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My Child's Journey Home: Perspectives of Adult Family Members on the Separation and Reunification of the "Disappeared" Children of El Salvador

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Abstract

This article explores family separation and reunification of the disappeared Salvadoran children separated from their families during El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) from the perspectives of adult relatives. During separation, adult relatives experienced an "unresolvable loss." Following reunion, families experienced an immediate relief that was often accompanied by an "ambiguous reunification." Emotions were especially complicated and painful when the separation had been a "forced choice" by the parent under coercive wartime political conditions. Adoptive parents strongly influenced reunification. Findings suggest that disappeared children and biological and adoptive family members need psycho-social support throughout separation and reunification.

I.   Introduction

Family separation and reunification impacts millions of families worldwide

each year.[1] This article will describe the process of family separation and

reunification from the perspectives of adult family members of the

disappeared children of El Salvador. The article will provide historical context

on the disappeared Salvadoran children, describe the research team's prior

study on the children's experiences with separation and reunification, review

relevant psychological theories and literature and, present findings from the

current study on the relatives of the disappeared children, and discuss

implications for improving family wellbeing.

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II.   Disappeared Children of El Salvador

A.   Historical Context of the Disappeared Children of El Salvador

Thousands of children ~~became~~were forcibly separated from their families during El Salvador's civil war, which was characterized by military-led, aggressive counter-insurgency campaigns against those viewed as guerrilla sympathizers. These operations resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians, including the massacres of entire villages, and the forced separation of thousands of children from their families.[2] The disappearances of children occurred most frequently during 1980 to 1982, the early years of the civil war, when military attacks on civilians were particularly rampant.[3] In many instances, the military turned disappeared or abducted children over to the Salvadoran Red Cross. The Red Cross then placed the children in orphanages or arranged for their adoptions abroad, commonly in the United States, France, and Italy.[4] Salvadoran military officials also trafficked disappeared children, arranging international adoptions or placing them with military families.[5] In other instances, Salvadoran families informally adopted children—relatives or family friends of children separated from their parents would take the children into their homes.

In 1994, two years after the signing of the Peace Accords in El Salvador, a group of mothers of the disappeared children joined with Jesuit priest Jon Cortina to found Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Association for the Search of Disappeared Children).[6] The

mission of the organization was to assist Salvadoran families in locating the missing children.[7] As the mothers who founded the organization had success in finding and reuniting with their missing children, the movement to locate the disappeared children began to spread across El Salvador, with other families gradually seeking Asociación Pro-Búsqueda's assistance in searching for their missing children. Today, Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, still based in El Salvador, uses investigative techniques that include DNA evidence to search for and locate missing children. Asociación Pro-Búsqueda facilitates the family reunifications of hundreds of families that were separated during the war.

B.   Prior Study on the Experiences of Disappeared Children with Family Reunification

In a prior study, the authors analyzed the family separation and reunification experiences of twenty-six26 disappeared Salvadoran children who underwent forced separation as children and reunification as adolescents.[8] Most disappeared children were separated from their families during infancy or early childhood and were later reunited as adolescents. The authors conducted ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador from 2005-2009, with the assistance of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. The analyzed data consisted of field notes and semi-structured interviews with disappeared young adults who had been reunited with their biological families (n = 26; ages 24 to 34 years old) and interviews with their close biological relatives (n = 14).

The prior study characterized the family reunification process in six stages:[9]

    1. *Pre-Disappearance*: the period in the children's lives~~ife~~ that preceded their disappearance*.*

    2. *Disappearance*: the physical event when the children were disappeared and became separated from their biological family.

    3*. Separation*: the period when the children were separated from their biological famil~~y~~ies.

    4. *Searching*: the period when the youth were searching to find their biological famil~~y~~ies; youth entered this period when they exhibited a desire to find their relatives or demonstrated a willingness to be found.

    5. *Reunion event*: the physical event when youth re-met their biological families.

    6. *Reunification*: the period following reunion.

    Additionally, three overarching concepts emerged in the youth interviews that permeated all six stages: search for identity, social connectedness, and resilience.[10]

III.   Theoretical Context and Literature Review

Findings from the current study on the experiences of the adult family members of the disappeared Salvadoran children draw upon several well-established psychological theories. These include attachment theory;

ambiguous loss—which we are reframing as "unresolvable loss"—defined as a loss without closure; and its twin concept, "ambiguous reunification"—defined as reunifying with a loved one who may be physically or psychologically distant.

A.   Attachment Theory

Attachment theory sheds light on how family separation can impact children, which, in turn, is likely to influence the caregivers' response. Developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s through their observations of "normal" children undergoing family separation and reunification, attachment theory postulates that in healthy parent-child relationships, children go through an expected process of attachment to their parents.[11] If children are separated from their parents, they may fail to re-attach securely once reunited. Further, since parents and other vital attachment figures form the basis for a child's healthy development, disruption of attachment can create lifelong challenges that may hinder a young person's ability to explore and adapt to their changing environment.

Many of El Salvador's disappeared children experienced an abrupt and often violent form of family separation that may have disrupted their healthy development and their ability to securely attach to future parent figures and other loved ones, as well as re-unite with their biological family members.[12] For the parents of the disappeared children, the psychological impact of

parenting children who had experienced abrupt and traumatic disruptions of the parent-child attachment is less clear.

B.   Ambiguous Loss/Unresolvable Loss

Pauline Boss' theory of ambiguous loss also helps shed light on the experiences of the families of the disappeared Salvadoran children.[13] Ambiguous loss describes situations where a ~~loved one~~family member is uncertain regarding a missing loved one, and does not know what happened to them and is unaware of ~~a missed loved one~~their whereabouts.~~, in terms of what has happened to them and where they are~~ ~~loved one is uncertain in terms of their relative's fate or knowledge of his or her whereabouts and therefore lacks closure.~~ Ambiguous loss was initially developed to describe the loss experienced by families whose sons and daughters were "missing in action" during the Vietnam War. Boss observed that the uncertainty and ambiguity of the family's loss, including not knowing whether or not their relatives were alive or dead,[14] left many family members "in a limbo of hope and despair,"[15] ~~that~~ which "freezes the grief process."[16] The uncertainty of the loss created a situation where it was impossible to let go of a missing family member which, in turn, inhibited the healthy detachment needed to heal after the death of a loved one, a concept that extends from Bowlby's and Ainsworth's attachment theory.

The team's prior analysis of the family separation of the disappeared

children indicated that the children experienced ambiguous loss during the separation. None of the children knew if they would ever reunite with their biological families again, and most did not know whether their parents and other close relatives were alive or dead.[17] Given the above theories and our previously observed findings about the experiences of the disappeared children, the authors hypothesize that family members of the disappeared, when separated from their children, also experienced the intense pain of ambiguous loss. Family members' coping mechanisms and resilience strategies for navigating the intense experience of forced separation from their disappeared children are unclear; elucidating this is a focus of the current article. For this reason, the authors prefer the term "unresolvable loss," as it conveys the intensity of the pain of yearning and uncertainty often exacerbated by a sense of guilt. Most importantly, it removes any implication that the loss is not deeply felt, which ~~that~~ the adjective "ambiguous" may inadvertently communicate.

C.   Ambiguous Reunification

Scholars have documented the experiences of family members undergoing reunification after separation resulting from political violence in a variety of settings, including the Argentine grandmothers in search of their disappeared grandchildren,[18] Jewish families separated during the Nazi holocaust, [19] families separated during the Greek civil war,[20] and families

separated during the military conflict in Guatemala[21] and the former Yugoslavia.[22] The lLiterature has also contains documentation ofed families separated because of institutionalization, including as a result of foster care involvement or incarceration. For example, studies involving reunification after foster care have highlighted that parents feel self-blame for the separation and struggle to feel like competent caregivers during the reunification period.[23] Parents reunited with their children after periods of separation due to immigration also face similar experiences, combined with the challenge of establishing a new relationship with their child.[24]

The related literature on the psychosocial effects of adoption describes the "primal wound" of family separation, meaning the inherent pain of separation that comes with adoption, and how family reunification can help heal this wound by mitigating feelings of guilt and shame.[25] Despite these insights, a critical gap remains in our understanding of how adoptees and their biological and adoptive parents navigate the uncertain waters of family reunification.[26]

Geoffrey Greif developed the concept of "ambiguous reunification" when conceptualizing the reunification process that occurs after child abduction.[27] In ambiguous reunification, ambiguity surrounds the reunification process, as parties seek to re-capture their old relationship or build a new one. As Greif describes, in ambiguous reunification, "the loved one is no longer missing physically but may be absent psychologically."[28] During the reunification of missing children with their families, a child may

be psychologically absent upon return, or a parent may be psychologically absent, or both—thus the term "ambiguous reunification."[29] The team's prior study suggested that the disappeared Salvadoran youth also experienced an ambiguous reunification. To what extent did the adult family members of the disappeared Salvadoran children experience an ambiguous reunification? Clarifying this can lend insight into the coping strategies and psychosocial supports needed to foster successful reunification.

IV.   Study Objective

Studies exist that describe the highly dynamic, intense, and painful experience of reunification from the perspective of the child, but studies applying this framework to family perspectives are lacking. The literature shows that the ways in which children cope with separation affects the reunification and adjustment process. How then do parents make meaning of separation and reunification? How do they cope and maintain resilience during the loss? How do they navigate parenting a child who is both dearly loved and close to them, and yet very much a stranger upon the moment of reunion? The theoretical underpinnings and existing literature suggest that separation and reunification likely have a lifelong impact on parents' and other family members' wellbeing. Yet little exists in the peer-reviewed literature about the experiences of families facing forced separation and subsequent reunification. The current study therefore ~~sought to~~ explores the

process of family separation and reunification from the perspectives of adult family members of the disappeared children of El Salvador.

V.   Methods

This exploratory study sought to gain insight into the process of family separation and reunification from the perspectives of adult family members of the disappeared children of El Salvador. Short-term and long-term impacts of these phenomena on the wellbeing of the adult family members of the disappeared children were the foci of the study. Researchers contrasted the experiences of the family members with the experiences of the disappeared children, which the authors examined in detail in the preceding study.[30]

A.   Approach

The study used a historical approach to life history with multiple case studies designed to discover the range of adult biological and adoptive family members' experiences throughout the processes of family separation and reunification. The authors used participant-observation ethnographic and qualitative semi-structured interview methods conducted in both formal and informal conversational formats, often in the participants' natural environment. The study focused on the extent to which the experiences of adult family members of the disappeared children matched those of the

children (now young adults), as identified in the research team's prior analysis. The study draws primarily upon the lead author's (Barnert's) extensive fieldwork in El Salvador, conducted between October 2004 and June 2009 but is supplemented by the third author's (Bourgois's) ongoing (1981-2017) long durée fieldwork with former guerilla combatants and their civilian supporters, which ~~that~~ began at the height of the civil war.

B.   Context

The authors conducted the fieldwork in San Salvador, at the site of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, a collaborating non-governmental human rights organization that facilitates the searches and family reunifications of the disappeared with their biological families. Fieldwork extended throughout the rural areas of El Salvador, and was especially concentrated in the regions that had been most directly impacted by the war. The civil war era fieldwork included fleeing with several thousand refugees during an eleven day-long scorched-earth military operation[31] that resulted in the disappearance of several children, one of whom (Armando) was reunited by Pro-Búsqueda as a young adult.[32] At the time the authors conducted case study interviews (2004), Asociación Pro-Búsqueda had been in operation for 10 years and had documented 765 cases of disappeared children. The organization had located 310 of these children, including some disappeared children who were confirmed deceased and 455 cases remained unresolved. The organization

found the majority of located youth in El Salvador, the United States, Italy, France, and Honduras.[33] The organization had reunited over 178 youth with their families. As of September 2017, the organization had documented 979 cases of disappeared children. Of these, 275 youth have been reunited with their biological families, eighty-four have been located but not yet reunited, eighty-two were found to be deceased, and 538 cases remain unresolved.[34]

C.   Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to identify clusters of families who had undergone family separation and reunification. Families that had undergone family separation during the civil war and subsequent reunification, and who resided in El Salvador at the time of the fieldwork, were eligible for this study. Although not the primary focus, adoptive parents and individuals in El Salvador in search of a missing child were also eligible. As a result of these methods, the study did not include individuals not connected to the human rights organization Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and those residing outside of El Salvador.

D.   Data Collection

The authors conducted fifty semi-structured interviews in El Salvador between December 2005 and January 2006. The study sample included

twenty-six disappeared youth (ages twenty-four to thirty-four years at the time of the interview) who had undergone family reunification; fourteen of their close biological relatives; three of their adoptive relatives (all adoptive fathers); three individuals searching for missing youth; one youth searching for her family, and three key informants who were employees at Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. For the current analysis on the experiences of the adult family members of the disappeared children, the analyzed interviews included the adult biological relatives and the adoptive relatives of the disappeared children who had undergone reunification, as well as the three adult relatives searching for missing children (twenty participants in total). The authors also used contextual data drawn from several hundred pages of field notes and recorded interviews collected during and after the 1981 scorched-earth operation in Santa Marta, Cabañas and San Francisco, California.[35]

Confidential case study interviews occurred either in a private room at Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, or at participants' homes, depending on participants' preferences. All participants provided informed consent. The authors designed the domains in the semi-structured interview guide to probe families' experiences with family separation and reunification. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed into Spanish. Authors also wrote field notes to accompany each case study interview and wrote took notes throughout the research process, documenting the lead author's experience as a participant-observer, serving both as a research and a bilingual forensic genetics consultant and advocate with Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. Field notes

also described the third author's experience as a witness of civil war violence in 1981 and his over one dozen follow-up visits to refugee camps in Honduras (La Virtud and Mesa Grande) during the war years and his subsequent visits to Santa Marta, Cabañas after the signing of the peace accords up through October 2017, all of which informed the qualitative analysis and interpretation of the findings.

E.   Analysis

The authors analyzed interviews and field notes using a two-staged thematic content analysis. The goal was to identify themes representative of families' experiences with separation and reunification. Interview transcripts were first coded using the six stages of separation and reunification that the research team had identified in the prior analysis on the experiences of the disappeared children with separation and reunification. For the analysis of the family interviews, the researchers first uploaded family interview transcripts into the software AtlasTi. Second, the research team reviewed the transcripts and then applied as codes each of the six stages of separation and reunification (developed through the prior analysis of youth interviews) to the transcripts from the interviews with the family members of the youth. Throughout this process, the research team was actively assessing whether the six youth stages fit the family member data. Third, the research team developed an additional coding scheme to represent emergent concepts not

captured in the six stages of separation and reunification and then preliminarily coded the transcripts. Fourth, researchers refined the coding schemes, and applied both sets of codes to the transcripts. Finally, through iterative research team discussions and coding, authors generated consensus themes and concepts of families' experiences with separation and reunification and then summarized the data. The UCLA institutional review board approved the study protocol.

VI.   Findings

The majority of the biological relatives interviewed had been separated from the missing child during the child's infancy or early childhood. Of the interviews with biological relatives, seven were biological mothers, one was a biological father, two were grandparents, three were aunts or uncles, and one was an older sibling of a disappeared child. The study sample also included three adoptive fathers; these individuals were readily localizable by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and were adoptive fathers of young adults included in the larger study. Additionally, the study included interviews with three individuals searching for missing children, including an interview with an aunt, a godmother, and an older sibling of a disappeared child. All of the interviewees were in regular contact with Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and several independently and spontaneously stated that they had consented to participate as a way to demonstrate their gratitude to Asociación Pro-

Búsqueda and to God, and to share their stories~iesy~ with those outside of El Salvador.

At the time that biological families reunited with their disappeared youth, the ~childrens'~youths' ages ranged from fifteen to thirty years, and families had been separated for fifteen years or more. On average, approximately ten years had lapsed between a families' reunion event and the interview for the study. The most recent reunion occurred one month prior to the study interview.

At the time of the case study interviews, all of the adult relatives were residing in rural El Salvador. In contrast, although most of the disappeared youth were originally from rural areas, at the time of the interviews, eleven of the twenty-six youth were residing in San Salvador or other urban areas within El Salvador. Two disappeared youth had relocated to the homes of their biological families and were residing with biological family members at the time of the interviews. Also at the time of the interviews, several of the siblings of the disappeared youth were separated from their families as a result of the siblings immigrating to the United States in the years following the war. Most of the survivors of the Cabañas scorched-earth operation from 1981 currently live in rural Cabañas and Chalatenango, San Francisco, California, and Herndon, Virginia, but some live in Australia and Canada where they obtained permanent status as refugees and asylum seekers.

A.   Stages of Family Separation and Reunification

As with the experiences of the disappeared children, the experiences of the family members of the disappeared could be conceptually divided into six stages: pre-disappearance, disappearance, separation, searching, reunion, and reunification. Although the six distinct stages were generally applied to family members of the disappeared, the families' experiences during each of the stages were distinct from the youths'. Not surprisingly, the experiences of biological and adoptive families were both distinct from each other and strongly interrelated with those of the youth. Although biological relatives of the disappeared shared strong commonalities in each of the stages, relatives described varied pathways through the six stages of separation and reunification. The immediate circumstances of a child's disappearance shaped the biological family's specific pathway throughout the six stages.

1.   Stage One: Pre-Disappearance

The first stage, pre-disappearance, described the period before the civil war and prior to a child's disappearance. From the biological relatives' perspective, this period was characterized by vivid, joyful memories. Family members recalled detailed characteristics of their disappeared child, such as age, descriptions of the child's appearance, behaviors, and personality traits. Nearly all of the characteristics described about the child were positive. Intertwined with the loving and nostalgic recollections of their disappeared child were painful memories of the war. Most of the adult relatives of the

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disappeared recounted fleeing from the military due to family members' suspected involvement with the guerrilla, as well as their lack of resources and general poverty. For the family members who were actively involved in combat, the pre-disappearance phase was marked with intense uncertainty and internal conflict as they began to confront the realities and dangers of having a child in a combat zone. All of the parents and other biological family members of the disappeared expressed an intense desire and effort to protect their children and loved ones during the war.

2. Stage Two: Disappearance

The second stage, disappearance, described the event of physical separation of a child from his or her biological family. Authors observed two mechanisms for family separation: *forced disappearance* and *forced choice*.

Forced disappearance refers to the violent, physical separation that occurred during military raids. Forced disappearances were less common but extremely traumatic when they occurred. In some instances, parents described that children were taken from their arms at gunpoint; one mother recounted witnessing soldiers forcibly pulling children away by their hair and placing them in helicopters. Civilians often fled at night, pursued by soldiers, and parents reported losing contact with one or more of their younger, slower-running children in the frightened mayhem of these desperate flights. The third author witnessed the purposeful killing of civilians by the military in

one of these classic scorched-earth military operations against a thirty-square-kilometer region of Cabañas that included approximately twelve small rural hamlets. He experienced the panic and disorganized flight of thousands of civilians and combatants running under military fire and aerial bombardment through rough rural terrain including overgrown underbrush, thick woods, and steeply-pitched ravines. He saw how members of the military, in the darkness of the night, purposefully aimed their automatic weapons fire and grenades directly into the sound of crying babies and children. In fact, he was advised by the fleeing population to sprint away to a safer distance whenever a baby started crying.[36]

More commonly, children became separated from their families as a result of what the authors termed *forced choice*, defined as a decision to separate from the child, which appeared voluntary but, in reality, reflected what parents felt to be the only reasonable choice for their child's survival. In several instances of forced choice, parents made informal arrangements with friends, relatives, or orphanages to care for their children. Several parents expressed that, as guerilla fighters, the guerrilla had pressured them to separate from their children so that the parents could "dedicate themselves" to combat. One mother, a former guerrilla fighter who separated from her two-month old son, recounted that these decisions were even made under the pressure of death threats from local guerrilla commanders. The third author collected multiple accounts from mothers who survived massacres and scorched-earth operations who describe, with a combination of outrage

and incredulity, how they were urged to suffocate their nursing babies, whose cries could not be controlled when they were hiding in ravines, bushes, or caves with the military patrolling nearby. In other examples of forced choice, a mother described leaving her two oldest children (ages nine and thirteen) behind while hurriedly fleeing a military attack, and taking her four other children with her to San Salvador, since she did not have enough money to pay for the bus fare for all of them to escape to the city. Several parents similarly described a forced choice that involved a desperate and quick decision to save the lives of other children while fleeing military attacks. One interviewed father described putting his daughter, who had an injured limb, down on the ground while in flight from the military, since he could only carry one of his two youngest children over a fence; he did not see her again until Asociación Pro-Búsqueda reunited them over a decade later.[37] Many parents burst into tears over thirty-five years later when sharing these memories with the authors or when documenting them for human rights reports.[38] Given these extreme war conditions, parents who made forced choice decisions to separate from their children felt it was the best chance their children had to survive. Several of the mothers interviewed by the third author, however, in retrospect expressed resentment and longstanding frustration for having been forcibly persuaded by their subsequently deceased or estranged husbands to send their children to a refugee camp in Honduras in order to remain with the fathers in the active combat zone. The fact that these parents felt they had made an active

decision to separate from their children was crucial as it led to a feeling of guilt that pervaded their experiences with the subsequent stages of separation and reunification.

Thus, for all biological family members of the disappeared, the physical separation from their children was an extremely traumatic, pivotal event in their lives. Forced disappearance during military raids led to intense uncertainty, causing families to fluctuate between hopefulness and despair regarding the possibility of their child's survival and eventual reunion. Parents separated from their children through forced choice often knew or had some initial knowledge of their child's survival and whereabouts. This variation in the circumstances of the disappearance—parents either having no idea whether their child had survived and no volition to have had their child removed versus parents having given up their child by "choice"—had tremendous repercussions on how family members moved throughout the stages of separation and reunification.

3. Stage Three: Separation

The third stage, separation, described the period when biological family members were physically separated from their children. The team's prior analysis indicated that during the long period of separation, the disappeared children reestablished themselves in new living situations, including in orphanages, with adoptive families, or on the streets. For biological family

members of the disappeared, the period of separation from their biological children was characterized by a struggle to survive the war. Many families also described the intense pain and uncertainty of not knowing whether their child was alive or dead. Families in which a forced disappearance had occurred, communicated uncertainty most strongly as compared to families who had been aware of their child's whereabouts, at least during the early months after the separation. Most of the families who had faced a forced-choice separation during the war had initially been aware of their child's whereabouts and had then lost touch with their child and their child's caregivers during the course of the war.

All of the adult relatives of the disappeared described facing "constant reminders" of their missing children, during which families oscillated between hope and despair about the chance of experiencing a reunion with their children. Families described that, in addition to stifling their own sense of peace, the forced separation negatively impacted other family members as well. Biological family members found themselves separated from their child for much longer than they had anticipated due to not knowing how to locate their missing child, even after the war was over. Lack of financial resources and lack of knowledge regarding how to locate missing children created barriers for parents and other adult family members to end the separation stage. Many families were overwhelmed with their day-to-day tasks, the poverty, and the grief they faced in post-war El Salvador. Faith brought solace to families during the painful separation stage as did focusing

on the care of their other children who had survived the war and who remained under their care.

4.   Stage Four: Searching

The searching stage described the period when biological family members shifted to actively searching for their missing children. In most cases, the biological family members initiated an actual search process by filing a case with Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. Less commonly, the missing children initiated the search through Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. False leads and misinformation were characteristic of this stage. Family members described that tThe most common impetus for initiating a search described by family members was simply gaining knowledge of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and learning the practical steps to begin the process of locating the missing child.

During the searching stage, as with separation, many parents struggled with oscillating feelings of hope and hopelessness. They felt hope and excitement at the idea of finding their child alive and well, but this sense of hope was mixed with feelings of hopefulness and despair, which arose as many families feared their child had not survived the war. Invocation of faith was a common theme expressed by biological family members searching for a missing child. The logistical assistance of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda in this stage was instrumental in locating the missing children and in emotionally supporting parents and other adult relatives of the disappeared during the

search process.

5.   Stage Five: Reunion

The reunion stage described the event when biological family members re-met their missing children. In anticipation of reunion, biological family members expressed that they struggled with intense anticipation and fear of being reunited with their lost child. Some family members also expressed uncertainty and doubt that was often fueled by other family members questioning whether the newly found child (adolescent or young adult at the time of reunion) was truly their missing child. Family members who had become separated from their families by forced choice described feeling intense guilt prior to the reunion, whereas family members forcibly separated (e.g., at gunpoint) most often described feeling anger towards the military, in addition to intense relief. However, despite these fears and any other uncomfortable feelings, upon learning that their missing children had been found, all biological family members were immediately willing to reunite with their missing children. In contrast, several families described that the disappeared children who had been located hesitated to set a date for the reunion, with some youth waiting a year or more until they felt ready to re-meet their biological parents or other older biological relatives.

All biological families shared that the reunion event brought immense joy. The joy was palpable in the words and body language of the family

members as they recounted the event. The reunion with the long-disappeared children was also marked with pain and grief, as family members reported to their children the deaths of other relatives killed during the war. Family members, however, also faced the difficulty of feeling distant from the children they had loved so much and yearned for so long, but who had had so many years of experiences without them and often lived in a completely different urban socio-cultural and political world. For most families, the intense love they felt for their missing children overcame this awkward ambiguous disjunction. Families described the immediate connection and love they felt upon having their first glance and first hug with their missing child. Ultimately, with the reunion event, all biological family members conveyed that they felt an immediate and powerful sense of "tranquility" or peace of mind upon re-meeting their missing child.

In contrast to the biological family members, the perspectives of the adoptive fathers' interviews were distinct and generally shifted as the reunion day approached. Most described that supporting the reunion was the morally right thing to do to help the disappeared children find his or hertheir "real parents and family." Although the adoptive fathers acknowledged feeling jealousy, they ultimately described making a conscious decision to let the child decide who they viewed as their "real" family. The degree to which the adoptive fathers facilitated the actual reunion event varied; however, all of the adoptive fathers expressed that the reunion of their adoptive children with his or hertheir biological parents was a pivotal moment in the youths'

lives.

6.   Stage Six: Reunification

The reunification stage described the long-term process following the reunion when adult relatives of the disappeared struggled to re-form new relationships with the formerly disappeared children. For the biological and adoptive relatives of the disappeared children, the reunification stage was challenging and an ongoing process. Biological family members of the disappeared described feeling immense peace simply knowing the whereabouts of their children, and having the continual knowledge that the children were "alive and well," and knowing they could contact them anytime they wanted. However, many also struggled to form a positive relationship with the newly found adolescent or young adult. Adult biological family members struggled to gain trust, acceptance, and recognition from their formerly disappeared children.

Biological family members of youth who had received schooling through their orphanages or adoptive families generally found it more difficult to understand and connect with the youth. Additionally, a cultural and economic divide existed between the biological relatives, most of whom remained poor and in rural areas, and the youth, many of whom had been raised in San Salvador and were working in the city. Even though the families had been separated by political conflict, which had often involved direct

commitment by family members to the revolutionary movement of that era, differences in political ideologies were not mentioned as a source of conflict by relatives during reunification. Because of the history of tremendous political polarization, however, Salvadorans who grew up during the civil war often carefully avoid referring to past or current political commitments so as to reduce the potential for tension or conflict.

Despite these practical and attitudinal differences, the biological relatives expressed gratitude for the safety and education the child had received. Several parents stated that they would not have been able to provide economically for the child and described feeling proud of their child's schooling and job. However, these differences in schooling and region (i.e., living in a rural versus a metropolitan area) created a class difference between many parents and their children. Many parents acknowledged these differences, sometimes describing them as a source of distance in their relationships, but consistently also feeling gratitude that their children were able to receive "a better life." Transcendent of any differences, several biological family members also described that "blood calls blood," meaning that no matter what physical or emotional distances had transpired or existed between them and their child, they would always be connected because of their relationship as kin.

Although generalizations about the experiences of the adoptive parents are limited due to the small number of adoptive parents participating in the study, for the three included, it was clear that the

reunification stage was marked by intense uncertainty. The adoptive fathers who were interviewed generally continued to view themselves as the caregivers who had paternal responsibilities to the children. Simultaneously, many feared losing their established relationships with their adoptive children, and actively questioned whether the adoptive children would stop loving them and forget about them, even years after the reunion. Most adoptive families were elderly and feared that they had lost the one young adult who could take care of them. One adoptive father expressed that the adoptive child was all he had left and felt threatened by the developing relationship between the young adult and his biological mother. A few biological mothers described that the adoptive parents made it difficult for the biological mother and youth to see each other. Resistance from adoptive families was overt or passive. Some adoptive families would indicate that they were skeptical or displeased about the reunion and either overtly objected to the youth spending time with the biological parents or more passively objected by not providing emotional or logistical support for youth and parents to meet.

In contrast, several biological mothers who were interviewed conveyed that acceptance and support from adoptive relatives eased the reunification process for the biological families and the youth. Across this variation, all participants expressed that the degree of support from adoptive family members strongly influenced the youth, which in turn, strongly influenced the biological parents' experiences with reunification.

All of the biological and adoptive family members said that their relationships with the youth were continuing to evolve, both as emotional wounds from the war healed with the passage of time and as they adapted to the youth or young adult, who had often married or themselves become parents. Ultimately, all of the biological relatives were extremely grateful that their missing children had survived the war and that they had an opportunity to re-connect with them. Throughout the challenges of reunification, biological and adoptive parents demonstrated a tremendous resilience that they described as largely fueled by their faith in God and their love for their children.

B. Overarching Concepts

Two overarching concepts emerged that permeated the experiences of the relatives of the disappeared across all six stages of family separation and reunification. Overarching themes included faith and uncertainty versus peace of mind.

1. Overarching Theme One: Resilience Built on Faith

All of the adult relatives of the disappeared exhibited strong faith. Faith in this context referred to the belief that their child was still alive, as well as an invocation of God. Faith fueled their resiliency and allowed families to

progress during the war and in the separation and reunification phases. Some adult relatives expressed that if it were God's will, they would find their child. Others described that they had felt in their heart that the child was alive. Families maintained faith in God even when doubting their child's survival or the possibility of reunion. Once reunited, families continued to display faith in God and ~~as well as in the~~ hope~~s~~ in the prospect of building a positive relationship with the formerly missing child, including when the child showed reproach or when the adoptive family hindered the connection. For example, one mother whose son had grown up in the city with an adoptive family had faith that her son would one day return to live with her in her rural home, even if she was not able to provide him with the same luxuries that he was used to. Having faith and trust in God, that their children would return to live with them gave solace to biological family members seeking to establish a relationship with their children after reunification.

2. Overarching Theme Two: Uncertainty Versus Peace of Mind

Although families maintained an underlying faith, most parents fluctuated between having hopefulness and despair regarding the fate of their disappeared child, due to the underlying uncertainty associated with the loss. They generally experienced hopeful feelings ~~by~~ when hearing news of reunions or ~~by~~when coming into contact with Asociación Pro-Búsqueda; despair was most often triggered by seeing or hearing of the death of other

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close family members. The hopelessness and despair caused by the uncertainty of the separation marked the essence of the experience of separation. It also marked elements of reunification, during which parents and other adult relatives of the disappeared questioned whether they would be able to maintain close relationships with the formerly disappeared young adult who had come back into their lives. To a lesser extent, it seems adoptive parents may have grappled with similar feelings of uncertainty during reunification, as they questioned whether the reunification of their adoptive child with their biological relatives would mark an end to their own relationships.

Biological relatives experienced a profound peace of mind as soon as they learned their child was alive and well. The fundamental uncertainty regarding their child's survival was resolved. This "tranquility" was solidified upon re-meeting their child, when they saw them with their own eyes and touched them with their own hands. Furthermore, the tranquility reverberated throughout the reunification phase and overshadowed any pain that resulted from emotional conflict or geographic distance with the child. For those interviewed who had not yet found their missing family member, they expressed exactly the converse—that they would not have peace of mind until they knew what had become of their missing family member. Family members of those who remained disappeared expressed a strong desire simply to know whether the missing child had lived or whether the child had been killed. In essence, family members viewed resolution of the

uncertainty as the path to peace of mind, both by those who had reunited with their missing children and those who had not.

VII.   Discussion

The experiences of the adult family members of the disappeared Salvadoran youth can be conceptually categorized into six stages of separation and reunification. As with the experiences of the youth, movement through these stages is not necessarily linear, and reunification is an ongoing and challenging process. For all of the family members of the disappeared, the extreme trauma endured during the separation had long-term damaging effects on participant's wellbeing. The trauma from the separation also hindered biological family members' relationships with the reunited child and other family members.[39] Further, a contradiction between inner and interpersonal pain occurred in which biological family members often felt intense relief and inner healing as a result of the reunion, despite any interpersonal conflict with the youth and with adoptive parents.

The circumstances of the child's disappearance shaped the families' pathways for separation and reunification through the six stages. Families forcibly separated during military raids suffered an extreme trauma that immediately fed into an unresolvable loss, as these family members had no knowledge of the missing child's fate or whereabouts.[40] Families separated as a result of forced choice were, if anything, more profoundly traumatized,

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as they felt self-blame for the separation, even when it occurred under the extreme duress of fleeing for their lives during ~~a~~ military raid<u>s</u>. Additionally, regardless of the immediate circumstances of the disappearance, all of the families either immediately or eventually lost touch with their missing children due to the chaos of war, and as a result, all of the family members immediately or eventually suffered a protracted, unresolvable loss.

The family members' experiences with unresolvable loss align with the experiences of the youth,[41] as well as with prior studies on families separated during war.[42] Many years of unresolvable loss festered while families struggled to survive the violent, twelve-year civil war. During separation, families oscillated between hope and despair over the possibility of their child's survival and whether they would ever re-unite with ~~them~~<u>their child</u>. Ultimately, family members' faith in God and their love for their child fueled a resiliency that allowed them to survive the traumas of the war and the separation. The years spent in the separation phase after the war ended may actually have been more emotionally painful for families, as much of the families' focus during the war was on the simple act of survival. Most family members of the disappeared described overwhelming pain whenever they remembered their missing child.

The context of the disappearance impacted the reunion event. For those separated during military raids, the reunion was generally a joyous event <u>as</u> ~~and~~ the child was notably more likely to be welcoming of the biological parents. In contrast, during reunions where the youth and parents

perceived that they had been separated by "choice,"—no matter how forced the separation may have been—the youth had difficulty adjusting to and accepting their biological family members. Despite these differences, however, for all of the adult relatives, the reunion event clearly marked the closure of the painful, unrequited loss. Adult relatives felt immense joy and relief despite the additional traumatic emotions that were re-surfacing, including the sense of guilt that was often accentuated by an ambiguous reunification process.

In this manner, the ambiguous loss of the disappearance event remained unresolvable when it morphed into the initiation of an experience of ambiguous reunification.[43] The adult relatives felt uncertain about whether the youth would be emotionally present—or even physically present—as many times located youth waited a long time until they felt ready to reunite. The families of the eighty-four disappeared children who have been located by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and have chosen not to yet reunite may similarly be feeling the confusing sense of irresolvability of an ambiguous reunification. [44]

Although the reunion event elicited joy and an immediate initial closure for biological family members, reunification remained extremely challenging. In essence, the reunited individuals needed to create new relationships and re-visit and heal old wounds needed to be re-visited and healed. The adult relatives struggled to gain acceptance and trust from their child. When youth rejected the new relationships, the family members consistently

demonstrated understanding of the youths' reactions. This contrasts with the youths' experiences, where in many cases the youth exhibited strong anger, disappointment, and mistrust related to feelings of abandonment—especially in ~~the~~ cases of forced choice separations—and a lesser ability to empathize and nurture their parents and other relatives during the reunion.[45]

For adopted children, encouragement from the adoptive family helped ease the reunification process. Although the adoptive relatives (all fathers) feared losing the love and support of the child they had raised, the participating adoptive parents were generally accepting and supportive of the reunification out of a selfless motivation to promote their adoptive child's wellbeing. Participants agreed that the degree of support from the adoptive parents had a strong influence on the success of the reunification. Although the roles and experiences of adoptive parents are an underexplored dimension of the study, the findings strongly suggest that providing support to all the parties, ideally by governmental agencies and, if not, by non-governmental agencies, is worthwhile to make the reunification less painful and confusing for all involved.

Overall, the study findings support previous research on family separation and reunification under such disparate scenarios as foster care, adoption, immigration, war, natural disasters, and incarceration. Similar to the parents of the disappeared Salvadoran children, parents reuniting with their children after foster care face prolonged challenges with filling a new parenting role, which ~~that~~ clearly warrants continued psycho-social support,

even well after the physical reunion has occurred.[46] The study findings similarly align with the adoption literature. For example, work in Ireland has ~~similarly~~ shown that reunification causes adoptive parents to struggle with feeling uncertainty about their parental role and has also shown that adoptive parents strongly influence the success of reunification.[47] Additionally, studies on reunification due to immigration have shown that biological parents struggle with forging relationships with children who often view their parents as strangers.[48]

The patterns of traumatization underlying experiences of separation and reunification across contexts and settings point to an apparently universal impact of forced separation and subsequent reunification. The child's need for a nurturance bond is fundamental to the human psyche. Its disruption may ~~universally~~ have severe ramifications, which are universal. A cChild's age at separation and the nurturance quality of the subsequent caretaker arrangement are also likely crucial determinants of the trajectory of separation and reunification. The circumstances of separation also require special attention, especially when they retroactively appear to have been volitional decisions by a parent, but actually involved forced choices under coercive and economically -challenging conditions. Emotional challenges after reunification are further exacerbated when the separation involved a protracted period of ambiguous, unresolvable loss that produces ambiguous reunifications. Further unraveling the concept of ambiguous reunification could lead to the development and delivery of effective therapies and other

psycho-social-economic interventions to support successful and effective reunification. Clearly, ongoing supports for family members of disappeared children and for the disappeared children are neededcrucial.

VIII.   Limitations

Several limitations of the study exist. First, recall bias may have been an issue as participants were asked to recall traumatic and politically -charged events that had occurred many years prior. However, given the significance of the events in their lives, interviewees recalled accounts of past events vividly and the accounts collected from multiple family members corroborated these stories. The small sample size was also a concern, with a particularly with the small sample of adoptive parents, which limiteding the authors' ability to draw firm conclusions about this important group. Finally, limited generalizability is a concern as the study focused only on El Salvador,; included only families actively connected to Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, and did not include youth illicitly adopted abroad. Nevertheless, the study findings suggest clear and consistent patterns that have historical value and implications relevant to the diverse settings in which separation and reunification occur today.

IX.   Conclusion

In conclusion, the experiences of the adult family members of the disappeared align with the youths' experiences.[49] Further, lessons from El Salvador, which presents an extreme example of forced separation and reunification, can extend to other settings and circumstances. Separation was a source of immense pain and uncertainty, while reunification brought closure, healing, and new challenges and conflicts. Given the intense pain of the ambiguous loss that occurs after the trauma of a disappearance and the extreme challenges of reunification, the study observations reinforce the importance of keeping families together whenever safe and feasible to do so.[50] If separation does occur, reunion is well-worth pursuing whenever feasible and mutually agreeable to do so, as reunion brings closure and a powerful transformation. All of the family members of the disappeared described an irrevocable sense of healing that occurred the moment they re-met their missing child. However, reunification proved itself to be ambiguous and adequate psychosocial supports—especially when separation occurred in the context of forced choices—are necessary to achieve optimal wellbeing and successful during reunification. Finally, it is tempting to argue, given the fundamental nature of the caretaker-child bond, for universality in the experience of family separation and reunification, given the fundamental nature of the caretaker-child bond. The content of kinship relations, however, is eminently cultural and diverse across the world. Extended versus nuclear versus fictive family formations have changed dramatically throughout history in response to cultural, gendered, political, and economic shifts in the

organization of societies and globalizing economies. Flexibly informal child adoption and extended family arrangements in El Salvador are notably extremely vital, especially in poor rural regions. In fact, these arrangements are often positive resolutions to traumatic or forced choice separations caused by economic migration of able-bodied young adults to the United States,[51] substance abuse, domestic violence, and/or abandonment by a primary, —usually male, —parent. Nevertheless, the vital importance of the stability and continuity of the child/caregiver-parent bond warrants further exploration as a fundamental human right, especially when separation occurs in the context of war and disruptive political and economic societal shifts.

Endnotes

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