

Long Journey Home: Family Reunification Experiences of the Disappeared Children of El Salvador

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ABSTRACT

Established in 1994, Salvadoran Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Association for the Search of Disappeared Children) has located 384 children, often with the aid of DNA evidence, of the more than 500 who went missing or were abducted during El Salvador's civil war. Families in other countries who were unaware of the forced separations adopted many of these children. Between 2005 and 2009, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-six children, now young adults aged twenty-four to thirty-four years, who had been reunited with their biological families. We found that we could conceptually categorize the process of separation and reunification into six phases: pre-disappearance, disappearance, separation, searching, reunion, and reunification. While these young adults said that reunification was extremely important, they often found this stage psychologically challenging, given their new identities and their uncertainty about how they would reintegrate back—if at all—into their biological families. We call this process “ambiguous reunification.”

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I. BACKGROUND

Each year, millions of families worldwide are separated by war, natural disaster, immigration, and other causes, and are subsequently reunited.¹ Understanding how family separation and reunification impact a child's health and well-being is critical, as children may be especially vulnerable to effects of prolonged separation from their families. The disappeared children of El Salvador represent an extreme example of family separation and reunification. These individuals, now young adults, were forcibly separated from their families during El Salvador's civil war from 1980 to 1992.² Many of these individuals underwent family reunification several years later. Understanding the reunification experiences of these "disappeared" youth helps shed light on the process of family separation and reunification as a result of war, natural disasters, immigration, and other causes.

This article is structured as follows. Section II reviews the psychological theories that form the foundation for understanding children's experiences with family separation and reunification. Section III examines the descriptive and empirical literature on family separation and reunification, with an emphasis on separation and reunification in the contexts of immigration and war. The section also includes an overview of the historical context of the disappeared children of El Salvador. Section IV provides a description of the study design, data used, qualitative methods applied, and analytic approach engaged. Section V presents the final results. Section VI discusses the implications of the results and highlights areas for future research. Section VII presents the conclusion.

II. THEORIES

A. Lessons from Psychology: Attachment Theory & Ambiguous Loss

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory addresses how family separation affects children.³ Attachment theory, developed based on

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1. *The Missing: Bring Hope Where There is None*, INT'L COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC) (2014), available at <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/missing-bringing-hope-where-there-none#.VFKIFE10zcs>.
 2. *See Soldiers Stole Children During El Salvador's War*, USA TODAY, (22 Feb. 2013) <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/02/22/soldiers-children-el-salvador/1940533/>; Monica Campbell, *A Push Is on in the US to Reunite Families Torn Apart by El Salvador's Civil War*, PRI (28 Aug. 2014), <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-08-28/push-us-reunite-families-torn-apart-el-salvador-s-civil-war>.
 3. Inge Bretherton, *The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth*, 28 DEV. PSYCH. 759, 759 (1992); 2 JOHN BOWLBY, ATTACHMENT AND LOSS: SEPARATION ANXIETY AND ANGER 14 (1973).

observations of normal children who underwent family separation and reunification, maintains that, in normal child-parent relationships, children undergo a process of attachment to their parents. When children become separated from their parents, detachment—characterized by failures to engage in attachment behaviors when reunited—may occur. Attachment figures provide children a secure base for exploration; therefore, when attachment is disrupted, children may lack the ability to explore and adapt to their environment. Implications may be lifelong.⁴

Pauline Boss's theory of ambiguous loss, which addresses situations where uncertainty about a relative's fate or whereabouts exists, can be considered an extension of Bowlby's attachment theory. Ambiguous loss, originally used to describe the loss faced by families of Vietnam soldiers missing in action, is a grief that is unclear because the outcome is unknown or ambiguous. It is "stressful," "tormenting," and "infinite" because the ambiguity of the loss impedes grieving.⁵ This extends from Bowlby's attachment theory, which suggests that it is impossible to let go of a missing family member unless one participates in a farewell or ritual that initiates the detachment process.⁶

Ambiguous loss is particularly salient to children who are forcibly separated from their families in the context of war. In these instances, children may face an additional dimension to the loss of their parents: the profound uncertainty of not knowing whether their parents and other family members have survived, or if they will ever see them again.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section reviews the empirical literature on children's experiences with separation and reunification. This small body of literature addresses children's experiences with family separation and reunification in the contexts of immigration, war, foster care, incarceration, natural disaster, and abduction. Essential themes about these phenomena may apply across contexts.

A. Children's Experiences with Family Separation

Children's reactions to parents emigrating vary from negative to neutral or even positive responses. Negative responses include feelings of anger, abandonment, and somatic complaints. Neutral or positive responses include a

4. See Bretherton, *supra* note 3; Mary Ainsworth & Silvia M. Bell, *Attachment, Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation*, 41 *CHILD DEV.* 49 (1970).

5. PAULINE BOSS, *AMBIGUOUS LOSS: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH UNRESOLVED GRIEF* 5 (1999).

6. Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss in Families of the Missing*, 360 *LANCET SUPP.* s39, s39 (2002).

child's description of a calmer home, a less violent home, or a more comfortable home, usually attained by remittances sent by parents abroad.⁷ One study demonstrated lower quality of life scores among children who had remained in the home country compared to children who had remained with their parents in rural China.⁸ Differences in response by gender and age have been observed.⁹

Child survivors of war often endure profound trauma, which can leave long-lasting physical and psychological sequelae. Furthermore, family togetherness during war has been found to predict child well-being. One study demonstrated that, if separated from their parents, children evacuated from London during German air raids fared worse than children who remained with their families in cities under attack.¹⁰

The theory of ambiguous loss has been applied to characterize the experiences of children with wartime family separation in various populations.¹¹ Qualitative study of family separation in Congolese refugees demonstrated that the ambiguous loss created by family separation conferred a profound sense of powerlessness and despair. This was mitigated by the ability to recall memories of missing relatives.¹²

B. Children's Experiences with Family Reunification

For child migrants following parent emigration, researchers have observed that pre-migration conditions strongly affect reunification. Specifically, the degree to which children valued parents' decisions to emigrate correlated with more successful reunification.¹³ Additionally, the presence of loving

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7. Naomi A. Schapiro et al., *Separation and Reunification: The Experiences of Adolescents Living in Transnational Families*, 43 CURRENT PROB. PED. & ADOLESC. HEALTH CARE 48, 56 (2013). For discussion of the effect of remittances on children of transnational families, see Claudia Lahaie et al., *Work and Family Divided Across Borders: The Impact of Parental Migration on Mexican Children in Transnational Families*, 12 COMMUNITY WORK & FAM. 299, 301 (2009).
 8. Zhaobao Jia et al., *Health-Related Quality of Life of "Left-Behind Children": A Cross-Sectional Survey in Rural China*, 19 QUALITY LIFE RES. 775 (2010).
 9. Schapiro et al., *supra* note 7, at 52–55.
 10. See ANNA FREUD & DOROTHY T. BURLINGHAM, WAR AND CHILDREN (1943).
 11. Tom Luster et al., *The Lost Boys of Sudan: Ambiguous Loss, Search for Family, and Reestablishing Relationships with Family Members*, 57 FAM. REL. 444 (2008); Cécile Rousseau et al., *Remaking Family Life: Strategies for Re-establishing Continuity Among Congolese Refugees During the Family Reunification Process*, 59 SOC. SCI. MED. 1095 (2004).
 12. Rousseau et al., *supra* note 11, at 1096.
 13. Amy Mong Chow Lam, Ting Sam Chan & Kcon Wah Tsoi, *Meaning of Family Reunification as Interpreted by Young Chinese Immigrants*, 17 INT'L J. ADOLESC. MED. & HEALTH 105, 114–15 (2005).

caretakers in the home country was protective for children and correlated with more successful reunification.¹⁴

The child's experience with the migration journey was identified as stressful and also impacted reunification success.¹⁵ Many children experienced war-related trauma in their home country and/or trauma when crossing the border. Shared decision-making by teens regarding whether to migrate was observed to protect against anxiety and depression.¹⁶

Early reunification experiences of migrant children with their biological families in the United States have had a wide variance in outcomes.¹⁷ Prior research has demonstrated that family reunifications are joyful during the "honeymoon" stage.¹⁸ Children experience the irreplaceable benefit of reconnecting with their parents and other close relatives. This quells the ambiguous loss of having been without their parents for so many years. At the same time, early reunification can feel disorienting.¹⁹ Upon reunion many children are unfamiliar with their reuniting parents and are simultaneously undergoing a separation from their previous caretakers.²⁰ Children in this setting may feel disillusionment and disappointment when confronted with the poverty, racism, and classism that many of their families struggle with in developed countries.²¹ These observations highlight the fact that reactions to early reunification range from positive to negative.

Literature on long-term impacts of reunification is scarce, and overall, the long-term effects of reunification have been characterized as mixed. Despite the expected benefit from reunion with parents, emigrating adolescents have reported that relationships with their parents were irreparably changed.²² Nevertheless, an objective benefit of reunification in the later phases has been observed. Specifically, one study demonstrated that symptoms of anxiety and depression among reunited youth were observed to decrease after a five-year follow-up period.²³

A few qualitative studies have examined the experiences of war-affected children with family separation and reunification.²⁴ Paralleling the literature on family reunification and immigration, family reunification of war-torn

14. Schapiro et al., *supra* note 7, at 58.

15. Linda K. Ko & Krista M. Perreira, "It Turned My World Upside Down": Latino Youths' Perspectives on Immigration, 25 J. ADOLESC. RES. 465, 477-78 (2010).

16. Schapiro et al., *supra* note 7, at 59.

17. *Id.*

18. See, e.g., Lam, Chan & Tsoi, *supra* note 13, at 111-12.

19. Ko & Perreira, *supra* note 15, at 479-80.

20. Lam, Chan & Tsoi, *supra* note 13, at 110.

21. Schapiro et al., *supra* note 7, at 59-60.

22. *Id.* at 59.

23. Carola Suarez-Orozco, Hee Jin Bang & Ha Yeon Kim, *I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind: Psychological Implications of Family Separations & Reunifications for Immigrant Youth*, 26 J. ADOLESC. RES. 222, 222 (2011).

24. Luster et al., *supra* note 11; Rousseau et al., *supra* note 11, at 1095.

families suggests mixed results; it can be a disorienting, painful, and challenging process. Reunification prompts a restructuring of family relationships. For example, a study on Sudanese “Lost Boys” who underwent family reunification observed that the boys put pressure upon themselves to fulfill adult provider roles upon achieving contact with their biological relatives.²⁵ The precise health impacts and measurements of social functioning for children undergoing family reunification after separation due to war have yet to be described.

C. Historical Context of the Disappeared Children of El Salvador

Counter-insurgency campaigns carried out by the military against guerrilla sympathizers during El Salvador’s recent civil war (1980–1992) resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, the destruction of entire villages, and the forced separation of thousands of children from their families.²⁶ Often, the military turned over disappeared children to the Salvadoran Red Cross, which either placed them in orphanages or arranged for their adoption abroad.²⁷ Some adoptions involving Salvadoran military personnel and US embassy officials may have been instances of child trafficking. The frequency of child disappearances was greatest from 1980 to 1982.²⁸ In 1994, two years after the close of the war, families of the missing children founded the nongovernmental organization Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Association for the Search of Disappeared Children) to assist Salvadoran families in locating their missing children.²⁹

IV. METHODS

This exploratory qualitative study sought to gain insight into the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children—now young adults—with family

25. Luster et al., *supra* note 11, at 452.

26. See generally MARK DANNER, *THE MASSACRE AT EL MOZOTE* (1993); ELIZABETH JEAN WOOD, *INSURGENT COLLECTIVE ACTION AND CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR* 8 (2003) (explaining that the death rate of civilians during the Salvadoran civil war was twenty-eight times greater than that of civilians under the military regimes of Chile and Argentina); Ralph Sprenkels, *Lives Apart—family Separation and Alternative Care Arrangements During El Salvador’s Civil War*, SAVE THE CHILDREN ALLIANCE (2002), available at <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/1467.pdf>.

27. Sprenkels, *Lives Apart*, *supra* note 26, at 31–33; RALPH SPRENKELS, *EL DÍA MÁS ESPERADO: BUSCANDO A LOS NIÑOS DESAPARECIDOS DE EL SALVADOR* 70 (2001).

28. See GIANINA HASBÚN ALVARENGA & ROSA AMÉRICA LAÍNEZ VILLAHERRERA, *TEJIENDO NUESTRA IDENTIDAD: INTERVENCIÓN PSICOSOCIAL EN LA PROBLEMÁTICA DE LA NIÑEZ DESAPARECIDA EN EL SALVADOR* 30 (2004) (stating that the most violent and intense fighting occurred from 1980 to 1982; forced separation increased during phases of more intensified violence).

29. *Id.* at 36–44.

separation and reunification. Particular attention was paid to the short-term and long-term impacts of these phenomena on the well-being of the disappeared youth.

A. Approach

This study used a historical approach with multiple case study designs to discover the range of children's experiences throughout family separation and reunification. The authors of this article used ethnographic and qualitative methods to identify common themes in the experiences of the disappeared Salvadorian children—now young adults—who underwent family reunification. The study draws from fieldwork conducted in El Salvador by the lead author between October 2004 and June 2009 while the lead author was a medical student. The lead author is now a pediatrician and researcher.

B. Context

The majority of the fieldwork was conducted in San Salvador, as Asociación Pro-Búsqueda—the partnering community-based agency—was headquartered there. In addition to fieldwork in San Salvador, the lead author conducted several visits to rural areas throughout El Salvador, especially to regions most strongly impacted by the war.

At the time of the interviews, Asociación Pro-Búsqueda had documented over 765 cases of children who were disappeared and had located 310 of these children, the majority of whom were found residing in El Salvador, the United States, Italy, France, and Honduras. The organization had facilitated 178 family reunions, and 455 documented cases remained unresolved.³⁰

This study received IRB approval from the institutions—UC Berkeley, UCSF, and UCLA/RAND—attended by the authors.

C. Sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling. Salvadoran disappeared youth and their close relatives (biological and adoptive) who underwent family reunification and who resided in El Salvador were eligible for this study. Although

30. Personal Communication in San Salvador between Margarita Zamora and Elizabeth S. Barnert, Clinical Instructor, Department of Pediatrics, University of California, Los Angeles (20 Mar. 2006); Elizabeth Barnert, *Searching for Lost Children/Hundreds are Still Missing in El Salvador*, SF GATE (9 Apr. 2006) <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/Searching-for-lost-children-Hundreds-are-still-2520222.php>.

not the focus, individuals in search of missing family members were also eligible. Potential participants were identified and recruited with the assistance of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. Individuals who were not connected to Asociación Pro-Búsqueda or who lived outside of El Salvador were excluded, which may have introduced a selection bias.

D. Data Collection

We conducted fifty semi-structured interviews between December 2005 and January 2006. The participants included twenty-six disappeared youth (ages twenty-four to thirty-four years) who had been reunited with their families, fourteen of their biological relatives, and three adoptive relatives. Interviews were also conducted with three individuals who were searching for missing youth, one youth searching for her family, and three Asociación Pro-Búsqueda employees as key informants.

Confidential interviews were conducted either in a private office at Asociación Pro-Búsqueda or in the participants' homes. All respondents provided informed consent. Interview guide domains explored participants' experiences with forced separation and reunification. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into Spanish text. Field notes accompanied each interview.

Participant observation complemented the interviews. In 2005, the first author volunteered with Asociación Pro-Búsqueda to assist with the creation of a DNA database to locate disappeared children. The lead author also assisted with family reunions, including serving as a Spanish-English translator during family reunions of disappeared youth who were raised abroad, and collected field notes throughout.

E. Analysis

A grounded theory approach was utilized to analyze the interviews and field notes. The goal was to identify themes representative of the disappeared youths' experiences with family separation and reunification. First, all of the interview transcripts were uploaded into the software AtlasTi. Second, the research team reviewed the transcripts, developed an initial coding scheme, and coded the transcripts. Third, coding schemes were refined, and codes were applied to the transcripts. Finally, consensus themes and concepts about the processes of forced separation and reunification were generated.

V. FINDINGS

Most of the young adults interviewed had been disappeared during infancy or early childhood. The youngest age at disappearance was reported as eight days old. The majority of youth participants in this study were raised in orphanages or with adoptive families. There were a few exceptions. Three boys were informally taken in by soldiers and raised on military bases. Several youth described moving between multiple orphanages and/or adoptive families. In addition, a few youth left their adoptive families or orphanages and subsequently lived on the streets.

At the time of their reunions, most of the disappeared children were between the ages of fifteen and thirty, and had been separated from their families for at least fifteen years. By the time of the interview, approximately ten years had lapsed since their family reunions; the most recent reunion had occurred one month prior to the interview.

Although most of the disappeared youth were originally from rural areas, eleven of the twenty-six lived in San Salvador or other urban areas at the time of their interviews. In contrast, only three of the twenty-six relatives interviewed resided in urban areas. Seven of the youth had, at some point following reunion, relocated to live with their biological families, either temporarily or indefinitely. At the time of the interviews, two of these youth remained residing with their biological families.

A. Stages of Family Separation and Reunification

The experiences of the disappeared children with family separation and reunification were conceptually divided into six distinct stages: pre-disappearance, disappearance, separation, searching, reunion, and reunification.

1. Stage One: Pre-Disappearance

Many youth retained memories from the period preceding their disappearance; however, some did not. Youth who did not retain memories attributed it to either being too young to remember or to blocking out memories of their families and the war. Of those who recalled this period, most described growing up feeling happy and loved by their families. Several participants spoke about playing childhood games with siblings or parents. They also described being poor and living in humble homes in rural settings. A minority of individuals described not feeling close to their families. In these cases, conflict between the parent and child existed in the post-reunion period.

Many respondents described vivid memories of enduring physical and mental trauma alongside their families during the war. Many stated that their

parents either were overt guerrilla supporters or were targeted by the military because it was assumed that they were. Several respondents described the physical injuries they sustained, such as gunshot wounds while fleeing during a military raid, often alongside their parents. Youths' remarks tended to highlight their parents helping them with basic aspects of survival, such as a parent foraging for food or finding shelter.

2. Stage Two: Disappearance

Respondents related several mechanisms for their disappearances. Many vividly remembered the circumstances of their disappearances; however, others had gathered information later from speaking with peers who had become disappeared with them, or with biological family members following reunion.

Most respondents were separated from their families during a military raid. In several instances, participants described that the military had forcibly taken them from their parents, sometimes at gunpoint. Several participants described witnessing their parents' torture and violent assassination. One participant, eight years old at the time of her disappearance, related that soldiers had used her father's machete to cut open his throat. She could still see his heart beating in his mutilated body when the soldiers took her via helicopter to a military base.

Several respondents similarly reported that they were delivered in a helicopter to a military base where they were then turned over to the Red Cross and placed in orphanages. Most attributed their disappearance to the military; however, several described the distinct role of the guerrilla force. Two brothers related that their mother had intentionally placed them in an orphanage so that she could dedicate herself to guerrilla combat. Two youth stated that the guerrillas had forced their parents to place them in security houses, which were houses where a façade of a family was created to cover up clandestine guerrilla activities.

A minority of respondents said they did not believe their disappearance was a direct result of the war. One adolescent cited poverty, familial discord, and her mother's inability to care for her as the reasons for being given up for adoption. Overall, however, respondents conveyed a common experience, which began with the sudden shock of being ripped out of the social fabric of their biological families. Next, they experienced a period of intense emotional turmoil and uncertainty, which was somewhat mitigated once they landed in the relatively more stable environment of an orphanage or new home.

3. Stage Three: Separation

The stage was defined as beginning once the youth had reached a relatively stable living arrangement—for example, arriving to the home of an adoptive

family—following the disappearance event. A few respondents remained in the same home environment following their disappearance, but most described moving among several settings. Adoptions tended to occur informally, and on several occasions, youth moved between adoptive families. Some respondents, particularly the males, described being moved among several orphanages because of their disruptive behavior.

Respondents described a wide range of feelings during the separation period. Some said they were raised in supportive environments where they felt loved and well cared for, either within orphanages or with adoptive families. Others experienced physical and mental abuse by their adoptive families and, to a lesser extent, within the orphanages. Most of the youth who were raised in orphanages expressed appreciation for the education that they received, as they reflected that the same level of schooling would not have been afforded to them had they remained in the countryside with their biological families, most of whom were poor and had less access to education.

Universal to all the youth was a struggle to develop their identity, as well as a longing for social connectedness. Many of the youth did not retain memory of basic aspects of their identities, such as their birthplace, birth date, last name, or parents' names, let alone knowledge of their family history or precise circumstances of their disappearances. Similarly, the youth lacked knowledge of their families' whereabouts, including whether parents and other close relatives had survived. The youth expressed a longing for connectedness that manifested more frequently as an intense yearning to see their biological mothers. This occurred regardless of whether youth expected that their mothers were alive or dead. The desire to see their biological mothers permeated much of their childhoods.

Uncertain about their identities and lacking their families, youth tended to feel socially isolated. Even when treated well in the orphanage, the youth expressed an unfulfilled longing for family and social connection. In response to lack of connectedness to a biological family, the youth created their own family structures. For those in orphanages, the priest or head nun represented parent figures, while peers became siblings. Despite these bonds, the longing for identity and family connectedness persisted.

The feelings and struggles that permeated family separation—most notably, longing for identity and connectedness—extended into the period following the family reunion. Meeting one's biological family did not necessarily mean that youth felt immediately connected to others and that identity issues were resolved. On the contrary, the psychological and social processes that characterized family separation often persisted well into reunification. This was particularly true for youth who did not reunite with their biological mothers—often because their mothers were dead. Thus, family separation, although nominally solved by the family reunion event, left deep scars that impacted many youths' ability to enjoy a sense of identity and connected-

ness during both the family separation experienced during childhood and the later phases that persisted into adulthood.

4. Stage Four: Searching

This stage referred to the desire to find one's relatives or at least a willingness to be found. In most instances, the youths' biological family members initiated a search, which led to the youth being located. Less commonly, the disappeared youth had actively sought the assistance of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda in locating missing relatives. For youth whose families were searching for them, this created a process during which youth displayed varying degrees of acceptance for Asociación Pro-Búsqueda to facilitate a reunion.

Many youth described feeling immense joy at learning that they had family alive and that they could meet them. For many, however, the potential opportunity to meet their biological family aroused strong memories and painful emotions. The youth struggled with feelings of abandonment and sorrow when considering the years they had lost and recalling the trauma of the war. Overall, the majority described feeling a mixture of joy and pain.

There was a wide range in the degree to which the adoptive families and the personnel in the orphanages supported the potential family reunion. In some cases, the adoptive families and orphanage personnel supported the reunion, but in many cases, they were hesitant. One youth, who had lived in a guerilla security house before being raised by an adoptive family, experienced a unique situation because his adoptive family had actually initiated the search for the young man's biological family—acting, according to the participant, out of love for him.

Respondents often felt conflicted about the potential reunion with their biological families. Youth who had been raised by adoptive families were often more reticent than youth raised in orphanages. These individuals described grappling with feelings of disloyalty to their adoptive family. They feared that meeting their biological families would represent a rejection to their adoptive families. In contrast, some youth immediately accepted the opportunity to reunite with their families.

Eventually, a longing for identity and connectedness drove most youth to move from separation to searching. Thus, the searching stage represented a turning point in the lives of the disappeared youth. During this stage, the youth broke away from the holding pattern of family separation and took the steps necessary, both physically and emotionally, toward reunion with their biological families.

5. Stage Five: Reunion

Typically, Asociación Pro-Búsqueda facilitated the reunions. The biological family often hosted the homecoming event at their home, which typically

involved festive decorations and a celebratory meal. Several guests, usually all family members of the disappeared youth, sometimes numbering up to fifty or more, waited to greet the reuniting youth. Less commonly, the events were impromptu. A few young adults had multiple family reunions, as additional family members were located.

Despite the outwardly festive atmosphere of most reunions, the youth described experiencing a wide range of emotional and physical responses. The initial moments of reunion typically involved youth embracing their relatives, and the youths said that family members were crying, or that they themselves were crying. Several youth described the shock of, after years of existing under the label of “orphan,” suddenly realizing that they had a large family. This jolt was punctuated by realizing that they, as disappeared children, were themselves aunts and uncles to a younger generation.

Family reunions were, in essence, emotional events. Respondents described feeling unsurpassed joy. Yet at the same time, they also grappled with feelings of abandonment and uncertainty about how they fit in. While some youth described feeling overwhelmed to the point of numbness, all related that they had felt intense emotions. One young adult, who was five years old at the time of his disappearance, described the scene of hugging, crying, and intense emotions characteristic of so many of the reunions: “When we arrived to my dad’s house, my mind was zooming. There were times that I would pinch myself. I felt frozen. I felt huge currents running in my body, as if boiling water ran through me.” He then described his feelings upon meeting his biological mother: “She came over and hugged me. I felt as if there was a force, like a magnet that lifts you. When she hugged me and I hugged her, I felt so different.” Several of the youth expressed similar reflections—that they felt drawn to, and instantly transformed upon meeting, their mothers.

The intensity of the reunion brought challenges. Some of the youth readily expressed that family reunification felt challenging. However, a few youth, particularly those that did not develop close relationships with their biological families following reunion, countered this by downplaying the emotions and the impact of the reunion. Youth varied in the amount of connection and affection they felt for their biological families. Many instantly felt connected. Yet, even those who described feeling an instant connection with their biological families simultaneously struggled to figure out how they would fit into their families. Family reunion was extremely disorienting.

Ironically, the inner experience of the reunion mirrored the disappearance in the sense that youth were thrust out of the family structures that they had created during the separation period. While several youth felt that their biological family members appeared familiar, they also wondered how they would fit into a now large, extended family. An additional challenge was that reunion awoke memories of war, as well as the pain of the fam-

ily separation that they had endured for much of their childhoods. Family members, including parents, often felt like strangers. Additionally, in many instances, relatives present at the reunion were able to confirm that parents or other relatives had died. This made the reunion a day of grieving as well.

6. Stage Six: Reunification

The reunification stage was a long-term process that the disappeared youth characterized as ongoing. The extent to which youth were actively engaged in, or attentive to, this process varied. Overall, the observations of reunification indicated that, just as reunion mirrored disappearance, reunification mirrored separation in the sense that the primary task of this period was to build new family structures.

Many youth were interested in gathering factual information about their identity from their biological families, such as full name, birth date, place of origin, and learning or verifying the story of their disappearance. On another level, the youth were internally reconstructing their sense of identity, moving from considering themselves an orphan to a son, daughter, grandchild, or whatever the new family roles called for. In other words, family reunification signified a long process of identity searching.

Several youth described the role of family reunification in shaping their sense of identity. While reunification did not remedy feelings of emptiness in and of itself, it constituted the important role of confirming memories of the war and clarifying youths' sense of identity. In other words, family reunion did not necessarily equate with happiness or success. For most, it was an arduous process that brought self-knowledge and an enhanced social network, but also disappointment and sadness.

This population faced several challenges to reunification. Many youth reported that lack of money, time constraints, and geographic distance impeded their ability to visit their biological families. Emotional challenges included the need to face the difficult feelings aroused by the reunion, including feelings of abandonment, facing the trauma of the war, mourning lost relatives, and coming to terms with new relationships, which most often felt uncomfortable or strained despite declarations of love. There were also conflicts between individuals. This included conflict between the youth and their biological families, adoptive families, or in-laws.

Class difference was also an issue. As many of the youth had been raised in urban environments and had received more schooling than their biological families, this created a class and cultural difference. Two brothers raised in the same orphanage typify this. They briefly lived with their grandfather on his farm following reunification, but both eventually returned to city life. The grandfather felt bitter about the boys' disappointing behavior in not completing farm tasks, while the boys felt frustrated by their grandfather's

unfair expectations. The younger boy explained that he had not been raised to cut sugar cane, found it boring, and lacked the calluses and physical endurance necessary for the work. Feeling bitter and rejected, the younger brother returned to the city and subsequently had little contact with his grandfather or other biological relatives.

Similarly, another youth described that differences in social norms and expected comforts became an obstacle in reforming her relationship with her biological mother. She stated that, unlike her mother, she did not feel happiness at re-meeting her mother, as she had grown accustomed to the ways and comforts of the orphanage. For some, the differences that evolved during the separation period felt insurmountable, while others accepted them as challenges to address continually.

Thus, the youth varied greatly in the extent to which they felt close to, or connected with, their families. This was reflected in the amount of support they received from their biological families, as well as the amount of responsibility they felt toward their families. One youth said, "Now I feel happy because before I couldn't count on anyone. Everyone has setbacks and now I know how to find my family if I need them. But I reflect and I decide to stay and fix my own problems." For many of the youth, finding their families had enhanced their sense of identity and feeling of belonging, regardless of actual quality of the relationships that they developed with their biological families. As demonstrated by the young man quoted above, resilience—one's ability to turn inward and face challenges—rather than looking outward to family relationships to solve problems, seemed more predictive of happiness and well-being than quality of relationships achieved.

Overall, although reunification was difficult, it was positive for most of the disappeared youth. No respondents reported that reunification was detrimental overall. In fact, two youth reported that meeting their families and learning that someone cared about them and could serve as a positive role model provided the impetus for them to leave gangs. However, some said that reunification had only a limited impact. Most commonly, the acceptance and reintegration of biological families into the lives of the youth following reunion provided a source of inspiration and support, regardless of the quality of relationships achieved. All of the youth in the study responded affirmatively that if they could choose whether to reunify with their biological families again, they would make the same choice.

Finally, while not directly elicited in the interview guide, many of the youth discussed navigating the violence and poverty of present-day El Salvador. Specifically, lack of money for local travel was one of the major challenges during reunification, as well as a motivation spontaneously offered by participants, particularly males, for considering migration to the United States. Related to this, many of the youth described cycles of separation and reunification that were ongoing due to immigration. For example, one

young woman had become separated from her family during a military raid, was raised in an orphanage, and subsequently reunited with her mother, father, and all seven of her siblings. At the time of the interview, this young woman and her youngest sibling were the only two of the eight siblings in El Salvador; the others had emigrated to the United States. Thus, while still grappling with reunification issues, she and her family were also in a new pattern of separation.

B. Overarching Concepts

Across all the stages of separation and reunification, three overarching concepts emerged: identity, connectedness, and resilience. First, the desire to better understand their identities facilitated movement through the process of reunification and, in particular, was key in pushing youth to move from the separation to the searching stage. Reunion and reunification, however, created an identity crisis of its own, as identities forged during years of separation now collided with identities either rediscovered or created anew. Second, youth commonly yearned for stronger social connectedness. This, like identity, fueled their path through the process of reunification. Again, however, the price of gaining social connections with reunited family members was ambivalence regarding their own loyalties, resentment regarding old connections broken, and disappointment in the quality of the connectedness attained. Third, resilience, which described the ability to transcend challenges in both internal and physical environments, moderated youths' movement through the stages of separation and reunification. The main vehicles and expressions of resilience were school, work, God, new family, and altruism. Of these, devotion to their new families as parents and spouses was especially prominent as a motivator for success. The acceptance and reintegration of biological families into the lives of the youth following reunion, regardless of the quality of relationships achieved, did not automatically bestow resilience, but it did provide a source of inspiration and support.

VI. INTERPRETATION

The experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran youth with family separation can be characterized as emotionally traumatic, ambiguous losses.³¹ Many of the youth struggled with uncertainty about their identities and grappled with feelings of loneliness and abandonment. At the same time, they faced the intense challenge of not knowing whether their parents were alive or dead,

31. See generally Boss, *supra* note 5.

which impeded grieving and heightened the intensity of the loss. Following the ambiguous loss, contact between the youth and biological relatives was re-initiated; this represented the extinguishing of the ambiguous loss physically. Yet, even after family reunion, youth still struggled to grasp their identities and to feel connected to their families and peers. In this way, the ambiguous loss created by the forced separation had lifelong implications; the emotional aspect of the loss persisted.

The youth underwent a long process of reconnecting with their biological families. To characterize this process, analogous to the application of ambiguous loss theory to the family separation period, the newer notion of “ambiguous reunification” may be crucial to understanding the youths’ experiences with reunification. The concept of ambiguous reunification was proposed for social workers working with children after abduction.³² Unlike ambiguous loss, which refers to ambiguity about either the physical or psychological absence of a loved one, in ambiguous reunification, the loved one is physically present but psychologically absent.³³ Many of the disappeared Salvadoran youth described, despite having reunited with their relatives, lacking connection or psychological acceptance of the new relationships. This represents the ambiguous reunification—the uncertainty and ambiguity in roles, titles, norms, and expectations in the newly forming relationships. The experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran youth also suggest that ambiguous reunification can be overcome, but several challenges—both physical and mental—exist. Through a long process of trust building, the relationships can be rebuilt on new terms. Resilience is essential. In essence, this is the central task of reunification—to define new family roles and accept the lost relative back into their lives.

Each of the stages of family separation and reunification is expressed in this article in chronological order with reference to sequences of events—for example, reunion. However, on a subtler level, movement through these stages in terms of mental states and processes often occurred in a nonlinear fashion. The family reunion mirrored the disappearance stage—being thrust out of and into a new family concept—and the reunification stage mirrored separation—being forced to develop a new family concept and identity—lending further support to the parallel concepts of ambiguous loss and ambiguous reunification. The social and psychological experiences that underlay family separation and reunification represented iterative, long-term processes that continue to impact the lives of the disappeared youth even today, decades after their disappearances.

32. Geoffrey L. Greif, *Ambiguous Reunification: A Way for Social Workers to Conceptualize the Return of Children After Abduction and Other Separations*, 93 *FAM. SOC'Y: J. CONTEMP. SOC. SERV.* 305 (2012).

33. *Id.* at 307.

The stages of separation and reunification likely extrapolate to children undergoing family separation and reunification in other countries and under different circumstances. Within our sample in El Salvador, dramatic parallels emerged in the experiences of the youth between the separations they endured during the war and those that they and their families endured due to relatives' emigration abroad. Furthermore, the various causes of separation were often interconnected. For example, as was seen with this community, war intensified immigration patterns. Surveying the literature on family separation and reunification, a universality of children's experiences with separation and reunification emerges. Across various circumstances and geographic regions, children seem to have similar essential experiences with separation and reunification. The fundamental aspects of family separation and reunification observed in the disappeared children—namely ambiguous loss, reconnecting, and ambiguous reunification—may apply universally to children in other settings. If this assertion proves correct, the implications are profound, as human rights strategies and policies of international relevance could emerge. Lessons learned from the disappeared youth may extend to children separated from their families as a result of diverse situations, such as war, natural disasters, adoption, foster care, or incarceration.

The intense and ongoing challenges of the disappeared children of El Salvador with family separation and reunification support the notion that family separation should be prevented whenever safe and feasible to do so. Furthermore, their overall positive experiences with reunification argue for promoting family reunification. These findings align with the American Academy of Pediatrics' recent policy statement on immigrant children, which asserts that family separation should be avoided whenever possible and reunification expedited.³⁴

Several limitations impact the validity and generalizability of the study. Cultural and language barriers were present. Additionally, trust could have been an issue, as participants were asked to reflect on traumatic and personal experiences. Finally, given that participants were asked to speak about their disappearance and reunion, which for many of them had occurred several years prior, recall bias could have been an issue. Further research on long-term effects of reunification on children across contexts is warranted.

VII. CONCLUSION

The experiences of the disappeared children suggest specific programmatic implications. For children who have undergone family separation in the

34. COUNCIL ON COMMUNITY PEDIATRICS, *Providing Care for Immigrant, Migrant, and Border Children*, 131 PEDIATRICS e2028, e2033 (2013).

context of war, providers should be attentive to youths' potential uncertainty about their identity and feelings of social isolation. The same issues with identity and connectedness may well be prominent for children separated from their families due to other circumstances. Additionally, the study findings suggest that providing long-term support for reintegration of identity and family concept would be valuable for improving the health and well-being of children and young adults undergoing reunification. Additionally, policymakers should pursue policies that avoid family separation whenever possible and, in instances when family separation is unavoidable, promote policies that ease the arduous process of reunification. While the disappeared children of El Salvador represent an extreme example of forced separation and reunification, their experiences are likely relevant to many. In the context of wartime and post-war El Salvador, the analysis expressed in this article suggests that supporting family reunification benefits the youth. With the exception of extreme situations, such as child abuse or neglect, this is also likely true for millions of children worldwide.