

Grief among relatives of disappeared persons in the context of state violence: An impossible process?

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Key points of interest

- Enforced disappearance has political, legal, and psychosocial implications. The absence of a body affects the grieving process of families of disappeared persons.
- Highlighting the complexity of this grieving process helps scholars and practitioners understand the multiple factors at stake and thus help families cope with their loss.
- More research is needed to develop clinical and diagnostic tools to consider the ambiguity of the loss due to the unconfirmed death and the traumatic circumstances in which enforced disappearance takes place.

litical weapon to spread terror within society. However, enforced disappearance is a crime against humanity. According to the Disappearances Convention, the relatives of disappeared persons are recognised as direct victims. The effect of this crime on families remains a topical issue.

Methods: We conducted a narrative literature review focusing first on the impact enforced disappearance has on the relatives and second on the specificity of the grieving process for relatives of disappeared persons.

Results and discussion: The literature concerning enforced disappearance allows us to make an inventory of interconnected features explaining the phenomenon of enforced disappearance in the context of state violence. We also emphasize the extensive terminology used to qualify grief among relatives of disappeared persons and the specificity of time in this context. We highlight factors that could jeopardize the grieving process.

Conclusions: The literature clearly shows the political, social, and legal issues of enforced disappearance. Relatives of a disappeared person are endlessly confronted with uncertainty, exacerbated by impunity. In this case, time does not seem to support the grieving process. On the contrary, time can reactivate the injury of loss because the disappeared is condemned to an eternally provisional status.

Abstract:

Introduction: During the dictatorships in Latin America, states allied with the Condor Operation used enforced disappearance as a po-

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Therefore, enforced disappearance could be considered endless torture for families.

Keywords: enforced disappearance; grieving process; psychological impact; state violence

Introduction

In 2006, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance recognized enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity (United Nations Convention, 2006). The ED Convention, which entered into force in 2010, defined *enforced disappearance* as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law” (UN Convention, 2006, Article 2). In this article, we adhere to this definition of enforced disappearance. Following this choice, we decided to present the paradigmatic case of Latin American dictatorships allied in Operation Condor.¹

Victims of enforced disappearance are not limited to the disappeared person. The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance stated in 2004 that families are direct victims as well (Article 24). Families of disappeared persons have to endure lifelong torture, living without any information about their loved ones and their fate (Adams, 2019; García Castro, 2011). What is the impact of enforced disappearance on families of disappeared persons? In a context of uncertainty and the unknown, how do families cope with this singular absence? What would affect the grieving process? These are the research questions that we will explore in this article.

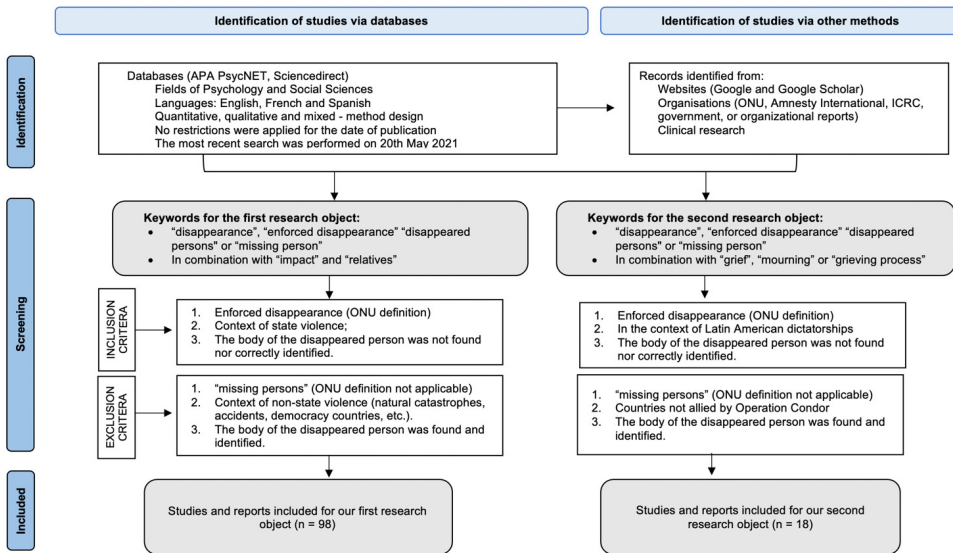
This article aims to show the specificities of enforced disappearance and its impact on families in the context of state violence. As a second aim, we will focus on the grieving process of families of disappeared persons in the case of Latin American dictatorships. We will discuss the complexity of defining the grieving process and the factors that seem to support the mourning process.

Methods

Narrative literature review

To answer our research questions and shed light on the phenomenon of enforced disappearance, we carried out a narrative review of the literature. We were interested in two topics: the impact of enforced disappearance on relatives and the grieving process among these relatives. Figure 1 outlines our methodology design.

1 This is the research field of the current project conducted by the authors at the Institute of Psychology of the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation: “From enforced disappearance of persons to the victims’ relatives’ complicated grief: observing the historicization process”. The project was approved by The UNIL Research Ethics Commission (CER-UNIL). It focuses on enforced disappearance during the dictatorships in Latin America and its impact on family members through generations. It is estimated that more than 90,000 persons were missing in Latin America between 1966 and 1986 (Amnesty International, 2011; Ayala, 2011).

Figure 1. The methodology design of the narrative review of literature

Findings

The loss of a family member in the context of enforced disappearance: a complex phenomenon

How can the impact of enforced disappearance on relatives be understood?

Apprehending the phenomenon of enforced disappearance and its impact on relatives is a complex task. Based on our literature review, we endeavoured to highlight the features implicated in the repercussion of this crime on family members. Despite the massive use of enforced disappearance in the context of political repression, the impact of this crime on victims is not always the same and many features may influence it (Crenzel, 2007; Lira, 2016).

Through a narrative literature review on the topic, we collected all the descriptions of the features involved in the impact of this crime on family members. To present our find-

ings, we followed the three main features characterising enforced disappearance according to the ED Convention's definition:

1. The context of state violence in which the enforced disappearance takes place
2. The absence of the disappeared person's body
3. The impunity of this crime, even years after the end of dictatorship.

Each main feature is linked to the others and involves elements from the others. Figure 2 shows the magnitude of the impact of enforced disappearance.

To understand the phenomenon of enforced disappearance better, the first feature that should be considered is the context of state violence: this crime takes place in a climate of political repression and confusion. Families face not only the disappearance of

their loved ones, but also threats against their lives and trauma (Haq, 2020). In this regard, authors emphasize individual and collective repercussions of this context: survivor's guilt (Biedermann, 1991; García de Villagrán, 2004), feelings of guilt for not protecting the relative (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Féres-Carneiro & Da Silva, 2010), and feelings of helplessness (Cerutti, 2015; Lira, 2016; Molina Theissen, 1998; Tully, 1995). These repercussions are also linked to the law of silence imposed by the dictatorship within the society and the sense of threat that many members of the family felt at the time (Escalante et al., 2014). Finally, this climate of terror made it difficult for families to search for information. The lack of information and the absence of a body results in the impunity of the culprits.

The second feature considered, the absence of a body, is the most studied in the literature. This is one of the main specificities of this crime, and it could partly explain the complexity of the grieving process (Escalante et al., 2014; Féres-Carneiro & Da Silva, 2010; Isuru et al., 2019; Kajtazi-Testa & Hewer, 2018). Without the body, a disappeared person could not be considered dead (Escalante et al., 2014). The victim's body is separated from his or her name and identity (Gatti, 2014), leaving the relatives to wonder where their loved one is? Disappearance creates a new place between presence and absence, life and death. Pelento (2009) claims other situations exist in which the body is absent, such as airplane crashes or earthquakes, but in these circumstances, the state provides at least some information to families that allows them to mourn the missing person. In the case of enforced disappearance, official institutions do not provide information about the time and the circumstances of the death (Kijak & Pelento, 1986). This impunity contributes to the negation of the very existence of the person who disappeared (Crenzel, 2007).

The body's absence and lack of information deprive relatives of funeral rites (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Escalante et al., 2014; Pelento, 2009). The reality test that usually triggers the grieving process – leading relatives to work on separation and disinvestment (Freud, 1915) – is troubled. Instead, doubt sets in, and relatives are inhabited by a phantom object (Braun & Pelento, 1989) that continues to haunt both individual and family memory. Not finding the body of the disappeared person can be defined as an *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1999), which is “a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution” (Boss, 2016, p. 270). Hence, the disappeared person continues to be psychically present even when physically absent. Families find themselves in front of an impossible choice: believing the disappeared one is still alive or considering him or her already dead (Kajtazi-Testa & Hewer, 2018).

To explain this situation, authors have discussed the *double link* (Díaz & Madariaga, 1993), a *living-death duality* (Blair, 2018), or an *ethical and moral dilemma* (Lira, 2016) in which relatives are caught. On the one hand, presuming the person is alive implies that the family is overwhelmed by fantasies of what could have happened to their relative (Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Lira, 2016) or is disturbed (Pelento, 2009). On the other hand, assuming that the loved one is dead, without any proof, could lead to feelings of guilt (Busch & Robaina, 2006; Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Kijak & Pelento, 1986). Accepting that the loved one is dead means somehow being responsible for the death of a close one, with the feeling of having “killed” him or her (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Taiana, 2014).

At first, families looked for their loved ones, led by the hope of finding them alive (Wayland et al., 2016). However, the searches were often unsuccessful and many questions remained

Table 1. Psychological impact on families at an individual level

Dimension	Psychological impact	Authors
Mental disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Depression • Post-traumatic stress disorder • Complicated or prolonged grief 	Baraković et al., 2013, 2014; Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Busch & Robaina, 2006; Kennedy, Deane, & Chan, 2019; Lenferink et al., 2019; Zvizdic & Butollo, 2001
Additional symptoms in qualitative studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somatisation • Symptoms of sleep disorders • Hypervigilance and increased arousal • Fear and trepidation • Mistrust • Guilt • Intrusive recollections • Phobic ideas • Concentration difficulties • Loss of interest 	Baraković et al., 2013; Busch & Robaina, 2006; García de Villagrán, 2004; Lira, 2016; Zia, 2016) Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Blair, 2018; Lira, 2016; Robins, 2010; Weinstein, Maggi, Gomez, & al., 1987 García de Villagrán, 2004; Robins, 2010 Adams, 2019; García de Villagrán, 2004; Hollander, 2016; Lira, 2016; Pérez-Sales, Durán-Pérez, & Herzfeld, 2000; Weinstein et al., 1987
Symptoms in quantitative studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression • Post-traumatic stress disorder 	Zvizdic & Butollo, 2001 Baraković et al., 2013, 2014; Isuru et al., 2019; Quirk & Casco, 1994

unanswered: Families clashed against a wall of silence, lies, and denial by the authorities (Thornton, 2000). Authors reported the social stigma of being “related to - or child of a missing person” (Busch & Robaina, 2006; Powell et al., 2010). The repercussions are the breaking up of social relationships, isolation, and feelings of shame (Basto & Melo, 2018; Blair, 2018; Molina Theissen, 1998). As time passed by, and without any sign of the disappeared persons, the thought of death began to take place, and families had to face a differ-

ent scenario.² However, giving up the search could be experienced as murdering the loved one. It seems important to highlight the role played by families: by continuing the search, relatives allow the disappeared to continue to

2 Based on research and her clinical practice as a psychologist, Castillo (2013) observed that the minority of families in Latin America had been able to find the bodies of their loved ones and to give them a proper burial. Most of the families had not found the body: Some still looked for disappeared persons, others gave up the search for various reasons (practical or emotional).

exist in the social environment (García Castro, 2001). According to this author, enforced disappearance presupposes the intervention of a *third witness* to attest to the crime.

The third feature is the impunity of the crime. The lack of social recognition of this crime exacerbates the idea that the decision to consider the disappeared person alive or dead depends on family members (Blaauw & Lähtenmäki, 2002; Pelento, 2009): the authorities' denial of all responsibility places the disappearance as a *private event* (Lira, 2016) and relatives as responsible for the search of their loved ones. Moreover, this impunity could lead families to take responsibility for what happened to their loved ones (Escalante et al., 2014). Confronted with the authorities' impunity (as well as with unsuccessful research), families could feel indignation, anger, and frustration stemming from a sense of helplessness (Adams, 2019; Blaauw & Lähtenmäki, 2002; Crenzel, 2007). Impunity could also be a retraumatisation and source of fear, mistrust, demobilisation, and social exclusion (Bekerman et al., 2009; Busch & Robaina, 2006; Cerutti, 2015; Edelman & Kordon, 2006; Munczek & Tuber, 1998).

At what level does enforced disappearance have an impact on relatives?

The phenomenon of enforced disappearance is not a singular event. It has an important impact at individual, familial, and social levels.

At an individual level, authors have identified that relatives of disappeared persons are likely to suffer from four mental disorders as well as several additional symptoms (Table 1). In quantitative studies on families of disappeared persons, the impact of this crime is often evaluated in terms of depression (Zvizdic & Butollo, 2001) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Baraković et al., 2013, 2014; Isuru et al., 2019; Quirk &

Casco, 1994). However, according to Adams (2019), there is no consensus among researchers about the symptomatology of relatives of persons who have disappeared due to war or state terrorism.³

At a family level, enforced disappearance causes a breakdown of the family system and a fracture with their pre-disappearance lives (Adams, 2019; Basto & Melo, 2018; Biedermann, 1991; Blaauw & Lähtenmäki, 2002; Cerutti, 2015; Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Faúndez et al., 2018; Kajtazi-Testa & Hewer, 2018; Kordon & Edelman, 2005; Lira, 2016; Munczek & Tuber, 1998; Tully, 1995).

Many factors could play a role in the disruption of the family system:

- Confusion and contradiction of the double link (believing the disappeared to be alive or assuming their death) that immobilises the response and blocks the reorganisation of the system (Díaz & Madariaga, 1993)
- Perturbation of the everyday routines of families of disappeared persons by the constant searching (Isuru et al., 2019)
- The change of roles among members of the family (Alvis Rizzo et al., 2015; Biedermann, 1991; Cerutti, 2015; Kordon & Edelman, 2005; Robins, 2010)
- The need to reorganise tasks and responsibilities within the family (Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Faúndez et al., 2018; Lira, 2016)

3 Some authors found the high rate of PTSD among relatives of disappeared persons was similar to the rate for people who have experienced the death of a family member (Heeke et al., 2015). For others, we cannot speak about PTSD for relatives of a disappeared person (Robins, 2010) because PTSD is linked to a specific trauma event, whereas in the context of enforced disappearance, the anxiety expressed by families is about the disappeared person rather than the event of their disappearance.

- Economic, legal, and social problems (Adams, 2019; Hollander, 2016; Zvizdic & Butollo, 2001).

Because of the ambiguous situation for relatives, as well as the sorrow and the fear they experience, communication could be troubled within and outside the family system. No single type of communication was observed, although silence seems to prevail (Brinkmann et al., 2009; Haq, 2020; Hofmeister & Navarro, 2017; Kordon & Edelman, 2007; Kordon et al., 2011).

Enforced disappearance also has a major impact on a social level (Basto & Melo, 2018; Díaz Facio, 2008; Hamid et al., 2021; Pelento, 2009). It always “affects the population as a whole; everyone is threatened and tyrannized by the terror those in power exert” (Preitler, 2015, p. 79). Because of the mystery and the ambiguity, families of disappeared persons can be seen as dangerous, leading to a breakup of social relationships (Pelento, 2009). Families feel isolated and social bonds are disrupted (Blair, 2018). All this leads to deterioration and fraying of the social fabric (García de Vilagrán, 2004). Hence, families have an ambiguous status in society (Hamid et al., 2021).

What factors could influence the impact of enforced disappearance on relatives?

Figure 2 is a synthesis of major features implicated in enforced disappearance and the impact on the relatives. However, it is important to remember that the repercussions of enforced disappearance of a loved one are always unique for each person affected (Sánchez et al., 2020), and they depend on several factors.

Following our literature review, eight factors are highlighted:

1. The age of the relative when the disappearance took place (Baraković et al., 2014; Edelman & Kordon, 2006)
2. Inner-psychological factors such as personality and past experiences (Preitler, 2015)
3. The number of traumatic events experienced, especially in the context of state violence (Adams, 2019; Baraković et al., 2014; Bekerman et al., 2009; Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002; Blair, 2018; Busch & Robaina, 2006; Cerutti, 2015; Edelman & Kordon, 2006; Lenferink et al., 2017; Preitler, 2015)
4. The relationship bond with the deceased and identification (Adams, 2019; Baraković et al., 2013; Busch & Robaina, 2006; Edelman & Kordon, 2006; Haq, 2020; Powell et al., 2010; Preitler, 2015)
5. The role disappeared person played in the lives of the victim’s relatives: affective, economic, spiritual, or political (Blair, 2018)
6. Whether the body is returned. Without the restitution of the body, some authors observed an accentuation of depression and symptoms of prolonged grief disorder (Isuru et al., 2019)
7. The belief and hope that the disappeared person is still alive. Higher psychological comorbidity is observed in people believing they will find their loved ones still alive (Heeke et al., 2015; Isuru et al., 2019)
- h. The culture and the social context (Preitler, 2015; Zia, 2016)

The grieving process among relatives of disappeared persons in the context of Latin American dictatorships

In this section, we focus on the grieving process of families of disappeared persons in the context of Latin American dictatorships, which is a paradigmatic case of enforced disappearance, according to the ED Convention’s definition. It allows us to explore the spe-

cificities of the social, political, and historical context in which enforced disappearance took place. Many authors agree that enforced disappearance undermines the grieving process.

How is grief defined in the literature in the context of enforced disappearance?

Exploring the grieving process, we faced a difficulty: all the quantitative studies identified as assessing grief among relatives of disappeared persons used diagnoses (Heeke et al., 2015; Isuru et al., 2019; Pérez-Sales et al., 2000; Powell et al., 2010), such as prolonged grief disorder (Prigerson et al., 2009) and persistent complex bereavement disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). More than one diagnosis was used to assess this type of grief. Some authors also used the

term of *complicated grief* to define the grieving process of this population. However, according to Jordan and Litz (2014) and Lenferink et al. (2019), complicated grief is often defined, conceptualised, and measured in different ways. The term *complicated grief* has been progressively substituted with *prolonged grief disorder*. In studies, prolonged grief disorder is used as a definition as well as a diagnosis to evaluate this type of grief. A third diagnostic concept was introduced in the *DSM-5: persistent complex bereavement disorder*. According to Maciejewski et al. (2016), there appears to be a compromise between *prolonged* and *complicated* grief.

All of these diagnoses were based on a confirmed death to evaluate grief among families, whereas enforced disappearance is precisely

Table 2. Terms used in the qualitative literature to qualify grief among families of disappeared persons

Dimension	Term used	Authors
Temporal dimension	Special grief	Braun & Pelento, 1989; Kijak & Pelento, 1986; Pelento, 2009
	Frozen/delayed grief [<i>duelo congelado</i>] ¹	Díaz & Madariaga, 1993
	Prolonged grief [<i>duelo prolongado</i>]	Kordon & Edelman, 2002
	Endless grief [<i>duelo interminable</i>]	Portillo, Guilis & Noailles, 2007
	Suspended grief [<i>duelo suspendido</i>]	Bekerman et al., 2009
Outcome possibility	Possible grief [<i>duelo posible</i>]	Díaz Facio, 2008
	Impossible grief [<i>duelo imposible</i>]	Féres-Carneiro & Da Silva, 2010
Psychological Impact	Traumatic grief [<i>duelo traumático</i>]	Castillo, 2013
	Enigmatic grief	Taiana, 2014
	Denied grief [<i>duelo negado</i>]	Lira, 2016

1 The terms in italics are the translations from Spanish proposed by the authors of this paper. The original terms are written in square brackets.

Table 3. Terms and criteria used in the literature to define grief among relatives of disappeared persons

Criteria's Dimension	Criteria	Terminology of the grieving process																			
		Special grief	Prolonged grief	Possible grief	Impossible grief	Traumatic grief	Enigmatic grief	Frozen grief	Endless grief	Suspended grief	Denied grief										
Factual elements	Absence of body																				
	Lack of information																				
	Consideration of the social context																				
	Lack of recognition and impunity																				
	Deprivation of funeral rites																				
Specificities of the loss	Consideration of the traumatic circumstances																				
	Ambiguity of the loss																				
	Absence of reality test																				
	Social isolation																				
Psychological Impact	Extension in time/ reactivation																				
	Feelings of guilt																				
	Feelings of helplessness																				
	Feelings of hate																				
	Idealization of the disappeared person																				
Psychopathological symptoms																					

characterised by the uncertainty of the death. The confusion about the terminology and the conceptualisation of this form of grief makes us wonder whether authors are exploring the same phenomenon.

Additionally, some authors are concerned about the risk of over-pathologising this form of grief: in their view, the circumstances in which enforced disappearance takes place are pathological and not the reactions of families to the loss of their loved one (Hollander, 2016); therefore, classifying this population based on diagnoses could be problematic (Hollander, 2016; Pérez-Sales et al., 2000). For these reasons, we decided not to consider studies working with diagnoses based on a confirmed death to take into account the context in which enforced disappearance takes place.

Therefore, we focused on the qualitative literature because we estimated that it is more consistent with the specificities of ambiguous loss that characterises enforced disappearance. The grieving process is mostly described by psychologists and psychiatrists, who directly work with relatives of disappeared persons. Among qualitative studies exploring grief among families of disappeared persons in the context of state violence, the wide range of qualifying adjectives used to refer to this form of grief is impressive. As you can see in Table 2, we decided to classify them according to the dimension to which they refer: an indication of time, an outcome possibility of the grieving process, and finally, the mention of a psychological impact.

Behind this extensive terminology, are the authors aligned on the topics? Do they conceptualise grief among the relatives of disappeared persons in the same way?

To answer these questions, we looked for the criteria authors used in defining this form of grief. Table 3 illustrates the criteria used by the authors we took into consideration. It

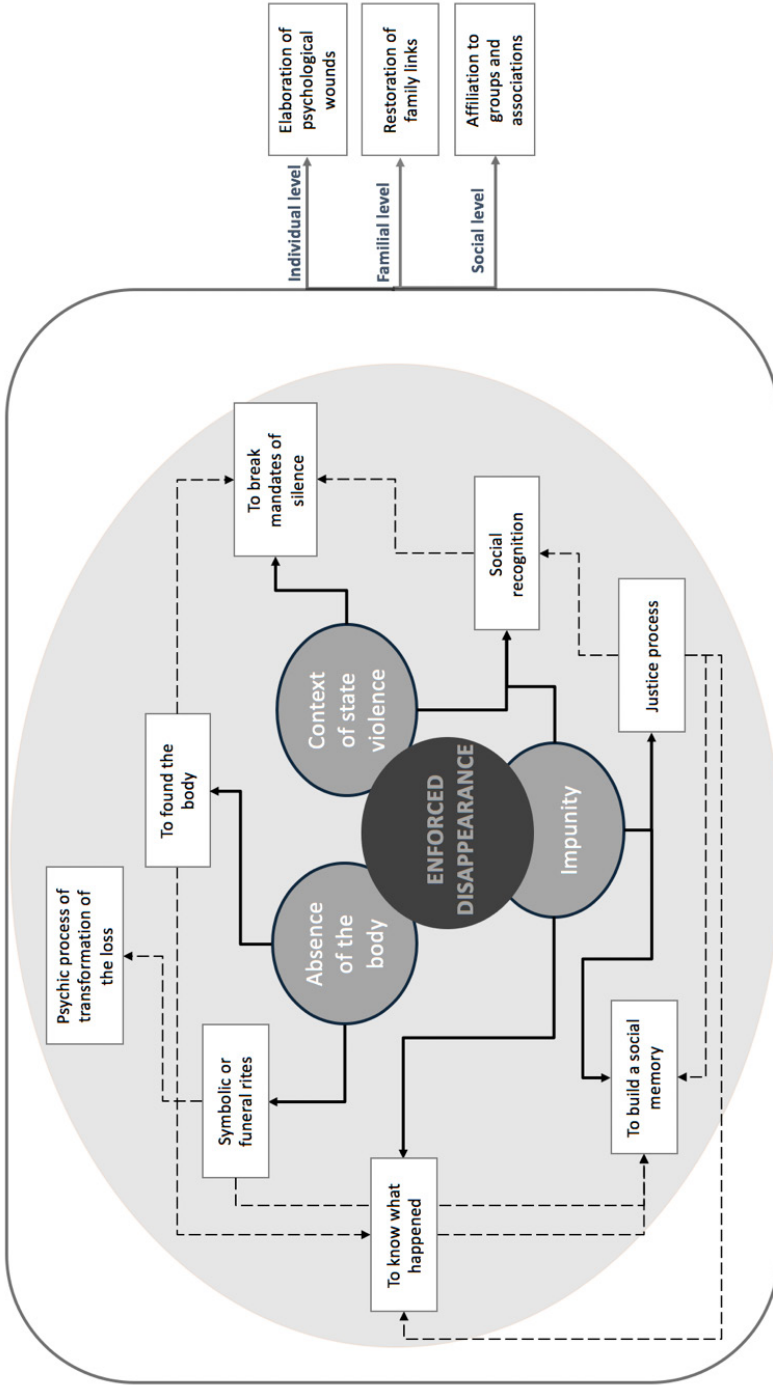
aims to compare similarities and differences between them.

We observed that all of these criteria are related to three dimensions:

1. Factual elements: absence of body, lack of information, consideration of social context and traumatic circumstances surrounding the loss, lack of recognition and impunity, deprivation of funeral rites
2. Specificities of the loss: ambiguity of the loss, absence of reality test
3. Psycho-social impact: extension in time/reactivation of hope and pain, social isolation, idealization of disappeared persons and feelings of guilt, helplessness and hate, psychopathological symptoms (e.g., anxiety and depressive symptoms).

The criteria used in the literature to define the grieving process of families demonstrate that many factors could play a role in the process of coping with this particular loss. As a result, even if the terminology employed by the authors varies, they seem to consider the same characteristics when defining grief. The features characterising enforced disappearance in the historical and political context that we are interested in (Figure 2) are similar to those that could complexify the grieving process. Nevertheless, a new dimension is highlighted to describe the impact on relatives: prolongation in time and risk of reactivation. Without the confirmation of death, any new information could likely reactivate hope and pain (Bekerman et al., 2009; Braun & Pelento, 1989; Castillo, 2013; Díaz & Madariaga, 1993; Díaz Facio, 2008; Féres-Carneiro & Da Silva, 2010; Kordon & Edelman, 2002; Lira, 2016; Pelento, 2009; Portillo, Guilis, & Noailles, 2007; Taiana, 2014). This temporal aspect will be discussed further in this article.

Figure 3. Conditions supporting the grieving process among relatives of disappeared persons



Which conditions could support the grieving process among families of disappeared persons? After having presented a list of aspects of enforced disappearance affecting the grieving process, we will now focus on the findings of our literature review concerning conditions that could support this process among relatives. Figure 3 illustrates these conditions according to the three main features of enforced disappearance.

Many authors point out that knowing the truth of what happened to the disappeared person (Braun & Pelento, 1989) and finding the body could help families to find closure (Castillo, 2013; Cerutti, 2015; Rojas-Perez, 2013). Funeral and symbolic rites are identified as factors that support the grieving process (Braun & Pelento, 1989; Castillo, 2013; Díaz Facio, 2008). Sites of exhumation can become places of commemoration (Rojas-Perez, 2013) and play a role in the reparation process; however, practices of exhumation must follow a standard of quality to respect families and their dignity (Navarro-García et al., 2010).

Being part of associations of victims could restore the social recognition of the crime and the victims and therefore support the grieving process (Braun & Pelento, 1989; Castillo, 2013; Díaz Facio, 2008; Portillo et al., 2007). Additionally, breaking the wall of silence imposed by the state could help families, as was the case in Argentina for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Thornton, 2000).

Some authors affirm that the construction of a social memory, recognising victims and culprits, could enable families to better cope with the loss (Castillo, 2013; Portillo et al., 2007). In that regard, the process of justice and the fight against impunity could be a key factor in the way families cope with the loss (Castillo, 2013; Díaz Facio, 2008; Lira, 2016; Portillo et al., 2007; Rojas-Perez, 2013). At a

family level, some authors consider that restoring family links (Alvis Rizzo et al., 2015) and breaking the mandates of silence within the family (Kordon et al., 2011) will support the grieving process. At an individual level, the psychic process of transformation of the missing object (Díaz Facio, 2008), as well as the elaboration of psychic wounds (Portillo et al., 2007), would allow families to process the loss. Finally, according to these authors, finding a meaning associated with their loss could help people to grieve and to cope, despite the ambiguity of the situation.

Discussion

Exploring the impact of enforced disappearance on relatives allows us to define the main features implicated in this complex phenomenon and their interconnection: the context of state violence, absence of body, and impunity. In these circumstances, how can relatives grieve their disappeared person? To answer this question, a narrative literature review has been conducted.

In this article, we decided not to consider quantitative studies that use diagnoses to assess the grieving process among relatives of disappeared persons because diagnoses are based on a confirmed death, which is not the case in the context of enforced disappearance. This finding led us to explore the ways authors in qualitative and clinical research define this type of grief. In our view, the qualitative literature has the merit of emphasizing the uncertainty of death, which represents an important particularity of enforced disappearance, but also the circumstances in which this crime takes place. As shown in Table 3, more than one dimension should be considered to understand this form of grief.

To our knowledge, we are the first to collect all the terms used to qualify this form of grief through literature focused on the context of

Latin American dictatorships. That multiple terminologies are used testifies to the challenge of apprehending the specificity of this type of mourning. However, deeper analysis shows that authors use similar characteristics in defining grief (Table 3). Moreover, authors who speak of the grieving process among families of disappeared persons refer to the main features of enforced disappearance (Figure 2). An additional dimension is highlighted to describe the grieving process: prolongation in time and risk of reactivation. This aspect is not mentioned in publications concerning the global impact of enforced disappearance on relatives. In our view, adding the temporal dimension allows us to understand the grieving process in the context of state violence.⁴ In this case, enforced disappearance often results in impunity even after the recovery of democracy. Ambiguity is a strong feature: time does not cancel it and impunity seems to exacerbate it. Relatives of a disappeared person are confronted with this second denial and still have to manage the hope that their loved one will come back one day. As Petrou (2016) claims, disappearance is an *absence* more than a loss because of the permanence of hope and ambiguity. Without proof and real recognition (legal, social, and political), families are condemned to live with uncertainty. The trans-generational impact needs to be considered.

4 When we speak about “context of state violence”, it is linked to the ED Convention’s definition of enforced disappearance (2006): These crimes are committed by agents of “the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State” (Article 2). This definition raises the question of situations in civil war where both parties use enforced disappearance as a weapon. The plural political situations point out the limitation of this definition and the complexity of this phenomenon. This issue needs further research.

Believing that the disappeared person is dead could imply for relatives that they accept the reality claimed by the state and therefore release the state of its duty to recognize its actions. Moreover, families could perceive resolving the grief and finding closure as betraying the disappeared, as abandoning their loved one (Braun & Pelento, 1989; Robins, 2010). As Rousseaux (2001) asserts, if the crime stays unpunished in legal terms, grieving could be perceived by relatives as forgetting the loved one. Enforced disappearance shakes the foundations of our representations of life and death, the body, and existence (Gatti & Peris Blanes, 2021). We agree with Haq (2020) that the political dimension of the grieving has to be considered: “The mourners reclaim their attachment with the missing as a form of political protest” (p. 110). Mourning always has an individual and a collective dimension. This process is not only intimate, but it also involves a collective memory process, whose stakes are political (Dutermé, 2021).

In the case of enforced disappearance, the families face a plurality of loss. According to Kajtazi-Testa and Hewer (2018), they have to grieve twice: not only for the physical loss of the person but also for the loss of the body over which to grieve (Edkins, 2011). Additionally, the disappeared person could represent many important aspects of life, such as an ideal of freedom, love, and trust; therefore, grieving involves not only losing a loved one, but also all the values that this person represented (Escalante et al., 2014). In *Mourning and Melancholy*, Freud (1915) points out that grief corresponds not only to the loss of a person, but also to the loss of one’s country, of liberty, or of an ideal. In this situation, we consider that these families have not only to grieve for the person and the body, but also for their ideals and for their institutions. Guardians of fundamental prohibitions, institutions

have failed in protecting citizens from death and torture as well as in ensuring the right to access justice.

It appears essential to think about the socio-political and socio-historical dimension in which this type of collective trauma is inscribed, as suggested by other authors (Betelheim, 1943; Faúndez & Cornejo, 2010). In our reflection, two concepts are interesting: Martín-Baró (1989) concept of psycho-social trauma [*trauma psicosocial*] and Puget et al. (1989) concept of psychic and social catastrophe. These two concepts allow us to highlight the social origin of the trauma and to consider its repercussions not only on the psyche of the direct victim (i.e., the relatives), but also on social links, groups, and society, as well as across generations. Hence, the concepts of loss and grief in the context of this crime could merit deeper investigation, even decades after the events.

Limitations

By having chosen to summarise the work of many authors, we have lost part of the specificities of each author's approach and the details of the psychological processes at stake in this phenomenon. The narrative literature review is mainly descriptive and could be incomplete; for this reason, it would be interesting to make a systematic review to explore which inclusion or exclusion criteria is the most relevant in this topic. The pertinence of regarding studies from various fields (e.g., clinical psychology, human rights, social psychology, and sociology) can be questioned. Nevertheless, considering that our research subject is still little studied, this method allows us to have an overview of this topic and to explore the similarities and differences between these fields. Another limitation is that we considered studies with different methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, mixed, and clinical,

as well as reports from associations and governments. It was a choice to seek a global view on this issue. We gain in terms of relevance and depth of the review, which can be useful for future research.

To explore the grieving process among relatives of disappeared persons in the context of state violence, we focused on clinical and qualitative studies because of the small number of studies based on a standardized questionnaire and involving large cohorts of relatives. Such studies failed in shedding light on the question of the global and specific impact on relatives of a disappeared person. Diagnosis is a major issue because it leads to the recognition (social, administrative) of the victim status of the relatives of a disappeared person. Nevertheless, we question the use of diagnoses without considering all the internal and external characteristics of the sufferer. In this sense, we wonder whether it would be necessary to create a new diagnosis incorporating the specificity of unconfirmed death. It would be interesting to develop new clinical tools of analyses and a questionnaire to understand this complex process better and to support families properly in coping with this type of loss. Enforced disappearance is not only an unconfirmed death (e.g., an accident or airplane crash) but also a crime committed by other people in a context of state violence: The diagnostic tools should consider the ambiguity of the loss due to the unconfirmed death and the traumatic circumstances in which enforced disappearance takes place.

This review shows us the confusion in the literature between the terms of *disappearance* and *enforced disappearance*. Further analyses would be necessary to improve the understanding of the differences between socio-political contexts in which disappearance happens. Moreover, the incidence of the context in which the studies are produced

needs to be further considered. How does the evolution of legislation and conventions influence the way relatives of a disappeared person cope with the loss? In that regard, we agree with Robins (2016) and Rojas-Perez (2013) concerning the importance of allowing families of disappeared persons the chance to describe their experience in their own words, to find meaning, and to become the authors of their story in the proper way.⁵ To establish the terminology used to define the grief of relatives in a context of state violence, we considered only studies referring to the Latin American dictatorships; it would be interesting to broaden the study to other countries that have experienced state violence. Moreover, studies comparing the impact of enforced disappearance on families in the context of state and non-state violence would be relevant to improving the understanding of the features implied in this phenomenon. Finally, longitudinal studies evaluating the impact of enforced disappearance on families many years after the event could give us a better understanding of the grieving process: to what extent could time have a role in the way families cope with this peculiar loss?

Conclusion

We have tried to highlight the complexity of such a political crime, which has an impact at an individual, familial, and social level. We point out some of the features that might play a role in the grieving process of families of enforced disappearance victims in the context of Latin American dictatorships. The literature clearly shows the political, social, and legal issues of enforced disappearance

with which relatives of a disappeared person are endlessly confronted. In this context, the relationship to temporality is unique: in fact, relatives are condemned to an eternally provisional status due to the uncertainty, which is exacerbated by impunity. This suspends the grieving process, which confers an equally singular status on relatives. Indeed, the progress toward a modern society has historically meant establishing a border between the world of the dead and that of the living. However, in the case of enforced disappearance, all these benchmarks collapse, which undermines social cohesion. It dehumanises both the disappeared and their loved ones, making this crime a permanent torture.

Even when influenced by the social environment, the grieving process is an intimate process, and a generalisation could never completely explain what people really feel about their loss and how they cope. Our reflections are a humble attempt to understand this complex phenomenon.

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5 It is an objective of our research, which is based on narrative interviews of families of disappeared persons from Latin American countries who are now living in Switzerland.

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