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To cite this article: Sandra Peake & Orla Lynch (2016) Victims of Irish Republican Paramilitary Violence—The Case of “The Disappeared”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 28:3, 452-472, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2016.1155931](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1155931)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1155931>



Published online: 19 Apr 2016.



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Victims of Irish Republican Paramilitary Violence—The Case of “The Disappeared”

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Throughout the history of Northern Ireland's (NI) “Troubles,” over 3,800 individuals were killed, with between 40,000 to 100,000 individuals injured, leaving many families and communities struggling with the aftermath. In recent times a particular category of victims and survivors has been politically active and thus featured prominently in the media: “The Disappeared.” This label has come to represent the victims of paramilitary groups whose remains were secretly disposed of. Through a long public and political battle the families of the Disappeared have achieved a measure of political success resulting in the establishment of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR). Achieving political voice is not the only or perhaps the most significant difficulty encountered by these families. Their experiences in fact epitomise the complexity of the conflict and divisions in NI society and reflect the dominant issues of loyalty, identity, and importantly—silence. Throughout The Troubles, this silence and related notions of loyalty permeated all levels of society: at a community level which included the response of the church; at a statutory level including the response from social services and police; and, at a political level including local political processes but also departments within the British and Irish governments. This article examines the experiences of the families of the Disappeared through a multilevel analysis of their public campaign seeking the return of the remains of their family members. Using data collected from the families, members of the ICLVR, and support workers, the experience of the families of the Disappeared are analysed through accessing the social dynamics of silence (and loyalty), in-group affiliations, notions of sacrifice, and the attribution of blame; political successes both national and international will also serve to frame the analysis.

Keywords the Disappeared, Northern Ireland, victims

Introduction

During the period in Northern Ireland (NI) commonly known as The Troubles, over 3,800 individuals were killed, with an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 individuals injured.¹ The violence in NI was all-encompassing; it is estimated that 80% of the

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population knew someone killed or injured during this time.² However, some segments of the population were significantly more likely to be killed or injured than others, for example young men account for the highest number of deaths. More specifically, men from poorer neighbourhoods in the deeply segregated communities of NI were most likely to be killed.³ However, these estimates do not convey the complexity of victimhood during The Troubles; like in other conflicts, becoming a victim during a protracted campaign of political violence inherently involves multiple incidences of victimization concentrated around particular segments of society, a high likelihood of multiple occurrences within the same family, and a very high likelihood of continued re-victimisation and re-traumatisation in the aftermath of the violence.⁴ For many in Northern Ireland, violence leading to the injury of, or death of a loved one was only the start of a very painful politicised process that in many cases has dragged on through the generations.

Efforts at addressing and even recognising the needs of victims of terrorism and political violence are subject to the undulations of the political landscape in Northern Ireland.⁵ During the peace process, due primarily to the stellar efforts of victims' families and their supporters, victims' organisations came to play a significant role in the negotiation of what became known as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). For example Margaret McKinney, whose son was abducted, killed, and secretly buried or Disappeared by the IRA, successfully lobbied President Clinton to assist in finding the body of her son Brian, leading ultimately to the creation of the International Commission for the Location of the Victims' Remains (ICLVR). More recently, due again primarily to continued lobbying efforts by families and supporters, those individuals disappeared during The Troubles have become politically visible and thus featured prominently in the national and international media.⁶ Like Mrs McKinney's son, those individuals who were killed by Republican paramilitaries and secretly buried have become known internationally as "The Disappeared."

The moniker "The Disappeared" signifies a group of 16 individuals separately abducted, killed, and secretly buried by republican paramilitaries over the course of The Troubles. Their bodies were buried in unmarked graves in Northern Ireland, across the border in the Republic of Ireland, including County Meath and Wicklow, and in one instance a body was interred in France.⁷ Throughout the conflict, responsibility for the deaths of these victims was denied and in some instances actively hidden from family members. Rumours of women leaving their children to marry abroad, hushed suggestions that an individual had emigrated to the USA, and even fabricated postcards from abroad manifested in the wake of the disappearances of these individuals.⁸ Families were left guessing as to the whereabouts of their loved ones and in many instances believed that there was a chance that they had not been killed or injured, but were merely missing through choice. The families of the Disappeared were unaware for many years that they were not alone in their experience of loss, such was the silence and deception surrounding the abductions of the victims. The extent of the disappearances only became apparent by happenstance as individuals compared experiences in forums such as WAVE, a victims support organisation.⁹ An official acknowledgement of the abductions and subsequent murders came only in 1999 when Republican paramilitaries admitted responsibility for the disappearance of ten of the group. As of 2015, the Provisional IRA (PIRA) has admitted responsibility for thirteen, and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) one; the remaining victims have not been officially recognised as disappeared, leaving their families in a state of limbo.

While a relatively small group of victims given the scale of the losses in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, the experiences of the families of the Disappeared epitomise the complexity of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the nature of community dynamics during this time. The Disappeared, while increasingly prominent in media and political debates due to the revelations in the so-called *Boston Tapes*, as well as the arrest of Gerry Adams in connection with the Disappearance of Jean McConville,¹⁰ have received little significant academic attention. While related academic and historical studies, transcripts, government reports, NGO research such as *The Cost of the Troubles*,¹¹ and international literature on disappearances during conflict provide a useful basis to contextualise the Disappeared, research with the families themselves and the specific case of NI is largely absent.

Achieving recognition, political voice, and visibility were not the only, or perhaps the most significant difficulties encountered by the families of the Disappeared in the thirty-year period since the abduction of their relatives. Their experiences epitomise the complexity of victimisation during The Troubles; complexities that resulted from the entrenched divisions in NI society and the issues of loyalty, fixed community identities, intimidation, and importantly—silence. The intense community dynamics present in Republican communities during The Troubles and even still witnessed in some areas today, resulted in severe personal, social, and at times physical consequences for anyone violating the complex traditional unwritten community rules, summed up in the words of Seamus Heaney,¹² “Whatever you say, say nothing.”

Throughout The Troubles, the prioritisation of maintaining *silence*^{13,14} and related notions of trauma, loyalty, and fixed communal identity permeated all levels of society: at a community level which included the response of the church; at a statutory level which included the response from social services, security, and policing; and, at a political level which included local political processes but also the respective approaches of the British and Irish governments. This article examines the experience of a family whose relative was Disappeared during The Troubles. Using data collected from interviews with all generations of the family, the experiences are analysed via an exploration of the social dynamics of silence, in-group affiliations, notions of sacrifice, and the attribution of blame; their political successes, both national and international, will also serve to frame the analysis.

Disappearance as a Tool in Conflict

Disappearance is a commonly used method in war;¹⁵ more than 30 countries acknowledge that 40,000 people are missing or suspected killed by this method.¹⁶ Disappearance is a multipurpose tool, however ultimately Summerfield¹⁷ suggests that its aim is to bring about “terror to exert social control, if necessary by disrupting the fabric of grassroots social, economic and cultural relations.”

While the number of conflict-related disappearances across the world is high, research attention has been comparatively scant and no research study has been conducted specifically on the prevalence, use, or impact of conflict-related disappearances in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland the levels of conflict-related disappearance are relatively small in comparison to other conflict areas, however the impact of the Disappearances were and are politically and socially significant.

Those Disappeared during The Troubles are however only the current manifestation of a strategy, long used in Ireland as a tool in political violence. O’Halpin¹⁸

documents the use of disappearances as a means of dealing with subversion but also as a result of *score settling*, poor intelligence, and incompetence. O'Halpin¹⁹ explains how the killing of civilians during the Civil War in Ireland by the IRA was a strategy that was extremely prevalent in certain geographic areas, namely South Munster; Hart²⁰ also refers to the killing and disappearance of civilians by the IRA in the region. Understanding the relevance of these events for those disappeared during The Troubles is complex given the complexity of the conflict and the intricacies of claims to historical continuity. However, lessons and questions from this period resonate with the experiences of the families of those disappeared since 1970. As pointed out by O'Halpin,²¹ why certain brigades of the IRA were more active in disappearances, particularly of civilians, why the disappearances were carried out, how they were portrayed, and how silence was maintained are all issues that have significance today. While the activity of paramilitaries during The Troubles is beyond the scope of this article given its focus on the experience of the families, the relevance of organisational and contextual factors in the policy to engage in Disappearances cannot be understated.

In Northern Ireland as mentioned, "The Disappeared" is commonly used to refer to sixteen individuals who were murdered and secretly buried since the start of The Troubles in 1969; however, other cases are suspected to exist. To date eleven bodies have been found, some through the work of the International Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) and others by chance.

The ICLVR is a body that was created after much lobbying in May 1999, supported by legislation that facilitated information to be passed through an intermediary, from former paramilitaries or members of the public, to members of the Commission. The remit of the ICLVR is legislated for in the United Kingdom by the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act and in Ireland by the Location of Victims' Remains Act 1999. Both these pieces of legislation offer protection to the individual transmitting the information relating to the location of the victims' remains but also the information itself: the information is not admissible in criminal proceedings. There are restrictions on the nature of the forensic testing of the remains and related items found based on the information, and there are limitations on the disclosure of the information by the Commission. In effect, in return for information on the location of a victim's body, the families may have to sacrifice the option for a criminal justice resolution;²² prosecutions for the abduction and murder of their relative would be highly unlikely.

In the mid-90s, the Disappeared became an issue in the Northern Ireland peace process. McKittrick et al.,²³ in a chronology of deaths during The Troubles, indicated that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had initiated an investigation into the missing in 1999 and stated their intention was:

To do all within our power to rectify an injustice for which we accept full responsibility and to alleviate the suffering of families.

Bew and Gillespie²⁴ however indicated that the IRA refused to reveal the places of burial unless there were assurances that no post mortem or other forensic examinations would be undertaken on the remains. It is of however even greater significance that they indicated, according to Bew and Gillespie,²⁵ that the funerals had to be held in private with all media excluded. While this is not adhered to in recent times, its inclusion in the original agreement is highly relevant to understanding

the control the IRA maintained, even in death, upon the Disappeared and their families. The investigation announcement was timed to coincide with intensive peace talks and for some this undermined any sincerity on behalf of the paramilitaries: “*The fact that the IRA have decided to make this announcement now and use us as pawns in the bigger picture*” was expressed as regrettable by one of the family representatives.²⁶

Internationally, much has been written on the impact of Disappearances on those families left behind, however sustained critique has been directed at the dominant trauma-focused approach; a focus on PTSD and other mental illnesses (see endnote 15) has been used to account for the individual experiences of family members. Little work is directed towards understanding the chronic interpersonal impact of experiencing loss through Disappearance, the societal impact, the intergenerational issues, issues around personal and social resilience nor the impact of politicisation of the victim and their families, including a dearth of analysis of measures to recover remains and avenues for restorative or criminal justice solutions.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the disappearances are a clear example of the exertion of not only internal paramilitary group control (as an effort to deal with alleged informers (albeit unproven) or those working against the paramilitary group), but also a deliberate mechanism of broader social control whereby the individual victim and their family were stigmatised by the event, the propaganda associated with it, and thus isolated and ostracised from their community.²⁷ In many cases this experience was inherited by generations of each family. Understanding the experience of NI’s Disappeared cannot be accessed through attempts to understand individual mental health experiences; importantly a Disappearance is not a one-off catastrophic event, it is a protracted experience that incorporates the individual and the community with instances of repeat victimisation and re-traumatisation commonplace.

A more useful conceptualisation for understanding part of the experience of a Disappearance for those left behind is the notion of “ambiguous loss.” Boss²⁸ suggests ambiguous loss as a theoretical construct to offer insight into the difficulties that emerge when individuals have not recovered remains after a disappearance. The impact for individuals, according to Boss,²⁹ is that ambiguous loss may block the grief process and can result in traumatisation, hopelessness, and feelings of ambivalence and ultimately suspend grieving. For researchers the concept of ambiguous loss offers important insights into the impact of disappearances serving as a more nuanced approach as opposed to considering the experience via a medical model. It also captures the importance of societal interactions in dealing with such a complex conflict trauma. Boss,³⁰ reflecting after 9/11, contended that in Western society the cultural inclination is always to seek closure, yet for many families whose loved ones were Disappeared the reality becomes learning to live with ongoing ambiguity. She argues that a focus on PTSD and grief is not sufficient and suggests that feeling ambivalent, confused, and unable to grieve are all natural reactions to ambiguous loss. Furthermore, terms such as closure may be inappropriate given that in such circumstances as Disappearances, closure in the traditional sense is not always achieved even after a body is recovered. Using the framework of ambiguous loss allows for a recognition that the impact of a Disappearance and the related longevity of grief reactions are not due to psychological illness or resistance to moving on, but rather the ambiguity of the loss itself and the complex circumstances surrounding the Disappearance.

There are implications also in how we think about the deaths of individuals as a result of political violence more generally. Societal perceptions of the victims and how the families should *deal* with the loss impact on the individual and familial processes of normal grieving. The portrayal of victims as heroes, the construction of their death as a sacrifice for the rest of the community, and their general politicisation after death places limitations on the *acceptable* form of public grief expected from the families. In addition, the clear existence of a hierarchy of victimhood, where some deaths are venerated more than others, adds to an already traumatic experience. Summed up in the words of a victim of the July 7, 2005 London bombings, the discord between the public face of *overcoming the bombings* and the personal struggle she endured is clearly evident:

It may not have broken London, but it broke some of us.³¹

For researchers the concept of ambiguous loss creates a different lens to review the issue of vulnerability in relation to families whose loved ones have been killed in conflict, as this approach focuses on recognising the longevity and normality of reactions given the ambiguity that surrounds such loss. The focus therefore is on resilience to tolerate and cope with what has taken place, even after the recovery of the remains.

In the case of NI's Disappeared, the notion of ambiguous loss captures the elements of individual and familial trauma situated to some degree in the context of the loss, but does not account for the complex community dynamics that played a significant role in prolonging and reinventing the trauma experienced. For the families left behind, it was commonplace to experience exclusion from their community, ridicule in their grief, dishonour of the memory of their loved one, and isolation from the institutions of government and church through both unintentional insensitivity and deliberate exclusion. The experience of being a family member of one of the Disappeared is one of personal traumatic loss but also a reflection of the community dynamics during The Troubles.

Methodology

A key focus of this project was to capture the inter-generational complexity of the experience of the families of the Disappeared. As part of a larger study, three generations of one family ($n = 5$) were contacted to secure agreement to participate in the study. The family members included a mother, siblings, and nieces/nephews. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews; the schedule was developed based on key themes emerging from the literature. The interview schedule was peer reviewed to ascertain that the questions were appropriately structured, sensitive in relation to language, and easily understood.

One-to-one interviews were undertaken over a three-week period, influenced by participant availability. The spread of interviews facilitated the researcher to refine the research questions and to enable the participants to engage fully in the process. Repeat interviews were carried out in three of the cases (total interviews $n = 8$).

The interviews were digitally recorded in addition to field notes being taken. The recordings of the interviews were coded, names and identifying details were redacted, the data was then stored securely and password protected to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

The data was analysed line-by-line using a thematic analysis approach. This process facilitated the drawing out of key themes, and facilitated the organisation of the data into codes and higher order themes; the final higher order themes are presented in the results below. Memos were created during the process of coding and were used to inform the analysis.

Given the needs of the participant group,³² careful consideration was given to the harm/benefit ratio inherent in this work; potential for re-traumatisation, harassment, retaliation, and further traumatic loss given the subject area was possible.^{33,34,35} Prior to the interview, participants were contacted to discuss the realities of their involvement in terms of their own well-being. All participants were willing to continue with the process and were given detailed participant information packs. Full ethics approval for this work was secured from the authors' home institution.

Results

As a result of the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged:

- Silence, as a method of coping and the external role of silence as a form of paramilitary control.
- The longitudinal impact of a disappearance.
- The continuous nature of the trauma experienced as a result of the ambiguity surrounding their loved one's disappearance.
- Mechanisms for survival.
- The use of disappearance as a mechanism for community control.
- The decisive role played by members of the international community in resolving the issue of the Disappeared.
- The role of faith and ritual in bringing closure and a sense of resolution.

Silence

Silence and silencing were dominant themes that emerged in the analysis of interview transcripts; the concept was constructed as an active process chosen by family members as a means of coping with the Disappearance but also something that was forced upon them by the actions of paramilitaries and their community more generally. As a means of coping both individually and within the family, silence was achieved via a tacit agreement not to speak of the victim, or to speak only of him in certain circumstances; for example in the absence of younger family members. However, different generations of the family saw silence as a means of protecting others from the pain of their loss. Parents spoke of protecting children, children spoke of protecting parents, and older siblings spoke of protecting the younger children. In the case of silencing as a result of the actions of paramilitaries and segments of their community, the concept was understood as both an active and a passive process; as an active process whereby the families were deliberately excluded from community processes that would have been the norm prior to the disappearance, and as a passive process whereby the community, out of fear of retaliation or through some notion of loyalty, ignored the loss and the plight of the family. This experience is commonly recognised in other communities that have experienced conflict, and younger family members are often those who experience the highest degree of *family* silence. Lykes³⁶ speaks of the normal abnormality of war in terms of dealing with

loss, but also recognises the need for individual, family, and community intervention that addresses *silence* for families left behind. Ending this silence as a result of sharing their experience, initially in a closed, supportive environment was a watershed moment for the family.

Silence as a Coping Mechanism

For some of the participants in this study, as the siblings of a victim disappeared during The Troubles, they universally reflected on the use of silence as a means of protecting other family members through attempting to minimise distress within the home and in particular not bring further upset to their parents. Silence was also used in an effort to protect the siblings themselves, as talking about their loss was difficult and uncomfortable:

Every time I talked about it, it opened a wound again for Mummy and for all the family, so every time you talked about it, it's just opening the wounds, opening the wounds, so if you don't talk about it and brush it away then maybe they might talk about something else and they are not hurting. (Int 4: p. 4)

However, while using silence in order to protect their parents was something the siblings sought to ensure, reflecting further on the family dynamics around silence, they recalled how their own exclusion from discussions about their brother, while seen as a deliberate effort to protect them from the emotional trauma, was a fundamental part of the difficulty of dealing with the loss:

I wasn't involved in anything that was going on, any conversations Mummy and Daddy had. One small memory is that I went upstairs and I could hear my Daddy sobbing in the bedroom about *F*.³⁷ So I sat at the top of the stairs just listening and Mummy was comforting him. And that was really sad. And that was it. I can't even remember what was said... you never hear your Daddy crying. It was upsetting for me. So I went down stairs and off I went, you know. (Int 3: p. 1)

The family protected each other by not talking because we didn't want to upset each other. Even though there was an empty chair at the table... but you just sort of tried to get on as if nothing happened but it was the elephant in the room... it's just like a gnawing owl feeling in your stomach. (Int 2: p. 8)

F's mother reflected on how silence in the household had a significant impact on her other children. She recalled how the trauma of the loss itself was one element of the experience for them, but the children having to cope with her grief and suffering was another:

It was worse for them I suppose having to look at me... They couldn't talk about it much, in case it upset me and things like that so it must have been worse for them, they had to keep quiet about it. (Int 1: p. 5)

Silence and thus a related feeling of powerlessness, both within and without the home environment, were common for the family. In the early days and years following the abduction, family members felt there was nothing that could be done. Nothing in that they could not alleviate the grief within their own family, and nothing because they had little or no community, nor police support in their efforts to find their brother. For this family, a sense of powerlessness lasted for over two decades:

There was nothing then, really nothing at all, just that was it, he was gone. (Int 4: p. 4)

The literature on loss identifies silence as a common theme that emerges following conflict-related deaths, including Disappearances. Silence, both as an effort at emotional self-protection but also as a result of community control in a divided society, is well documented. Cairns³⁸ refers to the denial or distancing, in that the reality is distressing and it cannot be spoken of, even to those closest to you; however Boss³⁹ suggests that far from helping to manage the distress, silence often helps continue the denial of death and the blocking of grief.

Silence as a Method of Community Control

While silence as a means of emotional control within the household was a key part of the experience for this family, all participants also experienced a silencing within their own community and beyond. Neighbours avoided family members, they avoided conversations concerning the Disappeared family member, teachers did not acknowledge the Disappearance with siblings of the victim, and even extended family avoided the subject. There was an all-encompassing denial of the families' loss; in some instances due to a concerted effort by members of the republican paramilitaries to *cloud* the reality surrounding the disappearance and in others due to an unwillingness to or fear of *getting involved*. This led to the family being shunned even by extended family and also the wider community, but importantly reinforced the perception held by some that their concern for their son/brother was unfounded. For example, repeated incidences of reported sightings of *F* in England encouraged the belief that he had left of his own free will, thus diminishing the concerns of the family. Sightings were a common occurrence; the family believe these supposed sightings were malicious in order to deflect away from the reality of the disappearance:

At the time people avoided me and all I did was cry, I went round the streets. . . no one knew nothing and that's the way you were left not even knowing. (Int 1: p. 2)

We were shunned everywhere we went. . . . It was basically a waiting game for 21 years. (Int 2: p. 1)

Eppel⁴⁰ contends that "communities are not immune to this sense of helplessness associated with disappearances and may remain silent and disturbed." However, those unable to help could be differentiated from those unwilling to help; individuals who had witnessed the abduction were warned not to talk to the family or give them

any information and so in effect were bound to silence, often under threat of violence:

*P*⁴¹ was very helpful with descriptions and things like that and then one day we went to see *P* again and he put his hands up and said "don't ask me anymore questions . . . I have been warned." He told us that someone had come to him and said you are not to answer any more questions or else . . . from that day on *P* never spoke anymore. (Int 4: p. 3)

This external pressure was evidence of the degree of control experienced by the community in, it may be assumed, an attempt to keep the disappearances hidden. The silence was enforced through a culture of fear:

From *P*'s perspective it was fear. *P* was a young man himself and his life, basically he was threatened, he had been warned if he continued to speak, talked to us or help by giving any more information to us then he too would be in trouble. (Int 4: p. 4)

Smyth⁴² contends that a culture of silence developed around the most dangerous and fearful aspects of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. Even when people did partially break the silence the taboo continued to be felt. The omnipresent threat of violence, both explicit and implicit, was perceived by the family to be a key factor in maintaining silence:

Oh God I, they probably said to anyone who asked Jesus, do you want to disappear if you keep asking questions like this. Anyone would be scared . . . These people are ruthless. (Int 2: p. 6)

In the beginning I was scared and told not to ask any questions, I was scared but you couldn't help it, you couldn't stop and let it go. (Int 1: p. 4)

But other people were just too scared to get involved, they didn't want to, they knew rightly, they would have got a knock at the door if they said too much. (Int 2: p. 2)

A culture of silence was fostered through the continuous threat of violence and by using disappearance as a deterrent should anyone try to assist the family. This threat compounded the trauma felt by family members; while they continued to search for their missing brother, the fear of further violence existed:

When Mummy and Daddy spoke out it used to frighten me, that in speaking out it would get them in any sort of trouble. (Int 3: p. 5)

For this family, speaking out was not only seen as problematic in terms of exposing the actions of the paramilitaries, it was also viewed as a display of disloyalty. Standing up to *the organisation* in any manner had implications for their perceived allegiance to a broad conflict identity—republicanism; this left the family isolated and completely unsupported by their own community. Apart from failing to recognise the families' loss due in part to a lack of clarity around how and why the victim disappeared, those within the community who were aware of the probability that the

victim was killed in conflict-related violence did not provide any support whatsoever. The family were completely alone in dealing with the loss of their loved one:

No if you have gone missing because of the IRA, the IRA were, they were God you know. So nobody speaks out against them, nobody. Because the minute you raise your voice or speak out against them you are condemned yourself, you are in trouble and so are your family, at risk. People just did not speak out against them. There was just this great fear...nobody would have taken your side and stood beside you and said "yes the IRA took this young man, he didn't do anything to deserve an execution." They wouldn't have done it because they are too afraid. (Int 4: p. 5)

Silence was also evident in the lack of assistance from other agencies, including the police, the clergy, health and social services, the education sector, and employers:

Nobody, nobody in medical, church, law, nobody was interested in helping. It was just, everybody closed their doors in our faces. And then that was it. (Int 4: p. 3)

The failure of the state to intervene in such instances is commonly reported in other conflicts including in Argentina,⁴³ Bosnia Herzegovina,⁴⁴ and in Zimbabwe.⁴⁵ Both the local and the national contexts were key to maintaining non-intervention. In the case of NI, the local relationship with police for republican communities was a key element in the lack of police involvement. For the republican communities, engagement with what was the Royal Ulster Constabulary was problematic as at the time, republican paramilitaries were seen to be *in control* of republican communities, so this prevented an already unwilling police force from engaging with the community. Nationalist communities were seen as a no-go area for police, and the communities themselves had little or no confidence in what was seen as a *loyalist* police force.⁴⁶ The issue of loyalty was also key for the issue of non-engagement with the police force; being seen to interact with the RUC was seen as suspicious and evidence of a betrayal to the community but also the fixed conflict identity.

The participants in this study understood this dynamic and recognised that their community was "a no-go area" for the police, and even though the parents of the disappeared man made a statement to the police:

Nothing was done. (Int 2: p. 3)

The paramilitaries owned the area while the police aren't able to do anything. (Int 3: p. 13)

One respondent suggested that police inaction was due to more than just community dynamics and lack of trust in the RUC. They believed that the failure of the police to act in the case of their brother was due to a tacit agreement between police and paramilitaries that the RUC would not interfere in paramilitary controlled areas or with their application of *community justice*:

The police weren't interested you know, they just assumed that he was one of them and he had done a crime against them, meaning the organisation

and they didn't interfere, that was their rules, that was their policing, their jurisdiction so they weren't interested and didn't make any enquiries or anything. (Int 4: p. 3)

There were very dark days, you were afraid to talk and you couldn't get the peelers (police) to come into the estates then. They were like no-go areas and who could you go to? Your local police and that was the boys (republican paramilitaries). (Int 2: p. 6)

As in many conflict-related deaths, the ironic reality is that those individuals responsible for *investigating* the missing person suspected of being killed, are often the people alleged to have had a hand in the disappearance itself. For the family of the Disappeared, the informal policing that was commonplace during The Troubles left them attempting to gain assistance from the very people they suspected of carrying out the violence against *F*; Kovras⁴⁷ suggests that the impact for families may be a further loss of control. A similar scenario, while differing in terms of scale, occurred in Argentina whereby state-run clandestine centres allowed the denial of captives' existence within the facility and thus ensured the state could deny any knowledge of disappearances.⁴⁸

The Longitudinal Impact of a Disappearance

As demonstrated by the testimony of the family, the impact of the Disappearance has had a profound and long-lasting impact on their lives. On analysis of the interview transcripts, as recalled by the participants, the experience can be categorised into three phases: the period around the initial abduction, the many years leading up to the recovery of the remains, and the post-exhumation period.

The recollections of the individual family members demonstrate that the experience of the different generations varied in terms of their evaluation of the emotional and social impact. For the parent of the victim, there was a very distinct recollection of the emotional trauma surrounding the event, a distinct sense of despair and helplessness. This related to the vulnerability of the victim, given that he had a mild intellectual disability and there was significant concern regarding his ability to cope with the abduction. She spoke of how her son needed "looking after" and that he was the "special one" of the family. For the parents of the victim the emotional trauma was linked to the experience of physical illness; they both had serious health issues in the immediate aftermath of the disappearance:

Oh God I can't remember much of that for I just went insane. Walking the streets crying and people looking at me and they wouldn't even come near me to... I had to find him, I needed to find him... because I knew he was dead by then. (Int 1: p. 5)

For the siblings, they recall the time around the disappearance as one where the family essentially broke apart; two of the children left Northern Ireland within three years following the disappearance. They reported being unable to deal with the ongoing trauma in the family home. For other older siblings, the impact was felt

both in the family home and subsequently with their own young families. The trauma was an ongoing part of their lives:

It was desperate so it was, insanity, sleeplessness, drink, fighting with the wife and all, there was no outlet at all, we had to box it all in . . . all you could do was sit and talk about it night, after night. (Int 2: p. 6)

For all generations of the family, the frustration and desperation was continuously linked to the silence experienced surrounding all aspects of the Disappearance. The concept of “boxing it in” was mentioned throughout the interviews, with terms such as “compartmentalising the experience,” or wanting visual reminders “wrapped and put away” rather “than in your face every day.” The ambiguity surrounding the disappearance compounded this further, leading the families to have conflicting emotions regarding whether their loved one was dead or alive:

Everybody we went to and nobody knew nothing. And that’s just what we were told. He has probably gone to England or something but I knew in my heart that that he couldn’t have done, he was too well looked after and we were all so protective of him, you know. So it got as the days went on I knew something had happened. I knew in my heart there was no way he could have stayed out of the house and that’s the way it went. And then months, weeks and years passed and I used to go away up the fields in the early hours of the morning on my own and dig through the soil looking for his body because I knew he was dead. (Int 1: p. 1)

The total abandonment and isolation felt by the family is witnessed in the horrendous recollection of their digging for the body of their loved ones in waste ground in their local area. Their suspicions, while unfounded at the time, were ignored by their local community. The continued searching both physically and through questioning local people was something all members of family carried out in their own way:

I was walking up to (redacted), it’s like a big pit you know looking for freshly dug holes where they could have buried him. (Int 2: p. 7)

Yet despite the belief that their brother was dead and buried, the family were caught in a rollercoaster of emotions; they believed that their brother had been killed, but due to the rumours in the local community and the denials by paramilitaries, they held on to the hope that he may still be alive:

And for all those years we hoped he would come back and of course it wasn’t until you know we finally found his body, that really any of us believed he was actually gone. (Int 4: p. 4)

Once their brother’s body was recovered, the participants expressed that in one sense there was a resolution of the emotional conflict around the *unknown*; there was a certainty in the discovery of death and a form of *closure* when his burial was possible. However, closure in this sense is a limited notion because once the remains were reinterred the family had so many unanswered questions about the

Disappearance, the experience their loved one endured before death, and questions about the death itself:

It's a real battle in your mind and for that to go on for so many years, it's enough to send anybody over the edge, you know. So that closure, that, once you have found the remains, once you have had that burial then you know you don't have the argument in your mind anymore. That's because they are not coming back. (Int 4: p. 9)

While the discovery of *F*'s remains allowed his family to give him a Christian burial, something that was central to their faith, it also helped the family to take control albeit in a limited sense. However, dealing with the recovery process catapulted the family into a new emotional trauma. The *normal* grief that was held at bay until this point emerged:

So the grieving was really when *F* was found. I think when he was found it lifted a huge weight. (Int 3: p. 7)

The recovery of the body not only allowed a form of grieving to progress, but it also addressed some of the issues that caused so much suffering for the family. The discovery of the remains was confirmation of the abduction and murder, and as a result ensured that there could be no further public denial of his abduction and death amongst the community. In addition, the recovery of *F*'s remains in some way vindicated the family's efforts during their attempts to find their son and brother all through the years. Boss also highlighted this process⁴⁹ in the concept of ambiguous loss, where the recovery of the remains breaks down the potential for public denial of death and loss. On a more personal level, for the family, the confirmation of death also removed the prohibition on grieving as it removed the perceived disloyalty of *giving up* on the disappeared person.⁵⁰

Mechanisms for Survival

As mentioned, when individuals and families experience trauma, family members often take on different roles in managing the bereavement.⁵¹ Boss⁵² contends that where ambiguity occurs in relation to death, established family roles and responsibilities often change in the aftermath of the event and family norms and structures altered. This restructuring of family dynamics is witnessed in the interview data collected for this study. The family reflect that their mother became the driving force in leading the search for her son; their father, while initially active, eventually retreated and as a result became somewhat removed from the process and as a result, from the family:

My Daddy was very quiet about it, he didn't like to talk about it and years later when Mummy became involved with WAVE,⁵³ and they gave her that platform and encouraged to talk about it, Mum took it like a baton and ran with it... she was doing something for... to try to find him again... My Dad took the total opposite view he didn't like everyone knowing this, he didn't like being public... He didn't like the media coming to the house... go off into his bedroom and hide in there until they left. (Int 4: p. 7)

The father's withdrawal was mirrored in the behaviour of some of the siblings who adopted the same stance, removing themselves from the public dimension of their brother's disappearance:

I don't like to talk about it. I don't like, don't enjoy public sympathy or attention. (Int 4: p. 7)

The silence within the family, being shunned by the community, and the general lack of support led to broader feelings of shame and embarrassment compounding a withdrawal that was already underway:

One of the feelings I also had was embarrassment and maybe that's why I have never spoken about it to friends or wanted to speak about it, or to teachers... You know I felt embarrassed about it a bit because I didn't know the whole story. And I thought...he must have done something...and you know it was embarrassing which is terrible because it doesn't matter what he did, he didn't deserve his life to be taken. (Int 3: p. 10)

While some members of the family struggled with the necessary public dimension of dealing with *F*'s disappearance, they realised that had they not achieved visibility and voice, even though it was many years after the disappearance, they would never have recovered *F*'s remains:

My mum finds...it was very beneficial for her to talk about it (the disappearance) over the years and to repeat her story and God love her because she did it, that's why we ended up getting *F*'s body back. (Int 4: p. 4)

Despite the activities of the family, achieving *voice* was only possible due to the changing circumstances in Northern Ireland: the emerging peace process during the late 1990s and the evolving victims support movement that brought together individuals who were bereaved during The Troubles.

Burial and Closure

Despite the fact that the respondents felt let down by the church, faith, ritual, and burial were seen as essential to the family. The ritual of burial satisfied the cultural expectations for dealing with the death but importantly for the family, the funeral acted as a public declaration and affirmation of the disappearance; the ceremony confirmed that the family were correct in their pursuit of *F* all the years since his disappearance, and it dismissed the belief held by many in the local community that *F* had emigrated, or left by choice. While the need for rituals and burial were the priority, the need to allow the community to bear witness was equally important:

It is very important because well otherwise you are living in that limbo and that limbo would continue. So finding him, brought closure, it just brought closure to the whole thing, because we knew at last where he was and he can rest in peace. Amen. (Int 3: p. 7)

However, the recovery of *F*'s remains was not a simple process for the family. The years of doubt, silence, deception, and misinformation meant that they felt they could not easily trust anyone involved in the process. For one member of the family, he felt it essential to see *F*'s remains for himself such was his distrust cultured over many years of searching for his brother. Being able to recognise his brother's clothes confirmed for him that the remains were indeed those of *F*:

After 21 years looking you weren't prepared to believe anyone or anybody or anything you know. (Int 2: p. 8)

Boss⁵⁴ contends that people yearn for the body of their missing family member; paradoxically, having the body enables them to let go. But for the family in this study, letting go was not a luxury afforded upon the return of the remains; it merely led to yet another stage in a protracted trauma. The need for redress is a constant issue that the family deals with, more so since they reinterred *F*. Resigned to the fact that a criminal justice solution will never be found in the case of their family member, they have spoken of the potential an apology may have in terms of a resolution for the family:

... an apology. Probably, an owning up to the fact that he didn't deserve to die and disappear an admission of that, that would make a difference. (Int 4: p. 11)

Members of the family have also spoken about the need for truth, the need to know why *F* was taken, the need to know why his abduction was hidden, the need to know what was done to him and heartbreaking details like his last words, or if he "had something to eat," or if he knew what was going to happen to him. Knowing this information, in one way, is seen as a release from the horrors of their imagination and the not knowing that they lived with for almost thirty years, but knowing this information is also important as it vindicates their suffering by highlighting the violence happened upon *F*, and challenges those who caused the shame, ridicule, and isolation that they felt in their lonely struggle to find their loved one.

The Use of Disappearances as a Means of Social Control

In the atmosphere of the 1970s, the period during which *F* disappeared, the family vividly recall the all-encompassing power of republican paramilitary groups in their area. The family recalled that the local organisations had total control of their community and were seen as the ultimate arbiters in community affairs. The communities' acceptance of this control, tacit or otherwise, was due in large part to the dysfunctional relationship between republican communities and instruments of the state; the result was that, due to actual support or fear, the sanctions or punishments paramilitaries deemed suitable often went unquestioned. There was also a significant element of victim blaming. In the case of *F*, suspicion about his tangential involvement in paramilitary *business* was often touted as being justification for his disappearance. These beliefs also ensure that the disappearance was seen as an

inside job, giving the community even more reason to stay silent and remain uninvolved:

So the neighbours didn't openly offer any sympathy, you know they just kind of shrugged their shoulders and nodded their heads as if to say well "maybe he got you know what he deserved" because they didn't know what he was accused of doing and neither did we. (Int 4: p. 4)

As a result of the lack of trust in the policing system amongst republican communities during The Troubles (see endnote 46) and the comprehensive power wielded by paramilitary groups, there was a degree of acceptance of the *community justice* meted out by the republican organisations. The tolerance of this type of community control even extended to the interviewees' wider family, thus ensuring the family were isolated from all potential support systems in the aftermath of the disappearance:

Even our relatives, we have lots of relatives you know, Daddy's cousins and people like that, were very republican people and again they didn't come forward or help or be sympathetic because they too had this attitude, well you know he must have got his just desserts if he had committed a crime against them (republican paramilitaries). (Int 4: p. 4)

When the family did seek information about *F* from republican paramilitaries, there was a consistent denial of responsibility:

There were guys saying I can't believe our ones would have done that there... oh I think you are wrong. (Int 2: p. 6)

For the family in this study, what became very clear were the rigid boundaries within their community; there were those who supported or tolerated the paramilitaries and there were those who didn't; those who didn't were isolated and vulnerable. The almost total control the paramilitaries wielded over the republican community made it near impossible for anyone to oppose them. This highlights the uncomfortable truth rarely reflected in the dominant narratives of The Troubles that for republican communities, the paramilitaries were the perpetrators of significant violence, both symbolic and physical, thus bringing the simplistic narrative of the paramilitaries as *community protectors* into question.⁵⁵ Reflecting on these complex dynamics within divided societies,⁵⁶ Kovras and Loizides contend that:

It sheds light on the notorious aspects of previously admired groups and delegitimises the dominant discourse.

International Involvement in Resolving the Disappearances in NI

While the experience of the family in this study was inherently linked to the local dynamics in Northern Ireland, and especially the dynamics of an intensely divided society, many years after the disappearance of *F*, his case was to become a significant issue internationally. As the peace process gathered momentum in the North

of Ireland, due to a concerted effort by the family and their supporters, international politicians took a personal interest; for Bill Clinton the Disappeared became a cause that he would champion. His role in bringing the Disappeared to national and international attention was something the family saw as a turning point in their search for *F*:

It was getting that level of international involvement and you know Bill Clinton in my Mum's mind, and in all our minds was the man that changed our lives. Because he put that pressure on, on the IRA and then you know the rest of the story from there. (Int 4: p. 11)

For the family the need for external intervention given the context of The Troubles was viewed as crucial; it allowed the caustic local politics of NI to be superseded. The family believed that the influence brought to bear upon republican paramilitaries by Bill Clinton's administration was central to achieving PIRA agreement on the ICLVR:

I reckon he took it to heart (Bill Clinton) and he said to the Sinn Féiners "now listen this here is going to have to be resolved before I give you the okay to collect money or whatever you do over here." I really think it is a big factor you know. Because there was nothing in it for them, they would never have admitted this here only for this. Remember they were getting Visas to visit the States where they were barred for decades. . . . They liked what they seen and dollars flowing in and they most likely said this is what we have to do to continue here. (Int 2: p. 11)

As a result of the intervention by the administration of Bill Clinton, the creation of the International Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains proceeded and was legislated for by the British and Irish governments. Legal instruments enacted in both jurisdictions effectively provided immunity for anyone providing information about the location of the remains of the suspected Disappeared. While in many cases this legislation allowed for the recovery of the victims' remains, this presented the families with the harsh reality that no one would likely be held to account for the murder:

Well you know if it had to be this way, that they had protection and anonymity then I am fine with that. Because there is no other way we are going to find out any information, if they are not kept anonymous, then they are not going to tell us anymore so no I agree although it pains me that they will get away with it and they are not to be shamed. (Int 4: p. 11)

For the families of the Disappeared the need for the return of *F*'s remains was ultimately prioritised over the pursuit of justice; family members reflected that there is little restitution for their suffering when those responsible were effectively forced to provide information with protective measures in place. While the family in this study agree that their ultimate goal was to have the remains of *F* returned, the very harsh reality was that once the body was recovered, they were left with little or no information about the circumstances of the abduction and murder. These unanswered

questions continue to haunt those left behind. The family also reflected on the difficulty in accepting that those involved in the disappearance will never be held to account for both the violence inflicted on *F* but also the shame, ridicule, isolation, and humiliation they experienced in the search for *F*.

Conclusion

A Disappearance during conflict is not just a horrendous personal and family loss, it is an all-encompassing trauma that spreads through generations of families impacting relationships, health, and ultimately one's entire belief system. The impact of dealing with a disappearance has ramifications for all aspects of a family's life: interpersonal relationships, trust in community, family structure, and personal resilience.

The findings in this study indicate that in the case of Northern Ireland, a number of key themes are central to understanding the experience of families of the Disappeared: silence, paramilitary control, the continuity of trauma; mechanisms for survival, and the role of faith and ritual in bringing a sense of resolution, as well as issues regarding community control and policing. The role of the international community in giving visibility to the campaign leading to the recovery of the remains also featured prominently.

The experience of the families of the Disappeared shines a light on the complexity of divided community dynamics in Northern Ireland; it highlights the harsh reality of being outside the very fixed identity boundaries that existed in republican communities and the all-encompassing exclusion experienced when a family sought to challenge the dominant forces of republicanism.

Through understanding the family experience of dealing with the disappearance of a loved one during The Troubles, there emerges a challenge to the dominant and ingrained narrative of paramilitaries as defenders of community, a group portrayed as having been provoked into action by the oppressive organs of the state, a claim that still exists to this day. In addition to addressing the complex issues that were central to the emergence and maintenance of the violence during The Troubles, there is a clear need to address the experience of victims who suffered intra-group violence. This harrowing account of a family of one of the Disappeared highlights not only the painful personal realities of losing a family member to political violence but also the ambiguities, the violence, and the complex community dynamics that were a significant part of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Notes

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40. Eppel (see note 32 above), 411.
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