Fatherhood in the Context of Political Violence: Los Padres de la Plaza." *Men and Masculinities*, 17(4), pp. 359–375. doi:10.1177/1097184x14539965
- Waintrater, R. (2004). "La famille survivante: familles et traumatismes." In P. Angel & P. Mazet (Eds.), *Guérir les Souffrances Familiales*. Paris: PUF, pp. 365–371.
- Waintrater, R. (2011). "Héritage de la violence, violence de l'héritage." *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 301, pp. 225–234.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Penguin Books.