

# Siblings of the Disappeared in Argentina

## A Contribution to the (Re)Construction of Memory

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*Cet article contribue à la construction de la mémoire sociale et individuelle de la dictature militaire en Argentine et met l'accent sur les expériences des parents des victimes disparues. La lutte des Grands-mères de la Plaza de Mayo pour retrouver leurs petits-enfants kidnappés ainsi que la contribution de l'Université ont pris place dans l'histoire.*

*Este artículo aporta a la construcción de la memoria social e individual de la dictadura militar argentina, buscando hacer visible la experiencia de los hermanos de desaparecidos. Se historiza la lucha de las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo por recuperar sus nietos/as apropiados, y se describe la contribución de la Universidad.*

In this article, our intent is to share our experiences both as social practitioners of resistance and as contributors to the construction of historical memory in the face of the devastating consequences resulting from the last military dictatorship in Argentina. Reference is made to research projects designed for the reconstruction of social and historical memory, and facts still enveloped in the shadows of silence are here revealed as well. The innovative aspect of our project lies in the connection between the University of Buenos Aires<sup>1</sup> and human rights organizations, such as the Association of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

Features of two projects are described in this article: “Reconstruction of the Identity of the Disappeared—Biographic Family Archive of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo” and “Siblings of the Disappeared: Their Experiences and the Effects of their Participation in the Biographic Family Archive.” These projects were undertaken in 1998 and 2002 respectively, by faculty and students from the various study areas of the department of social sciences at the University of Buenos Aires.<sup>2</sup> The projects were conducted within the framework of research studies on social memory in Argentina, a topic that is currently becoming increasingly popular.

A section describing the activism of Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo Association, followed by a description of their collaboration with the University of Buenos Aires, provides the context for the findings of the research projects on siblings of the disappeared, mentioned above.

### Appropriation and Restitution

One of the most abhorrent crimes committed by the Argentinian dictatorship from 1973 to 1986 was the planned appropriation/kidnapping and identity change/identity-theft(?) of infants and young children. These forced disappearances amounted to an estimated 500 under-aged children and their parents, together with the abduction of infants born in captivity whose mothers were murdered after giving birth. This means that the children were violently alienated from their biological families and thrust into another one founded on crime and the secrecy of the child's family origin (Teubal).<sup>3</sup>

This fact, unprecedented in modern times, gave rise to the emergence of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their involvement in political contexts and acts demanding the return of their children and grandchildren. The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo demanded then, and continue to do so now, from both societal and judicial standpoints, the restitution of the identity of abducted sons and daughters. Restitution is a legal term involving a complex psychological process that implies the recognition of two rights: the right of the child to know and recover his or her true history and identity, and the right of the family to re-unite with the disappeared relative.

This issue is framed within the context of the recognition of the universal rights of the child: the right to a life of dignity, to not be deprived of his/her biological family of origin, to know the truth of his/her own history, to grow up with his/her family and loved ones. In this respect, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo have made an important contribution to the international community,

that of the incorporation of “the right to identity” into the United Nations International Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

In recent years, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo’s strategies to find disappeared relatives have focused on getting the youth to approach the organization; consequently, search efforts previously based on investigative methods leading grandmothers to their grandchildren have taken a new direction which, while still seeking to find the truth and reunite dismembered families, now address the location of these grandchildren as a dramatic, public issue of social concern. In this context, public information campaigns are launched with a strong media impact and with public participation as manifested in artistic creations such as “Theatre for Identity,” “Music for Identity,” and “Sports for Identity,” among others, involving social actors from all fields. These efforts have resulted in an increasingly important social legitimacy. In a parallel way, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo have introduced initiatives from different social sectors willing to join their fight.<sup>4</sup> To date, 82 grandchildren have been found.

### **We Are All Looking for You...<sup>5</sup>**

Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo’s creative display of strategies to incorporate more and more social sectors, give rise to the following questions: What role should the social sciences play in the search for 400 youth who are still unaware of their biological origins and family history? How can the contribution of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo be academically institutionalized?

In 1998, the project “Reconstruction of the Identity of the Disappeared—Biographic Family Archive of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Archive Project)” was developed, which connected the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo with the University of Buenos Aires. This project reconstructs the life history of disappeared fathers and mothers in a document to be handed out to each of the abducted youth once they are found. In this way, the stories of relatives, friends, and militant companions go to each youth in the process of the restitution of his/her identity.<sup>6</sup> In this same way, the project enables the youth to access their own histories and recover their identities while paving the way towards the recovery of the recent, collective historical memory (Muñoz and Pérez).

The development of the project was made possible by the voluntary participation of 128 students and graduates, mostly women, and strikingly, of similar ages to the abducted victims. This was a clear manifestation of ethical commitment to the task.

It was during the fieldwork phase of the Archive Project that the need arose for more detailed testimony from the victims’ siblings, aunts, and uncles to complement the testimonies from the other relatives who were being interviewed. “...*I think nobody understands my pain,*

*mom had to be supported,*” was one among the number of testimonies received. It is from this desire to delve deeper into the Archival project that this demanding aspect—the experiences of the siblings of the abducted and disappeared—became a research challenge. Thus, the project “Siblings of the Disappeared: Their Experiences and Effects of their Participation in the Biographic Family Archive” was born.

The objectives of our research project were three-fold. The first was to learn about the way the siblings of the disappeared coped with the disappearance of their brothers or sisters during the last repressive period in Argentina. They are from the same generation as their disappeared siblings; they are the ones who survived, the ones who remained, but the ones whose history is least known. We aimed to investigate the specific distinctive features of their experience, their views from a generational and fraternal perspective, and the ways their testimonies contribute both to the construction of identity as brother or sister of an abducted victim and to the family and social memory.

The second objective was to become familiar with the siblings’ own perceptions of the impact of their participation in the Archive Project for which they (and all of the family members of the disappeared victim) consented to be interviewed, enabling them to recall, reflect upon, review and express themselves (in many cases for the first time) on a number of aspects of their family history. We examined both the positive and negative impact of this participation in the interviews by probing into issues related to areas such as the sibling’s personal and intra- and inter-familial relationships. It is our belief that these interviews gave participants a measure of relief. As Edoardo Rabossi states, “personal identity is explained in terms of the recalled or the recordable, that is in terms of memory.”

The third objective was explore the interview participants’ perceptions of the disappeared victims.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative methodological strategies were developed as they not only provide useful means to understanding the social worlds of the siblings of the abducted victims, but also allowed us to obtain new elements from their narratives that shed light on their subjective views and personal experiences. Our goal was bring to light the experiences that brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts of the disappeared were able to recall, as well as the nature and the degree of closeness of the relationship between them and the abducted victims; the impact of the disappearance of their relative on their lives; the ways they coped with the trauma; their present wishes, expectations, aspirations and life projects, among others.

Attempts were also made to disaggregate the experiences undergone by elder and younger brothers and sisters, men and women, militant and non militant, taking into

account the social context and status of the participants interviewed. Actual accounts of the disclosed experiences have been included, and discourse, ideas, images, that is, the imaginary, have also been analyzed.

### **Memories and Identities**

The issue of social memory strongly emerges in Argentina in response to the huge criminal wave striking the collective unconscious and which calls for some kind of action and remedy from society. (Vezzetti)

is constructed by images from the past that are chosen, preserved, and renewed by relying on social imaginaries—a framework that is never all-encompassing or definitively healing. Memory and identity thus play meaningful roles as cultural mechanisms to enhance a sense of belonging and construct citizenship.

### **Fraternal Relationships**

The study of family relationships has historically focused on parent-child relationships, the parent figure being

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The contribution of human rights organizations to the process of reconstruction of the collective memory during recent years is significant, as is also the presence of the mothers and grandmothers, and eventually the found children, in the social scenario and the public speech of memory. The same cannot be said about the siblings of the abducted victims who are generally not recognized as having experienced trauma and identity conflicts.

From our perspective, identity is not once and for all essentialist and unchangeable, but rather is an ongoing construction inevitably formed and transformed throughout relationship with others, who at the same time defined and limited by views or representations with which we define ourselves. Identity is formed from difference; it is relational, multiple, and fragmented. It is a relationship that is never completed, never ending. In line with Maurice Halbwach's contention that memory and group articulate in "collective memory," we maintain that the construction of social identities is a process that involves all of us, not so much as supportive individuals but as responsible citizens for our history and protagonists in the permanent search for authentic identity.

With regard to collective memory, Yerushalmi holds that a people or social collectivity can be said to forget when the generation owning the past fails to pass the memory of that past on to the next generation, or when it refuses what was given or ceases to convey it, which is in essence the same thing. A people cannot be said to forget what has never been received. Collective oblivion takes place when certain human groups cannot convey for posterity—voluntarily or passively (due to rejection, indifference or indolence)—what they have learned from the past.

Collective memory conceived of as a battlefield in an ongoing state of tension is a widespread assumption. In Tzvetan Todorov's terms, current personal identity

regarded as the obvious instigator of the brother/sister bond (Droeven; Assoum) and as "conditioning" future relationships between siblings (Bank and Kahn; Assoum). Recent scholarship in the field of psychology examining the siblings of the disappeared victims has emphasized also the importance of fraternal relationships.

General characterizations of fraternal relationships have tended to connect the idea of a pair with the idea of learning to be different but equal (Kehl). Other characterizations refer to fraternal relationships as the entrance into the social realm, marked by conflicting relationships of support and love on the one hand, and competition and hatred or frequent ambivalence, on the other. Bank and Kahn pinpoint various factors that contribute to building fraternal relationships by allowing high or low levels of "access" or interaction. They also introduce the issue of grief at the loss of a sibling due to traumatic reasons, which however is not comparable to extreme trauma of kidnappings and forced disappearances of siblings in a society where terror is perpetrated by the State.

Droeven reminds us of the number of forms that a modern family takes, and presents her research on fraternal relationships as founded primarily by choice rather than as a result of consanguineal relationships. She argues for the development of fraternal relationships independent of parental relationships. On the whole, all the authors discussed "rediscover" the concept of a fraternal relationship as an important factor constituting subjectivity.

### **Our Research, Some Advances<sup>7</sup>**

#### ***The Fraternal Bond***

From the various interviews, different types of fraternal relationships can be identified that could approach the categories expounded in the theoretical framework of this

project. For example, in A. and B.,<sup>8</sup> we find, in Bank and Kahn's terms, "high access" in the fraternal relationship with his sister:

*...I used to talk a lot about this with my sister, used to speak up, used to tell her the things I used to do... If I didn't show up at a certain time, she [used to say]: "He's surely tied up with..." I mean she covered for me within my family, or kept me out of things, when I was militant ... [referring to his distribution of militant propaganda materials].*

*How was I changed so much?" Except for the career that was my choice, the rest of it, life, was made for me.*

Throughout this study, it was clear that the method of a person's disappearance had an impact on both the social collectivity and on the individual families. We analyzed participants' personal experience of a sibling's disappearance: that is, how it happened, what was the impact on the family, what their lives were like afterwards, and in what ways their personal projects changed.

All of the participants revealed at some point in the

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In C.'s case, the fraternal bond is manifested in a different way as C.'s disappeared brother attended boarding schools for his elementary and high school education:

*We shared very little with my brother because he was a boarding school student, so life with him was very different from the one with my sisters. He started boarding school since third grade, so he used to come over [only] on weekends [or] we used to go and see him.*

With clarity, C. explained to us why her distant relationship with her brother impacted on their ability to establish meaningful fraternal bonds:

*A bond is created when ... love and family ties are made through sharing, so when you have friends and share with them, sleep, play, spend 24 hours with them, you form a bond that is very different from the bonds you form when you only see each other for a little while. And for my brother, his friends are very significant ... and we, the sisters, were less significant, I mean we got along well ... but his friends were his priority or closest tie, or at least that's the way I felt...*

This corroborates Bank and Kahn's assertion that lack of access to a sibling can prevent the formation of a bonded relationship. Fraternal bonds can be thus determined by a number of variable factors, such as age difference, living together, a shared father and mother figure, the number of siblings, and access to the relationship, among others.

### **How a Sibling's Disappearance Affected Life**

*I came to be the only thing I didn't want to become and all I wanted to be I wasn't... I told myself, "what's this?"*

interview the hardships experienced immediately following the sibling's disappearance. Some of the hardships can be attributed to the following:

- a) Overpowering grief prevented the family from overcoming their pain. It was likely that they did not find, or make, space to raise issues with the remaining child; everything relating to the tragic kidnapping and disappearance of the sibling was left unsaid.
- b) Typical fraternal relationship contradictions are aggravated (love/hate relations) as they are built on idealized images of the abducted child (by siblings, relatives, and acquaintances).
- c) The status of "sibling" is socially regarded as a bond of lower order than that of "parent" or "child," which hinders the process of grief and detracts experience from testimonial value.
- d) The silence set up by the dictatorship affected the siblings in particular because the silence was perceived of as individual responsibility detached from the effects of repression implemented by the military dictatorship.
- e) Sisters and brothers who had been engaged in political organizations during those years, and particularly those who remained involved with them, were able to cope with grief in a different way because they inserted the loss they felt into the risks they dared to take.

### **Impact of Participation in the Archive Project**

We hoped that the interviews given by the siblings of the disappeared, within the framework of the Archive Project, would open up ways for healing. The following are some of the responses by participants to their involvement in this project:

a) Feelings during the interview: Many of the interviewed siblings, whether youth or adults, militant or non-militant, ranked their participation in the project as positive. They defined the interview as “triggering,” “very intense,” “painful,” and “hard.” Nevertheless, their comments reveal the positive impact of recalling these memories: “*It was a healing, good experience. It made me bring back things that seemed to be flattened in my memory.... I cried a lot, I remember I cried a lot, and well ... it was very, very positive.*”

b) Assessment of the opportunity to recall: Some of the participants felt that the processes of recalling and restructuring the figure and the life history of his/her sibling was particularly positive. Recalling particular memories helped in as well as the access to knowledge of new facts anecdotes from other members of the family helped in the recreation of the disappeared sibling’s identity and place in the family. Pleasing and gratifying moments were often experienced despite the hardships. “*...I didn’t remember very much about his favourite music. I remembered he liked Larralde, and Cafrune, but my mom made me recall that he was also very fond of Sandro. I must have been in denial [he grins].*”<sup>9</sup>

c) Assessment of the possibility to narrate: It was here that we observed a clear difference between non-militant and militant siblings; the latter identifying this possibility as positive, but also as simply another action among their whole social and/or political practice of struggle. It was apparent that the fact of talking, relating and conveying constituted a frequent practice inherent to their lives. Most non-militant interviewees admitted that the possibility to talk, to reconstruct a history was for them a unique and singular experience:

*It was always hard for me to bring this topic up in conversation, like something one has to talk about with someone.... I had no one, I mean the family history lent itself, as far as the siblings were concerned ... not to realize that we were suffering ... our parents had already had their own to digest, hadn’t they?*

To conclude, we present the assessment of the importance of the university’s participation in this study by one of the siblings interviewed during this project which, as already mentioned, integrates the university as a partner in the fight for human rights:

*The topic of youth has always intrigued to me because I think the ones called upon to break into the country once again are the youth. I think there’s no chance for us to generate a more just democracy if youth don’t take part, and I mean at all institutional levels. Obviously, it’s very gratifying that youth and the university are working together toward this end.*

## Epilogue

It was the intention of the members of the group Mne-mosine<sup>10</sup>—students, graduates, and faculty from communication sciences and social work—to assist in the advancement of our research project, to share on the one hand the history and social mechanisms that Argentines have struggled for to enhance the social and democratic reconstruction of our country, and to highlight on the other hand the importance of the role that the university—public and free in our case—should play in all issues of social concern.

All of the participants in this research team agree that critique ought to be exercised not only in thinking but in actions aimed at social transformation at all levels. From our perspective as researchers, we intended in each interview not only to take the elements useful for discourse analysis, but to give voice, as our main goal, to these sisters and brothers who have remained in the shadow of events, suffering in silence to support the families, in an attempt to keep them “united” in a social and collective memory that only in recent years has begun to remember them—through the work of various human rights organizations resisting oblivion politics; we are referring to siblings who in most cases have had to cope by themselves with a trauma provoked by a plan designed to eliminate people at a regional level—State terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup>The University of Buenos Aires is a prestigious, fully accredited public educational institution in Argentina that offers free tuition and open enrollment.

<sup>2</sup>The disciplines contributing to designing and enriching this project are anthropology, communication sciences, social work, history, liberal arts, photography, sociology, political science, and psychology.

<sup>3</sup>See Teubal for more detailed psychological, political, and social implications of the appropriation of under-aged children during the Argentine military dictatorship.

<sup>4</sup>This was manifested in poetry and graphic poster contests, as well as speeches and debates promoted at all educational levels (elementary and middle school, and university).

<sup>5</sup>“We are all looking for you” is part of a strong-impact radio, TV, and media campaign in which well-known



Argentine figures play their part.

<sup>6</sup>The archive is made up of three types of supporting evidence: verbal (tape and CD voice recordings), written (interview transcripts) and photographic (current records of the interviewees' personal, familial, and historical accounts with illustrating photographs and souvenirs) (see Tuebal et al.). <sup>7</sup> Space restrictions prevent us from including a greater number of narrative accounts.

<sup>8</sup>Initials and names are pseudonyms.

<sup>9</sup>Larralde and Cafrune are very popular singers recognized for their political activism in Argentina. Sandro is a very popular, melodic singer.

<sup>10</sup>The name was chosen to participate in the *Foro Social Mundial* (World Social Forum) that took place in January 2006 in Caracas, Venezuela. We were invited to write about our work in this publication as a result of our participation in a workshop coordinated by Cristina Bettanin (member of the team) and Horacio Pietragalla (restituted grandchild).

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## KAY R. EGINTON

### January

Clean, unbroken lines of trees  
Caught in the shadows, tracks of  
Animals leaving their mark

As I walk  
Struggling to lift my feet  
Above the crust, the end of day near

It sparkles silence and ice  
Can it be that twice I've gone astray  
In some unknown way? You have,  
You have, they mutter

The fool's gold of sunlight ahead  
On the empty hillside.  
Staggering toward it, I remark  
Perhaps they're right, but while I  
can

I'll walk in the afternoon  
And shoulder light away,  
Moving toward memory  
Cautious, sunlit as the flight

Of time on a January day.

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