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Transmission of Trauma

The Argentine Case

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THE SITUATION IN THE DICTATORSHIP PERIOD IN ARGENTINA, 1976–1983

Between 1976 and 1983, a military dictatorship overthrew the Argentine government and installed itself by means of state terrorism. During this period, the worst form of political repression in Argentina's entire history was carried out. It was characterized by the illegal detention of many people in clandestine prisons and the "disappearance" of about 30,000 people, the majority of whom were killed after having endured terrible tortures; the illegal detention in known prisons of more than 10,000 people over a long period of time (more than 2 years), who also underwent torture and inhuman conditions of detention; murders, many of which were carried out to set an "example" (for instance, a few bodies were dynamited together); the kidnapping of children and the changing of their identity (more than 400 are still missing); and hundreds of thousands of people who went to other countries as refugees.¹

After the military coup, the Executive Power was destituted and Parliament was dissolved. A large number of judges were removed from their positions, and those that remained took oaths in the name of what was then called the Statute of National Reorganization Process, whose postulates were placed higher than those of the National Constitution. This statute was, in turn, violated by the dictatorship itself. The Judicial Power was subordinated to the decisions of the new Executive Power.

All the crimes committed during the period of dictatorship were protected by the impunity that the military power granted itself. There were no trials. In 1983, shortly before the first summons to free elections, the dictatorship sanctioned a self-amnesty law.

¹The conditions of terror that were present and the events are detailed in the report on the situation of Human Rights in Argentina—CIDH (OAS) Chapter 3, 1979—and in the book *Nunca Más (Never Again)* that was edited by the National Commission of Missing People (CONADEP), Ed. EUDEBA.

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During the later constitutional period, pushed by a massive popular movement that clamored for justice, trials against the first three military juntas and some officers who had acted in the repression were started. Not long after the sentences of the highest-ranking officials were pronounced, the laws of Final Point and Due Obedience were passed, which excused all those who had been found responsible, with the exception of the highest-ranking officers.

The Law of Final Point, which is particularly abhorrent at the fundamental level, proposes the following:

1. The torturers of low military rank would not be held responsible for their actions.
2. The torturers could not decline against any order that was given to them, due to the state of war under which they supposedly were acting.
3. A serious alteration in the system of ethical values, since it excused kidnapping, torture, and murder, but not the robbing of tangible private property. This law placed private property above life itself.

Under the second constitutional government, the Executive Power sanctioned two pardons that granted freedom to the members of the juntas of the military government that had been put on trial and condemned. These “pardons,” although constitutional, gave the president the unique power to pardon, exclusive and independent of all social consensus. Before the pardons to those most responsible for the genocide in Argentina were actually granted, a large number of protest marches took place. The decree of this pardon installed a system of exceptions and privileges that questioned legal and ethical norms and values.

The massiveness of the phenomenon of the “missing detainees” made it paradigmatic of the type of political repression that was used by the military juntas. Taking its characteristics into account, we can consider it as a particular form of torture in itself, a torture that the missing detainees suffered but that was also suffered by the relatives and friends of the victims.

The psychosocial status of the missing detainees was similar to that of someone who was living in a “no-man’s land,” or who was “beyond life and death.” He or she had no legal help and was at the mercy of his or her captors. On a family level, this presence-absence brought about a high degree of psychic suffering and a profound alteration in the everyday events of the affected groups, both in intrafamily and extrafamily relationships.

To assure complete social control, the dictatorship created not only terror but also an intense propaganda campaign, the characteristics of which would have to be analyzed in detail to be able to understand the complex psychological phenomena that not only were produced in the relatives of the missing detainees but also in the whole social body.

A silence regarding the repressive events that occurred was induced. Even though there were events and information that proved the existence of missing detainees, any public mention of them was forbidden. The effect on a person is particularly sinister if he or she has been a witness to the kidnapping of a son or daughter, a friend or a neighbor, and is continually told by outsiders that it is not true, or the outsiders do not want to accept the truth, or simply deny the perception.

The situation is frankly psychotic (Galli, 1984; Macci, 1985), especially if added to this there is a total absence of information about what happened, and about the fate of the person in question, that lasts for many years on the part of those who must answer these questions. On the other hand, the society could not believe that a person could be kidnapped and turn out to be a missing detainee. Though political repression used to be common, Argentinians had never lived through events of such horrendous characteristics and magnitude.

Many parents whose sons and daughters had been missing detainees never thought that being detained, no matter how violent, would result in the disappearance and/or murder of their loved ones.

After a long period of unsuccessful efforts to determine the whereabouts of their children, the relatives, under threat by the authorities that nothing would be made known about what was happening, under the pretext that this could increase the risks for the persons they were looking for, began to suspect that something sinister was happening. They still did not contemplate the possibility that their children would never return home, but they began to understand that, beyond what they had ever imagined possible, a system of political repression had been established in which the victims were “swallowed up by the earth.” Not believing in the possibility of these events was also based on the efficiency of the historical silence concerning the indigenous genocide that had been carried out over a century earlier by the Argentine oligarchy using quite similar methods.

During the first three years of the dictatorship, there did not even exist a term for the status of the kidnapped people. Although the violence of the kidnapping was not expressed, and because the word *kidnapped* had a terrifying connotation, in time, a new word, *disappeared* (or *missing detainee*), was coined as a social representation that defined the fate of the people who had been the victims of these actions.

In some cases, some missing detainees were released. Under threats to their lives, these people also accepted or went along with the mandate of silence regarding the events that they had lived, witnessed, or heard from their repressors. In many cases, they were forced to collaborate with the forces of repression upon release from the concentration camps.

Little by little, reconstructed from the few testimonies that could be obtained, the truth of the terrible physical and psychological suffering of those missing detainees became known: the existence of clandestine prisons; brutal and sophisticated torture methods systematically applied to all prisoners; the so-called “transfers,” which usually meant assassination and disappearance of the bodies of the victims; the number of people that were drugged and thrown into the Rio de La Plata or into the sea in an attempt to cover up all traces of them; and, finally, the atrocities that were implemented by the fascist repression of the dictatorship.²

Different human rights organizations began the difficult task of collecting information and making the corresponding denunciations. At the same time, from the start of the repression, the relatives of those who disappeared attempted to search systematically for their loved ones. In particular, the mothers began to gather and meet, and occupied the public squares in an attempt to break the walls of silence imposed by the dictatorship. Thus, the movement of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo was formed.

Children were also a target of repression. Hundreds disappeared while they were preadolescent or adolescent. One of the most dramatic and significant episodes was the “Night of the Pencils,” in which a group of secondary students from the city of La Plata, who had been calling for the continuation of a student bus fare, were kidnapped, tortured, and finally disappeared. Many adolescents and students involved in student centers also disappeared, especially those from secondary schools connected with the University of Buenos Aires.

On the other hand, the dictatorship implemented the practice of delivering, under false identities, very small children or babies born in captivity to families who registered them as their own children. These families were often couples who could not have children, who were associated with groups carrying out the repression. A notorious case is that of a sheriff of the Federal Police, Miara, married to a woman who was also a member of the Police Force, who appropriated the Reggiardo-Tolosa twins.

The pregnant women who gave birth in captivity to children underwent horrendous treatment. The majority of the women were violently separated from their children before being

²In 1995, an ex-officer of the Navy, Adolfo Scilingo, publicly acknowledged that, in a systematic way, prisoners were thrown out alive from airplanes into the river or the sea.

assassinated. Eloquent testimony of one of these cases was given by Ms. Adriana Calvo de Laborde, who, after giving birth to her son in captivity, was released.

Inés Ortega de Fossati, a girl of 17, was one month more advanced in her pregnancy than me and more or less a month before her due date; at the end of February, she started to have contractions. It was her first childbirth so we called the guards to help. After a long time of calling for someone, Berges appeared with his usual brutal gang, with cars entering at high speed, doors opening, and the slamming of car doors (you had to be there to be able to imagine all this). This made us get further into our cells and crouch in a corner because we knew that those noises were the signs of what was to come. Just as we had imagined, "the gang" entered our cell; it was something that was felt rather than seen. But this time, besides the "gang," Berges also came. He asked who had been complaining and a guard pointed to Inés Ortega. They dragged her by her arm and took her away. And, unfortunately for me, when they were leaving, a guard saw me and remembered that I was there and said, "This one is also pregnant." I felt them grab me by an arm and then start to drag me. Inés was ahead and I went behind. They made us go up a very steep cement staircase because I banged my feet trying to go up. With our eyes blindfolded and our hands tied behind us, they pushed us on our backs and we hit ourselves against those cement stairs. We went up a flight of stairs, and when I reached the top, I felt them start to push my chest. They pushed us backward and we both fell to the floor, and then I realized with horror that they were taking off my panties and examining me manually. This examination did not last more than 30 seconds. It was horrible. There was Berges; he was a medical doctor, a gynecologist, an obstetrician. He rapidly announced that we were both in very good condition, and in the same fashion that they had taken us up to that room, they dragged us down the stairs and threw us into the cell again.

A short time later, Inés went into labor. She was more than 12 hours in labor, alone with us in the cell, which in reality was the best situation she could have been in. I remember that not many of us there had already had children. There were women that were much younger and, with Patricia Huchansky, we took turns helping Inés. We tried to teach her how to breathe, how to push the air into her abdomen. And we tried to calm her. All of the others were at the gate shouting "guards, guards" for 12 hours nonstop. Then Berges arrived again and we all felt terrified by the shouts of the "gang." The shouts were also directed to the guards, who were also terrified. At last they were coming to take Inés. They took her to the kitchen, which was very close to our cell, so we all knew what was going on, partly from what we heard, partly from what we imagined, and partly from what she told us afterward. They put her on top of the kitchen table and tied her legs and hands; in this situation, she gave birth to her son, surrounded by the guards. We heard the laughter, the insults: It was horrible, the screams of the doctor, until we finally heard the baby crying. Leonardo had been born. This was March 12, 1977. We all breathed a bit. He had been born, he was crying, he was alive. It was our first experience. Imagine what it meant to me, because I knew what was going to happen to me. They then took her to a small cell that was next to ours but which was not connected to ours, but we could hear what was going on. Inés stayed there 24 hours with her baby. We heard her talking to the guards. The guards told her that the Colonel wanted to see the baby, that it was a beautiful baby. She told them that she had named him Leonardo after his grandfather. Twenty-four hours later, they came and took the baby away. They took Inés out of her cell and threw her into the common cell in which we were all together. We never heard anything more about the baby or of her either. . . .

Inés Ortega and her baby are still missing. Elena de la Cuadra gave birth to her daughter in the Fifth Precinct Police Station; both mother and daughter are still missing. When I arrived at the pit at Banfield, they told me that a few days earlier Eloisa Castellini had given birth to her daughter there and that she had been the most affected by the presence of Teresa because she had just had a daughter. In her case, they didn't even take her to another room. After a lot of shouting, Patricia was allowed to go out into the corridor with Eloisa, who gave birth to her daughter with Patricia's help. They were given a kitchen knife with which the umbilical cord was cut and immediately afterward, the baby was taken away. Nothing more was heard of either Eloisa or her baby. The fourth case is the one of Silvia Isabella Valenzi, whom I also met at the Banfield Pit. She "disappeared"

at the Quilmes Pits and she was also pregnant. Silvia was a really beautiful girl, with blonde hair and green eyes. She was so beautiful that they called her "the cat." She realized that they were waiting for her baby. Her baby had been reserved. They took care of her, they gave her special food, and they even took her to the Quilmes Hospital to have her baby. Berges himself took her there. Silvia managed to ask the nurse and midwife to tell her family; the midwife did indeed tell the family and then disappeared. Immediately after having the baby, they took Silvia to the Banfield Pit and she disappeared. The baby had been left in the Quilmes Hospital.

Among other repressors, General Camps, the Chief of Police of the Province of Buenos Aires during the dictatorship, explicitly stated that children who were educated by the same families that had brought up their parents would also be opposers or "subversives."

And even though the kidnapping of children was expressly excluded from the laws that guaranteed impunity, it has been extremely difficult to obtain the return of those children, who were located by the untiring work of human rights organizations, to their legitimate families. It is calculated that there are approximately 400 children in this situation. To date, only 54 have been found; 7 were killed, 13 continue with their adopted families, and the rest, 34, have been returned to their families of origin.

INCIDENCE OF IMPUNITY

Until today, impunity has been maintained. We consider impunity to be a new traumatic factor (Edelman & Kordon, 1955a; see also Danieli, 1992; Danieli, Rodley, & Weisaeth, 1996). Not only has nothing been done to achieve the symbolic reparation offered by justice, but in an inexorable manner, impunity has been accompanied by a periodic reappearance in the mass media of the same psychological campaigns of the dictatorship, repeating the same arguments of those times, or presenting denouncements of the period of terror as "fantasies" of those who resisted the military dictatorship.

These campaigns have been particularly notorious in the case of the return of kidnapped children and to justify, though different arguments, not giving back these children to their biological families. The most common argument used to defend this way of thinking is stating that these children will lose the love of those who appropriated them.

They tried to cover up the crimes committed against these children's parents. They proposed a concept of family love in which assassination did not produce any mark in the constitution of the identity or in the new family ties that the children established (Edelman, 1995). There was a tendency to suggest that the appropriators of those children, who had themselves participated in the kidnapping and assassination of the parents as well as in the abduction of the children, could function as excellent "parents." Some cases that became publicly known showed evidence of the level of perversion and psychopathy of these appropriators and the appearance of these traits in their relationship with these appropriated children.

Thus, in an attempt to generate a favorable social consensus toward these appropriators as part of impunity, the true story of the parents of the children was kept secret while the families of origin were continually degraded and blamed.

On May 11, 1994, Law No. 24321 was passed, Article 2 of which states:

In accordance with this Law, let it be understood that forced disappearance of a person means that a person's personal liberty has been taken away and that this event is followed by the disappearance of the victim, or if the person has been detained in clandestine places or deprived, under any other form, of the right of jurisdiction. The same must be justified

through a denouncement which has already been presented to the competent legal authority, the ex-National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (decree 158/83) or to the Sub-secretariat of Human and Social Rights of the Interior Ministry or the ex-National Board of Human Rights. (*Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina*, 1994, p. 2).

This law is the first acknowledgment of responsibility on the part of the state in connection with the missing detainees. It also makes it possible for the families to determine the status of the disappeared person.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

The effects were multigenerational in the sense that various generations were affected simultaneously.

In this chapter, we analyze some of the problems observed in the generation that was born and grew up during the dictatorship, in particular, the problems of those children of missing detainees. We also examine some problems appearing in the next generation. Our ideas are the result of clinical observations based upon having assisted many people affected by repression, either individually or in group therapy, from the start of the military dictatorship to the present. From 1977 to 1990, we worked in the Psychological Team of Assistance to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and from 1990, until today, in the Argentine Team of Psychosocial Work and Investigation.

As an example, and before going in depth into some of the problems, we would like to describe a mother's narration of what has been happening to her 7-year-old son, whose father had been kidnapped when the child was 11 months old.

When my husband was kidnapped, Facundo abruptly moved from an organized family to a situation in which he was handed from one relative to another in different places where he could be hidden. He first showed imbalances in his sleep and in his appetite: in one day he shift[ed] from serious constipation to a severe diarrhea. I had to abandon my house because the police took possession of it, and I left my job as if I were a fugitive. My child continued to grow up in this situation.

Almost 2 years later, I managed to reconstruct what had happened to my husband. He had been kidnapped on the street. At that moment, he screamed his name, denouncing that he was being abducted, and asked for help. Someone who happened to be passing by went to a police car nearby and asked for help. They told him: "You haven't seen anything." Some time later, I managed to meet this person.

I never lied to Facundo about the situation. From the beginning, I talked quite a bit about it but he didn't seem to understand because he was a baby. One day when he was 3 years old and we were traveling toward Buenos Aires along the Avenida de la O.E.A. he asked me: "OK, Mom, what happened to Daddy?" My answers, although true, were rather confusing. At his age, they were not something that could be logical, but they were logical in the sense that he was frightened that this might be repeated. At this stage, his constipation problems were quite serious. And I had been able to reconstruct my life with some stability.

This was the period of "I don't know if Daddy is going to come home." The father's coming home implied that the child's liberation could also become a reality.

When the dictatorship was over, Facundo was 7 years old. At that time, he narrated a dream he had to a reporter during an interview: A big bird is attacking and killing all the people who are within eyesight except for the children. Then, the bird tries to enter Facundo's room to go after him. His mother closes the window just in time, cutting off one of the toes of the bird. Facundo constantly has nightmares. The reporter asked Facundo if the bird had died and he answered, "No, Mummy just cut off his toes." At this point Facundo started to ask me if he also could have been taken away.

THE QUESTION OF INFORMATION AND TRUTH

Many families, particularly during the first years of the dictatorship, had great difficulty in informing the children about what had happened to their parents (Kordon & Edelman, 1988b). Some of the reasons were as follows:

- The widespread nature of the mandate of silence.
- The fear that what had occurred could also happen to the children or to their families if the children spoke about it to their classmates or friends.
- The difficulty of the adults in accepting the suffering caused by the disappearance of a loved one. This difficulty was projected to the children in the fear that the information could cause harm or suffering.

That is why, in many cases, the absence of the parents was explained as a trip or work, or some other similar lie. In fact, these explanations could be interpreted to suggest a voluntary abandonment of the children by the parents (Kordon & Edelman, 1988b).

As we have proven in the majority of the cases, children, especially those who were already going to school, knew that the information they had been given was false and, in some cases, were aware of the fate of their parents. Nevertheless, they supported the family "secret" by agreeing with the prohibition of talking about what happened to the family. The lack of support from natural groups often included the extended family. In fact, the breaking up of families due to situations of fear, or differences in reasons about whether to keep silent about what had happened, led to important emotional losses.

In the majority of the cases, this silence was also maintained outside of the family, even in relation to their peers. This denied them the possibility of support from their natural groups. In other cases, the situation was told on a confidential basis to some friend of the same age.

Experience has shown (Danieli, 1995) that it was essential for children to have detailed information about what had happened, since the pathological effects of silence and secrecy could become even more important than the situation of loss, especially in situations where the substitute parental figures were adequate. Children want to know the truth. It was essential to clarify this to relatives, since the return of the person who had disappeared was not an option. On the other hand, it was possible, through a careful process of comprehension within the family, to withdraw, even if only partially, from the induced silence and social distance and to manage the truth in relation to the children.

In contrast, the children of the families who were committed to the public search for those who had disappeared, and who did not keep silent, avoided talking about the subject, especially in times of latency. This brought about feelings of anguish to the relatives, who viewed it as a sign of negation of the real events. A frequent consequence was the adults' compulsive insistence and children's rejection or hostility. In other cases, where the families had informed the children of the truth of what had happened, they were subjected to the mandates of silence and were quite relieved to avoid the subject.

Especially during the first years of the dictatorship, an important aspect of our clinical work was to collaborate in different ways with the transmission of information to the children of those who had disappeared.³ In some cases, it was in group reflection that these conflicts were especially discussed; in other cases, it was through individual interviews with relatives in

³The purpose of the first groups of reflection with the relatives of the disappeared was the discussion of this problem that generated anguish and conflict within the families.

charge of the children; in still others, it was through individual interviews with us present at the precise moment when the information was being given.

The access to the truth produced, in all the cases to which we have been linked, a very important feeling of relief (Palento & Braun, 1985).

Some children explained that they did not insist on asking questions because they did not want to increase the anguish of their relatives. A similar situation is described in children of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust (Danieli, 1993). In these cases, the two parties had a pact to sustain a situation that both knew was false but which was intended to allow each to take care of the other. This pact was based on a misunderstanding about the possibility of not increasing the suffering of the other. It was quite inadequate for both.

THE STATUS OF THE DISAPPEARED

One of the pressures that was most frequently put on relatives was that they themselves should admit that the disappeared were really dead.

This was a particularly traumatic and complicated situation. On one side, the dictatorship that denied the existence of the missing detainees simultaneously induced their relatives to admit that they were dead. This was accomplished through “well-intentioned advice” given by public officials, people in the armed forces, or Church members who were a part of the police or armed forces when the relatives went to them in search of information about their loved ones.

Another frequent struggle between family members occurred when the parents of a disappeared person insisted that their son or daughter had been kidnapped and that it was necessary to continue the search for them, while the husband or wife of the disappeared person preferred to believe that he or she was dead and to transmit this information to their children. This preference was linked to the possibility of forming a new couple. As observed later on, many couples who were rapidly formed during that period seemed under the illusion that they were avoiding abandonment and blocking the difficult process of mourning. Many of them split up immediately after the dictatorship ended.

Simultaneously, many therapists who were consulted about how to manage the situation of the children, and who were also alienated by the inducements of the dictatorship and/or contratransferentially needed to give answers that could solve the psychotic ambiguity of the presence-absence situation of those who had disappeared, advised that it was better to believe that the disappeared person was dead and to inform the children, so that the family and the children could work through their mourning accordingly.

THE PROBLEM OF ABANDONMENT

As mentioned earlier, many explanations that were used as substitutes for the truth left the impression of voluntary abandonment. It is for this reason that we did not agree with therapists who, during the constitutional period, proposed to characterize the situation that the children had lived through as a “forced abandonment,” as though the second word characterized the whole term.

From the children’s point of view, both in clinical contacts and in groups of reflection for them, we found a conflict between the conscious acceptance of their parents’ disappearance as an involuntary event and feelings of hostility and reproach for having been “abandoned” by

them. The children tended to hide the latter because it was unacceptable to them, but it was nonetheless expressed many times in their aggressive attitude toward the other members of the family who were taking care of them, especially if these relatives were of the same generation as their own parents, at the therapists, and at the coordinators of the groups.

In the transference, explosions of anger were numerous, evidently motivated by the displacement of the original hostile feelings toward parents.

TRAUMATIC EFFECTS

We have found differences among children both according to the way each family faced the circumstances and the meaning each child gave the traumatic situation that he or she had lived through. In many cases, the children of disappeared people did not show disturbing psychological effects during early childhood that drew the attention of relatives, teachers, or themselves. But they did occur upon entering adolescence, a particularly critical period of their lives. Obviously, these effects did not necessarily spring forth in a direct manner from the early traumatic situations to which these children had been subjected. During their treatment, the interior articulation of both situations was established with clarity.

Contingency

In some cases, the principal clinical problem was related to the lack of adequate contingency for the development and growth of the children. In each case, this is expressed in different ways, from the impossibility of adopting adequately the integration of the ego to the most circumspect problems.

For example, a 6-year-old had been 1½ months old when placed in the care of some neighbors for approximately a week after his parents had been kidnapped. He was later found by his grandparents and brought up by them. There was frequent contact with his aunts, uncles, and cousins. This child presented a single symptom, encopresis, each time his grandparents left him, even if only for a short period of time, or when his teachers were changed at kindergarten or school. This symptom was repeated at the beginning of his treatment, before going on vacation or during a short illness of his therapist. Luckily, it was solved during psychotherapeutic treatment.

In other cases, children assumed, at stages too early in their lives, the roles of adults. They occasionally occupied the place of their mother or father who had disappeared and structured a personality with features that were overadapted.

Gustavo was referred to our team by his mother's therapist. He was 17 years old when he started treatment. His father had disappeared when his mother had been pregnant with his younger brother, Julian. His mother, from then on, had never had a stable partner, and they could not count on relatives for any kind of help. They moved from one city to another and could not settle down anywhere.

During our first interviews with him, we were struck by the way Gustavo accepted things: He showed an understanding attitude toward all the difficult situations he had been through and did not manifest any aggressive feelings. He was studying and working to help to support the household. He also supported his mother and brother emotionally. When we interviewed his mother, she indeed expressed guilt toward Gustavo because she constantly overburdened him with her own anguish.

Gustavo seemed to be a man but had an adolescent aspect. A compensation for narcissistic self-esteem is evidenced in the role he had assumed in the family. After a year of treatment,

when the mother finally achieved a greater degree of autonomy and personal stability, had a stable partner, and the general conditions of the family were more favorable, Gustavo, who, up to that moment, had shown high intellectual achievement, decided to leave his studies and entered a period of tumultuous adolescence characterized by the systematic abandonment of all situations that characterized personal achievement. This was followed by a period of narcissistic retraction in which apathy and abulia were the fundamental clinical expressions.

The pathology of overadaptation appears to be more frequent in boys, especially at the beginning of adolescence. Also, boys more frequently show a “defensive” attitude by avoiding talk about the traumatic situation. The phenomenon of overadaptation is probably linked to the social role of men regarding the functions of protection. When boys find themselves alone with their mothers or grandmothers, that is to say, in a relationship with a female figure, they develop their protective function at an earlier stage. When boys had the presence of a substitute father figure during adolescence, the pathological effects were more linked to infantile and/or impulsive behaviors.

We also noticed a family situation in which symbiotic and endogamous situations predominated and outside circumstances were considered as dangerous or persecutorial.

Since Alicia was 10 years old, she had to change homes frequently because her mother participated in a political organization opposed to the government and tried to elude repression by constantly moving. Her parents had separated some time earlier, and she and her brother (2 years older than Alicia) lived with the mother. The father did not share the mother’s political activities. When she was 12, while staying at her maternal grandmother’s house, her mother and her 14-year-old brother were kidnapped, and, since then, nothing has been heard from either of them. Alicia continued to live with this grandmother, economically sustained by a father who remarried and formed a new family in which she did not find a place. She finished secondary school with some difficulty. From then on, Alicia found it very difficult to continue any activity. When she turned 19, she sought refuge in all the places whose activities were related to human rights. She moved from one human rights group to another, entering into conflict with each of them as soon as there were differences or signs that the institution was not going to take total and absolute care of her. In this case, it is evident that different human rights organizations are sought as maternal substitutes, because they simultaneously give identity and perform containing functions.

Identity Problems

Acknowledging that being “the son–daughter of a disappeared person” was an important traumatic social situation during the first years of dictatorship (Nicoletti, Bozzolo, & Siacky, 1988), we wondered what weight it would bear on the child’s personal identity. How much of the personal identity would be shaped by it? How much capacity for full development of persona ego potentials would remain?

To this day, years later, many children of disappeared people still search for different groups. The objectives of these groups vary from participating in social and political activities whose purpose is to ensure that those responsible for crimes during the dictatorship are punished, to the support of the historical memory, to carrying out entertainment activities that are suitable for adolescents.

Some groups are created to accomplish an activity, such as making a film, or organizing homages, such as those that are held at the University of La Plata, where students and teachers that disappeared during the military dictatorship are remembered. In other cases, they are long-lasting groups that sometimes become associations.

These groups have simultaneously sprung up all over the country. Clearly, aspects of identity exist that necessitate being processed in peer groups that have undergone the same

problems. These are those aspects of personal identity that are related to the origin, to the traumatic situation, that had been socially silenced.

The silence, the social denial of the existence of disappeared persons, and the tendency to blame those who disappeared and the families characterized the context in which the children grew up to such an extent that the young men and women of today tend to gather together. All these events seem to have deeply marked the aspect of personal identity that corresponds to social belonging and that, in many cases, is required for the elaboration of the construction of a group matrix, that of a group of peers with the same problems. Probably these peer groups, like those of the mothers who went out in search of their disappeared children, operate simultaneously as groups of belonging (with aspects of a primary group in the sense of a giver of identity), and as groups of reference that provide social representations capable of identifying support even for those young people who do not directly participate in them. The peer group thus functions as an intermediate space in the identifying process.

These groups have begun to develop practically one generation later, that is to say, 18 years after the beginning of the dictatorship.⁴

Like a historical paradox, the appearance of these groups within the social scene coincides with the reactivation of the problem of the repressors' impunity, but more particularly with the appearance of the "speakers," those who repressed and tortured, and who are protected by the framework of impunity and go to the mass media to "confess" the crimes in which they participated.

Each time they meet people who had something to do with their parents, most children of the disappeared ask what their parents were like in every aspect, from the expression on their faces to their ideas. They maintain an important identification with them, which is expressed in different types of interests, careers, and so on. They try to reconstruct an image of the family, identifying both the parents and themselves simultaneously. The identifying process covers everything from attempts to imitate to trying to find common traits, physical features (such as the way of smiling), how they dealt with matters, how they had communicated with them, if they had changed their diapers or not, everyday habits, and so on. They ask if certain personality traits that they possess could have been inherited from their parents. In some cases, there may even be character traits that they consider to be negative but would have the value of somehow assuring the genealogy.

For many years, we chose not to hold long-term therapy groups with children or adolescent children of people who had disappeared, so as not to encourage an identity that was ascribed to the traumatic situation as a fundamental and distinctive aspect of personal identity. Moreover, we tried not to favor the tendency to stigmatize or to marginalize, which was encouraged in relation to the people who had been affected in a direct manner by repression (Danieli, 1995).

During treatment, adolescents tend quickly to link their conflicts to the trauma that they have lived through. In therapy, they find an adequate space to face these problems, because in many families, it is still conflictual to talk about this. The males maintain a more pronounced defensive disassociative level.

On the Generation Gap

One of the situations that has produced an important effect on the level of personal identity is that of the "crossing out" of a whole generation. We are referring in this case to the situation that was brought forth in young grandparents (those of about age 40) who were left in

⁴In Argentina, 18 marks the legal coming of age.

charge of their grandchildren (if both parents had disappeared), and who established an almost direct parent-child relationship with them. Concretely, their grandchildren called them Father and Mother. They claimed that it was better for the child so that he or she did not feel different from other children. What it hid was the attempt to deny the death of their own children and/or the substitution of that grandchild who occupied the place of the lost child. Serious disturbances in behavior and refusal to accept any kinds of limits were observed in these cases. Worse, these children, whether they had detailed information concerning the fate of their parents or not, were enormously confused, unconsciously, about the parent images and the structure of family roles. They were greatly different from children who lived with their grandparents but fully understood the generation gap that existed between them.

Younger Brothers and Sisters of People Who Disappeared

A special comment should be made about the situation of younger brothers and sisters of people who disappeared, and who lived through a situation of repression during their childhood. These children had to elaborate a situation of loss simultaneously with the destructuring and melancholic effects that were brought about in the midst of the family.

In the cases where the parents, and most especially the mother, participated in some group movement in search of the disappeared child, profound recriminations linked to feelings of abandonment existed. In other words, the children who suffered the loss of an older brother or sister felt they needed more protection from their parents. The parents, on the other hand, were in the middle of the process of mourning for their loss. At the same time, there was an abrupt modification in the structure of family roles due to the activities demanded by the search for this child. The sense of abandonment that these children lived through was very important. The parents spent less time with them at precisely the moment when they needed their parents more. They also had feelings of devaluation in reference to the narcissistic acknowledgment on the part of their parents, since the disappeared child became more idealized with the passing of time. At the same time, somewhat contradictory and overprotective attitudes of parents were quite frequent due to the fear of the risk implied by the child's development of independence. (This referred not only to the political posture, but also to normal events in the process of growing up such as traveling alone at night or leaving the house to go and study elsewhere, and so on).

All these elements created a highly conflictual situation that was complicated by the resulting feelings of hostility, which were subjected to self-censure.

Many of these younger brothers and sisters maintained dependent relationships toward the family that lasted too long (reinforcing the family symbiosis), or broke away from the family at a too early an age (demonstrating a type of pseudo-independent behavior such as marrying while still in adolescence).

During the last years, the problems that arose in connection with the sale and traffic of children have become public. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that since the state was responsible for the kidnapping and appropriation of children, a situation of anomaly is produced in the organization and social normalization of the family structure and in the generational transmission that is much more general, and that transcends those who were affected by the repression of the dictatorship.

The subject of child trafficking, a problem that undoubtedly existed prior to the dictatorship, today has a different meaning and has been broadened in view of the crisis in the social delimitation of what is licit and what is illicit. This problem has been extended to the question of the traffic of children's organs. Myth or reality, once again this is a symptomatic consequence of impunity.

The institution of adoption, in general terms, is one of the most affected by the kidnapping of children and impunity. In Argentina, the subject of adoption is in itself conflictual, since it recognizes social and class roots. But the persistence of the undetermined status of disappeared people and of the majority of kidnapped children and the situation of impunity have cast a great suspicion over all adopted children, especially those born between 1976 and 1980.

Many parents do not tell their children that they are adopted, so as not to cause them pain. In reality, it is they themselves who cannot bear this information. The absence of truth always brings about symptoms by occluding areas of the child's psychic development behind that which must not be known. If what leads to the concealment has something to do with the impossibility of elaborating mourning for the biological maternity–paternity, this is curable with treatment. But if what is concealed has something to do with the social environment, then the elaboration of this situation is much more complex. It must be noted that we are not referring here to situations of direct or indirect complicity in the appropriation of children by the repressors.

Many families blame themselves when they think of the possibility that their adopted children might be children of disappeared people. This doubt fills the adopting father/mother–adopted son/daughter relationship with anguish and reproach.

In opposition to the generalized suspicion, many adopted adolescents wish that they had been children of disappeared people.

Susana was adopted⁵ and her parents have not given her a clear version of her origin. Years before, she had undergone a histocompatibility test, with negative results, to see if there existed the possibility that she were the child of some person who had been registered as disappeared by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. She presented a serious abandonment pathology.

Susana wished to be the daughter of a disappeared couple. Under her true situation of abandonment, if she were the daughter of a disappeared person, it would mean, at least to her subjectivity, a place of acknowledgment and external desire, which she feels she is lacking. In the face of the possibility of not having been a child desired by her biological parents and having been abandoned voluntarily, and also in the face of a destructured family with scarce resources for her care, the desire to be the daughter of disappeared parents implies that she was desired by her real parents, from whom she was separated by force.

Although this chapter focuses on problems related to the disappearance of persons, the traumatic situation that was lived, from the transgenerational point of view, also takes into account children of people who had disappeared and then reappeared, of people who had been in prison for a long time, as well as children whose parents had gone into exile and then returned, and who have suffered identity or behavior disturbances as a result of the different processes of transculturation that, in the majority of cases, came about in an abrupt manner and in unfavorable conditions.

Conceptualization

We are analyzing the psychological consequences over a long period of time that were produced in children who today are adolescents and young men and women, and who suffered the conditions of secrecy that they had to live in, as their parents had been political opponents of the dictatorship. If we take into account the number of consultations that we have today, we are only beginning the analysis of these types of problems.

The nature of the traumatic situation affects the family structure and the individual subjects at the multi- and transgenerational levels (Puget, 1991). We characterize the traumatic

⁵*Adopted* in Argentina means that a nonbiological son or daughter is declared a son or a daughter by a legal procedure or a false inscription pretending to be a biological son or daughter. The latter is very common in Argentina.

situation as that which is constituted by events of political repression (disappearance, torture, etc.) and by the social inducements produced by the state and implemented through the mass media.

Impunity, as well as silence and the induced guilt, are decisive components of this traumatic situation. The longer they persist, the greater is the iatrogenic effect that they produce and the greater the possibility of the production of pathologies over a long period of time and in the plane of transgenerational transmission.

The psychopathological incidence of impunity varies according to the containing capacity of the families, the possibility that these families have of adequately managing the information and sustaining the truth, the previous levels of symbiotic functioning, the depth of the depression after the loss, and the degree of the endogamous return that is produced as a result of the repressive event.

It can be affirmed that a personal elaboration of the trauma isolated from the conditions of social elaboration does not exist. In this social elaboration, various factors must be taken into account. One of the most important of these is the collective answer produced by the same people who had been affected (either direct victims or their relatives). This solution helps the personal preservation of those who participated in those actions and functions as a reference even for those who were affected but did not have direct participation.

On the other hand, this socially organized solution allows the members of the next generation to find a starting point from which to resignify their own history. Experience has indicated that this historicization in the next generation constitutes a necessary step in the passage from adolescence to adulthood.

In the context of the reconstruction of this history, adolescents search for the narration of the history of their parents. They also want to know about identifying features such as personality traits and even habits or gestures that make them recognize themselves more intimately as the children of those people who, many times, they have never met.

In the Argentine experience, from the beginning of the social trauma produced by the kidnapping of children, many social and legal mechanisms were affected, apparently without connection to the repressive situation, as was the case of the institution of adoption that affected the transgenerational level.

In this regard, the analysis will be centered on one of the situations that produced the most controversy in Argentina, which is the return of the kidnapped children or children born in captivity to their families, in which the two levels that were mentioned earlier are manifested.

Even though the return of these kidnapped children to their families is a very complex matter, where ethical, legal, and political factors play an important role, mental health professionals were asked to give expert opinions on this subject. Indeed, many times, we went beyond our professional intervention when faced with concrete cases.

A few months ago, a baby girl was stolen by a woman, perhaps psychotic, from the maternity ward of the Spanish Hospital. After a few days, the baby was taken to a church. In this case, nobody doubted that she should be returned to her parents. This is an act of justice, of reparation. This is basically an ethical position based on not validating, not excusing and leaving unpunished one of the most terrible crimes of the dictatorship.

We think that the return of children consists of giving back of the *patria potestad* to the legitimate family. But what has happened to this view?

When the film *La Historia Oficial (The Official Story)* was shown in Argentina, it aroused an enormous popular reaction. The people identified themselves with the character portrayed by Norma Aleandro. The character's decision to search for the true story of her adopted daughter was in reality the true story of the country. That was a hushed-up story,

whose existence the dictators, from their positions of power, tried to deny. In that search, the woman portrayed by Norma Aleandro was willing to give the little girl back to her legitimate family.

This story was probably not different from another official story, which unfolded in the context of the human rights politics of the constitutional government—not so much for what it said but, rather, for what it omitted. And it encouraged, from this point of view, the expectation of personal reparation without full justice, which would also include punishment of the perpetrators.

Some years later, during several procedures of return of the children, but most especially in the case of Juliana Sandoval Fontana, a very intense propaganda campaign was waged on two principal arguments:

- One was psychological: not to inflict damage or even further damage on the children, separating them from the false parents.
- The other was legal: Abandonment automatically legitimates adoption. Returning a child violates the legal order.

A part of the population identified with the position of not giving back the small girl. Others felt extremely torn internally upon facing the conflict.

What has happened in the time that elapsed? What are the factors that determine this change?

Elsewhere (Kordon & Edelman, 1998a, 1998b; Macci, 1985; Nicoletti *et al.*, 1988; Pelento & Braun, 1985; Puget, 1991; Viñar, 1992), we have analyzed how the state has intervened in creating the social systems of representation. During the dictatorship, a series of statements that tried to establish its necessity and inevitability was produced. The dictatorship, through the manipulation of the mass media, and through self-justifying statements and a set of inducements, the most important of which was the inducement to silence, tried to make people believe that the violence they were using was both necessary and natural. A situation of terror favored identification with the dominating discourse. In the face of these proposals, there were different answers between the poles of discrimination–resistance and heeding–submission.

Since the film was first shown, the laws of Final Point and Due Obedience were enacted. This not only deprocessed and guaranteed the impunity of the great majority of those responsible for the crimes committed during the dictatorship, but it also excused them. Only the kidnapping of children and the theft of property were not included in this law of Due Obedience. But to think that the question of the kidnapped children could be solved, isolated from the global situation, within a framework in which justice was lacking and impunity existed was merely an illusion, or, in any case, an illusion for those who made these laws. The case of Juliana shows quite plainly how totally illusory it is. And it goes beyond the desire of many to cling to this to be able to sustain a fictitious personal calmness. From this point of view, it works in the same manner as what was instructed in *Nunca Más (Never Again)*, besides the concrete conditions of punishment of those who were guilty so as to guarantee that “Never Again.”

The kidnapping of children during the dictatorship was not simply another atrocious act. It showed explicitly or implicitly that certain families were determined by the state as not fit for creating new subjects, as long as these subjects were not a part of the dominating socio-cultural model.

This campaign again tried to show the victims as guilty of harming the girl because they seek her return.

The subsistence of these proposed models of the state and the implacable logic that intertwines them induce a certain identification with the power in such a way that it is possible to begin collaborating in the search for kidnapped children and to end up in the position of the "creators of public opinion" in favor of the dictatorship.

By omitting everything that happened until Juliana's arrival at Casa Cuna (Hospital), an attempt was made to reduce her case to the equivalent of a struggle between, for example, separated parents, and to make the people decide among options that pertain to this type of problem, thus creating a situation of internal schism between the desire for justice and the desire to keep the children.

This is what has happened to us. But what has happened to the children?

We know that every person is constituted through a process of identification that is developed at an early age in the nucleus in which he or she lives. This process of identification implies an internalization of the bonds with these people.

Do these children have the kidnapping, the violent separation from their mother, the conditions of their birth, and the violent basis of their identity registered inside of them? We think they do through a double mechanism: on the one hand, the register of what is archaic in the psyche; on the other, because all conflicting family situations are present in the relationships that are internalized in each subject.

The social discourse, the social marks, operate as an internal factor in the family structure and in the relationships. There will be present, for example, an attempt to hide the assassination of the parents or the fear of revenge that the child may take upon him- or herself to pay for what happened to his or her parents, in the case of children who are living with repressors, or when the suspicion of the true origin of the child exists. But can we believe that the suspicion of the origin of the child in this case is a strictly personal situation? We think that in every case, but more especially in the situations generated by the social violence of state terrorism, the suspicion is more of a social nature than a personal one. And this social suspicion inexorably impregnates the personal relationship.

Can this child become, for those who are bringing him or her up, a persecutory object that must be controlled?

How does one answer these children's questions about their origin?

If the fantasy of having robbed a child from his or her mother is present in parents who adopted a child under legal conditions and this has its effects, then is this not present in these families where the theft of the child is not a mere fantasy but a reality?

We think that without a change in the existing conditions, it is not possible to open any possibility of psychic health and productivity (Galli, 1984). By no means do we believe that the return of these children, who many times have been years within another family, will function as a miraculous cure. Since they were separated from their mothers, they have been submitted to psychic situations that border on the catastrophic.

But the child's return does open the way for the integration of his or her subjectivity with what is genealogical, historical, transgenerational, and social that may give the necessary support for his or her personal identity.

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