

**In search of the disappeared:
The information practices of families of
disappeared persons in Colombia**

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War's shadows cast widely; and in the areas of poor illumination lives and fortunes are forged and lost. As nations grow and crumble under the banners of progress and the weight of violence, each citizen tells or paints or dances or bleeds his or her story of survival. The sum total of these stories tells us the nature of war and the prospects for peace. Few reach the light of international recognition, most are lost in the shadows.

(Nordstrom, 2004: 3)

"Jovencitos, duden, opinen, hagan hablar al archivo, no dejen que guarde silencio. El archivo de un cirirí tiene que seguir siendo incómodo en un país injusto y violento como el nuestro, se los dejo como oportunidad de comunión, de solidaridad y de creación, no como un objeto muerto del pasado....Este es mi presente de dignidad a las generaciones que están y a las que vienen, ustedes que son amantes de la verdad, la libertad, la justicia y la belleza, ustedes que tienen en sus manos construir un país distinto. Persistan, no dejen de buscar, de preguntar siempre por qué, por qué, por qué..." Fabiola Lalinde, Medellín, 17 de abril de 2018.

(Young people, doubt, give your opinion, make the archive speak, don't let it keep silent.

The archive of a Cirirí¹ must continue to be uncomfortable in an unjust and violent country like ours, I leave (my archive) to you as an opportunity for communion, solidarity, and creation, not as a dead object from the past... This is my gift of dignity to the generations that are here and those to come, you who are lovers of truth, freedom, justice, and beauty, you who have the possibility of building a different country. Persist, do not stop searching, always ask why, why, why...'²)

¹ A Cirirí is a small South American bird that protects its young from birds of prey, through small persistent attacks with its beak (Vélez and Bautista, 1994). The Cirirí has become a symbol in Colombia to represent "the perseverance and persistency in the search for the truth" of all those searching for the disappeared (Vélez and Bautista, 1994: 20) because it was the name that Fabiola Lalinde gave the 'operation' of finding her son; "Operación Cirirí".

² Fabiola Lalinde's speech 'Make the archive speak, don't let it be silent' to the students of the National University of Colombia at the donation ceremony of her personal archive (17th April 2018), translated from Spanish by Bermúdez Qvortrup (02.06.22) *Hagan hablar al archivo, no dejen que guarde silencio, Verdad Abierta,* see <https://verdadabierta.com/hagan-hablar-al-archivo-no-dejen-guarde-silencio-fabiola-lalinde/> (Accessed 02.06.22).

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Finally, to Martha Soto Gallo and the women I met and spoke to, who are missing loved ones; You spoke of love more than you spoke of hate. Of reconciliation and of peace. We engaged in conversations about the love and sadness for our country, my luck in being able to live abroad, and our roles as mothers. You asked me about my children, just like I asked about yours. I was

engaged in these loving and intimate conversations which covered more than what made it into the findings or articles. I have tried to highlight your work the best I can, and give you a space to articulate your frustration, agency, resistance, and love. Thank you for opening your lives and stories to me and sharing your pain and strength. Your disappeared are also our disappeared.

Oslo, March 2023.

In memory of Jorge and all the forcefully disappeared in Colombia

Abstract

Enforced disappearance is the elimination or concealment of bodies and information about the whereabouts of a person that has been illegally detained by a powerful actor. Most of the perpetrators of enforced disappearance are nation-states; yet, problematically, they are also responsible for establishing justice. The search for the disappeared is mainly a search for information about what happened to a person. Those who search are mainly the relatives of the disappeared, often with the help of NGOs. Concerns of, *what information is available*, and *how to record, organize, protect, and preserve it for posterity*, are central to the field of enforced disappearances, both for those who search and for scholars. The information sought is to achieve the social, political, and legal aim of *accountability*.

To help respond to these concerns, this project studies the overall information-seeking process of these families and what other practices are developed throughout the families' search to help them deal with the obstacles that arise. Using a practice-based approach, document analysis, and interviews of family members (five individuals, of which four became case-studies) and four NGOs who assist the families in their search, the aim is to reveal existing information practices at the grassroots level and their consequences; what they mean not only for the individual families but for the wider society. The study is contained within the location of Colombia as a useful example of the current practice of enforced disappearance occurring under democratic rule, yet characteristic to Latin American nation-states for decades.

This study is organized around the production of three research articles. The first article looks in depth at the personal collections that families are creating with the help of NGOs and family organisations, to understand how and why they are created, who the creators are and what these collections mean for society. The aim is to begin the process of conceptualising these collections and include them in the wider concept of human rights archives. The second article looks at the trajectory of the seeking process including some of the complexity of the socio-cultural barriers the families face that have led them to gather and create records. The third article focuses on one case study which highlights the process that has led to the creation of a personal archive, and how it is being used for purposes of accountability and memorialisation. The last article is, in turn, a concrete example of the conceptualisation made in the first article: an example of an *archive of the disappeared*.

The capstone paper adds a more extensive and comprehensive discussion of the findings, explaining how the families carry the burden of proving the crime happened in order to counter the denial of the state and their refusal to investigate. Hence, they carry the burden of finding information and documenting the disappearance to assist formal investigation processes. I show how their records have indeed been used and absorbed by NGOs and transitional justice mechanisms due to the informational values they carry. I also show how families learn to share their knowledge within their communities, sharing their stories but also their methods.

The study's main contribution is to the field of archival studies in the conceptualisation and highlighting of an existing documentation practice, the creation of personal collections I have named *archives of the disappeared*. By conceptualising these collections, I establish their place under the umbrella term of human rights archives and demonstrate how they contribute to building social accountability.

For information studies, the research implies looking at concepts such as *information needs*, *seeking*, *barriers*, and *use* in new contexts (armed conflict, mass violations) that can help strengthen these concepts by testing them in new ways. The study has taken concepts from two neighbouring disciplines (information studies and archival studies) and combined them to produce something new; an understanding that, in contexts of mass violations and informal systems, *accountability* is bound up with *information-seeking* and *use*, something which needs to be more widely researched. *One* material output of this is the human rights documentation emerging from the grassroots level, conceptualised as records and archives.

The practical contributions are that it highlights the work of informal recordkeepers and the role of recordkeeping training in NGO work which could benefit from more attention and support from archival scholars and practitioners. It also demonstrates the potential of non-institutional recordkeeping as a method for building social accountability. For human rights practice, it contributes to acknowledging where foundational human rights documentation comes from. It reveals how the families of the forcefully disappeared play a critical, yet rather unrecognized role at the front line of recordkeeping and knowledge creation.

Sammendrag

Tvungne forsvinninger innebærer bortføring av personer og tilbakeholdelse av informasjon om hva som har skjedd med dem. I de fleste tilfeller er det statlige aktører som er ansvarlige for tvungne forsvinninger. Samtidig er det også statlige aktører som er ansvarlige for rettsoppgjør. Leting etter forsvunne er først og fremst en leting etter informasjon. Det er stort sett de pårørende som leter; ofte ved hjelp av NGO-er. Sentrale spørsmål for både pårørende, NGO-er og forskere, er hvilken informasjon som er tilgjengelig, hvordan tvungne forsvinninger kan dokumenteres, og hvordan informasjon kan organiseres, beskyttes, og ivaretas for ettertiden. Dokumentasjonen skal bidra til å oppnå et sosialt, politisk, og rettslig mål om å holde noen ansvarlig for det som har skjedd.

I avhandlingen studeres familienes informasjonssøkningsprosess, samt andre informasjonspraksiser som utvikles under deres forsøk på å overkomme hindringene de møter. Ved hjelp av en praksisbasert tilnærming, dokumentanalyse, og intervjuer med pårørende (fem individer, hvorav fire er case-studier) og fire NGO-er som hjelper de pårørende i deres leting, søker avhandlingen å identifisere informasjonspraksis på grasrotnivå, og konsekvenser både for de pårørende og samfunnet. Undersøkelsens setting er Colombia. Colombia er et eksempel på et land med demokratisk styresett, men med mange tvungne forsvinninger, en praksis karakteristisk for latinamerikanske land i flere årtier.

Avhandlingen hviler på tre forskningsartikler. Den første artikkelen tar for seg de personlige samlingene pårørende etablerer ved hjelp av NGO-er og familieorganisasjoner. Hvordan og hvorfor ble samlingene laget, hvem har laget dem, og hva betyr de for samfunnet? Målet er å konseptualisere disse samlingene som en del av menneskerettighetsarkiver. Den andre artikkelen ser nærmere på selve søkeprosessen, og kompleksiteten i de sosiale og kulturelle hindringene de pårørende møter som har ledet dem til å samle dokumentasjon. Det rettes oppmerksomhet mot rollen NGO-er og familieorganisasjoner har når det gjelder å veilede i aktivisme og i å lære de pårørende å bevare dokumentasjon. Den tredje artikkelen er en case-studie i prosessen som leder til etablering av et personlig arkiv, hva arkivet betyr, og hvordan det blir brukt for ansvarliggjøring og som et minnesmerke for den forsvunne. Den tredje artikkelen er samtidig et eksempel på et arkiv for de forsvunne; konseptualisert i den første artikkelen.

Kappen gir en bredere og mer omfattende diskusjonen av funnene, og forklarer byrden de pårørende har ved å måtte bevise at en forbrytelse har funnet sted i møtet med fornektelse fra statlige aktører som ikke vil etterforske. De pårørende må finne informasjon og dokumentere at en forsvinning har funnet sted for å bygge opp under en formell etterforskning. Jeg viser hvordan pårørendes dokumentasjon er blitt brukt av NGO-er og i forbindelse med overgangsrett (transitional justice)-mekanismer. Jeg viser også hvordan pårørende lærer å dele kunnskap med lokalsamfunnene; ved å dele sine erfaringer og fremgangsmetoder.

Avhandlingens hovedbidrag er til fagfeltet arkivstudier, og ligger i konseptualiseringen og oppmerksomheten som rettes mot en eksisterende dokumentasjonspraksis; opprettelsen av personlige arkiv som jeg har kalt de forsvunnes arkiv. Ved å konseptualisere disse arkivene, gir jeg dem en plass under paraplyen menneskerettighetsarkiv, og viser hvordan de bidrar til sosial ansvarliggjøring.

For fagfeltet informasjonsstudier, innebærer avhandlingen at begreper som informasjonsbehov (information needs), informasjonssøking (information seeking), informasjonsbarriere (information barriers), og informasjonsbruk (information use) ses på i en ny kontekst (væpnet konflikt, menneskerettighetsbrudd), noe som kan bidra til å styrke begrepene. Avhandlingen har tatt begreper fra to tilgrensende disipliner (informasjonsstudier og arkivstudier) og kombinert dem for å produsere noe nytt; en forståelse av at ansvarliggjøring henger sammen med informasjonssøking og informasjonsbruk når konteksten er menneskerettighetsbrudd og arbitrært byråkrati. Et materielt eksempel på dette er menneskerettighetsdokumentasjon som er laget på grasrotnivå, konseptualisert som nedtegnelser og arkiver.

Avhandlingens praktiske bidrag er å belyse dokumentasjonsarbeidet pårørende gjør, og rollen NGO-er spiller når det gjelder opplæring. Dette arbeidet ville ha nytt godt av mer oppmerksomhet fra forskere og arkivister. Avhandlingen demonstrerer også potensialet ikke-institusjonell dokumentasjonsforvaltning har som metode for å holde aktører sosialt ansvarlig. For menneskerettighetsfeltet er avhandlingen en påminnelse om hvor grunnleggende menneskerettighetsdokumentasjon kommer fra. Den viser hvordan forsvunne personers pårørende spiller en avgjørende, men allikevel lite anerkjent rolle når det gjelder å få frem dokumentasjon og kunnskap om tvungne forsvinninger.

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Article 1

Bermúdez Qvortrup, N. (2022). "Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualizing the Personal Collections of Families of Disappeared Persons." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 14(2): 582-599.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huac003> [Article not attached due to copyright]

Article 2

Bermúdez Qvortrup, N. (2022). "Finding ways of searching for the disappeared: the information practices of the families in Colombia." *Journal of Documentation* 78(6): 1371-1388.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-10-2021-0202>

Article 3

Bermúdez Qvortrup, N and Giraldo Lopera, M (2022) "Evidence of Jorge: Documentary Traces of a Forced Disappearance in Colombia" *Archivaria* 94, Fall 2022.

URL: <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13875>

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List of abbreviations

ASFADDES Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos - Colombia

CNMH Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica – Colombia

COP Communities of practice

FARC Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

FEDEFAM Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-
Desaparecidos

FO Family organisations

ICMP The International Committee on Missing Persons

ICPPED International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced
Disappearance

JEP La Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz - Colombia

LIS Library and Information Science

NGO Non-governmental organisations

OHCHR United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights

TJ Transitional Justice

UBPD Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas – Colombia

UP Unión Patriótica - Colombia

1 Introduction

“We decided to go to the authorities and they told us that we had to (...) go to another institution. Once there, the officials told us that we should wait 72 hours. We saw all the coffins of bodies arriving there, but none of them were Daniel's. There, they told me to go to another judicial authority, that they would take my case there. They (second office) took over the investigation into Daniel's disappearance. But nothing, absolutely nothing. So we started our own parallel investigation. We searched with the whole family throughout the city and in the places surrounding the house, in Chapinero (an area of Bogotá) I began to trace Daniel's route from our house to the university. I went with the photo of Daniel, asking about my son to people who passed through that area (...). Daniel's case went to the Sijín and the investigator collaborated with us a lot, and he was attentive until the case arrived at the Prosecutor's Office. Then, Prosecutor 42 had it, and now the Second Prosecutor's Office has it (...). The District Attorney has helped me a lot. Even so, every month I go to the Legal Medicine Institute and the Ombudsman's Office.... I'm only missing the cemeteries in this search. I even thought about talking to the armed group, but at the time Daniel disappeared my (other) children were small. I thought: What if they kill me? If something happens to me, who will look for Daniel?” (Julia's story - UBPD, 2019).

Julia's story is one of hundreds of thousands of stories of enforced disappearance in the world. Enforced disappearance consists of the illegal detention and then subsequent disappearance of individuals, meaning that no trace of that person is to be found. The bodies are usually disposed of in secret places or destroyed. This is coupled with the denial of all knowledge about the crime and a refusal to investigate. Like in Julia's case, the families of the disappeared (from now on 'the families' or 'relatives') embark on an endless and strenuous search in countless offices and with different systems, for a person whom they hope can be found alive at first, until the unforgiving passing of time turns it into a permanent search for *information*, as many end up realising that their loved one will not be found alive. The families call it *the search*³ either for *truth* or *answers* – “la búsqueda por la verdad” or “la búsqueda de respuestas”. Whether they

³ As clarified more in depth in section 3.1, the term 'search' in this study is aligned to the definition within the field of enforced disappearance - the search for the disappeared person, not the subset of information-seeking that focuses on the interactions with information search systems.

search for a body, for answers, or for the truth, the process of searching for *the disappeared*⁴ cannot be separated from a search for information. The two are indelibly intertwined.

This study is an exploration of the information-seeking process of the families of the disappeared in order to discover information practices developed at the grassroots level in Colombia that help meet some of the enormous barriers to information in this context. It looks specifically at the documentation practices, and the implications these involve.

This chapter begins by delving into a short background of the study, defining the concept of enforced disappearance, its repercussions, why it was chosen as topic of study and how it relates to both the field of archival studies and information studies. This leads to an explanation as to why the setting of Colombia is useful and relevant, which in turn points to the importance of focusing on the families and their needs. Section 1.1 also explains the motivations behind this study. This is followed by the aims and research questions in section 1.2. Section 1.3 briefly situates this doctoral project within the field of information studies and archival studies, and how the two have come together in this project. Section 1.4 presents my own assumptions and personal motivations and how these influenced this study. I finalise with a brief outline of this capstone paper.

1.1 Background and motivation

1.1.1 Enforced disappearance

The crime of enforced disappearance is categorized as a *crime against humanity* under the Rome Statute and the Inter-American Convention (Giorgou, 2013). This means it is one of the most serious of human rights violations, breaching a number of human rights, such as the right to security of the person, to protection under the law, not to be arbitrarily deprived of one's liberty, the recognition of the legal personality of every human being, and the right not to be subjected to torture or to other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment. It can often be related to the right to life, freedom of thought, expression, and the rights of the family (Scovazzi and Citroni, 2007: 1). The crime of enforced disappearance is one of the biggest legacies of conflict and repressive regimes worldwide (Crettol et al., 2018: 591).

⁴ The term *desaparecidos* is so widely used it has begun to be used in direct translation from Spanish – *the disappeared* – the one I use in this project. The concept *disappearance* is transformed into an intransitive verb, *to be disappeared*, an 'awkward and incomplete' term but, as Weld describes, terminology has evolved in response to this reality (Weld, 2013).

It is defined by the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* ICPPED (2006) as,

“the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law” (ICPPED art.2).

It was only in 2006, after decades of debate, that the ICPPED was adopted and entered into force in 2010 as a legally binding instrument. This convention is important because it is the first universally legally binding human rights instrument regarding enforced disappearance (OHCHR, n.d.). It obliges States parties to search for the victims, to investigate their disappearance and provide victims with access to justice and reparation, making it a punishable offense (art. 4, 6,7 & 12.a). Furthermore, it **obliges States to assist those who are conducting the investigation to provide access to the documentation and other information relevant to their investigation** (article 13, para. 3a).

This, however, has not stopped the crime. The latest factsheet on enforced disappearance from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) states that

“Enforced disappearance has become a global problem and is not restricted to a specific region of the world. Once largely the product of military dictatorships, enforced disappearances can nowadays be perpetrated in complex situations of internal conflict, especially as a means of political repression of opponents. Of particular concern is the ongoing harassment of human rights defenders, relatives of victims, witnesses and legal counsel dealing with cases of enforced disappearance; the use by States of counter-terrorist activities as an excuse for breaching their obligations; and the still widespread impunity for enforced disappearance” (OHCHR, 2009: 2).

Governments are the perpetrators of most enforced disappearance as well as the legally responsible for resolving the cases (Congram, 2016: 4). This two-sided aspect of government institutions poses an enormous obstacle for the families to achieve justice or even obtain information (Congram, 2016). The crime of enforced disappearance is, at its heart, **about the**

absence of knowledge (Wagner and Kesetovic, 2016): Where a person is, what happened to them, who perpetrated the crime and why.

The practice as government policy to get rid of political opponents, emerged systematically in Latin America during the second half of the 20th century, in countries characterised by armed conflict, dictatorships or other internal struggles (Scovazzi and Citroni, 2007). As the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (“the Court”) stated in its first case on enforced disappearance:

*Disappearances are not new in the history of human rights violations. However, their systematic and repeated nature and their use not only for causing certain individuals to disappear, either briefly or permanently, but also as a means of creating anguish, insecurity and fear, is a recent phenomenon. Although this practice exists virtually worldwide, it has occurred with exceptional intensity in Latin America in the last few years.*⁵

Enforced disappearance was chosen as the paradigmatic context for this study for a number of reasons;

1. It is a growing human rights violation globally. The numbers of enforced disappearance have increased over the years with new and alarming patterns in the context of migration, internal conflict, transnational organized crime, humanitarian crises and the struggle against violent extremism.⁶
2. It is a violation that rests on the lack of knowledge and lack of information and yet is intrinsically linked to documentation practices. Documentation has a strategic role in claim-making for justice, and state accountability, but also for memorialisation.
3. Enforced disappearance has given rise to some of the most iconic 20th-century social movements such as Las Madres del la Plaza de Mayo and FEDEFAM (Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos) formed by the families of victims of enforced disappearance (Bickford, 1999). These organisations have provided much of the knowledge that we have about enforced

⁵ Velasquez Rodriguez v. Honduras Judgement, Inter-Am.Ct. H.R (July 29, 1988) quoted in Dulitzky (2019: 426)

⁶ Video message by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein to General Assembly high-level plenary meeting to commemorate the 10th Anniversary of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2017)

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21198&LangID=E>

disappearances and have been at the forefront of combating the crime, through lobbying and documenting (Dulitzky, 2019). Yet, until now, there has been no in-depth investigation into individual families' information practices.

4. It provides a new and under-researched context for both archival studies and information studies, applying their theoretical concepts of *information practices (information-seeking and use), personal archives, records and documentation*.

1.1.2 Colombia

When studying the issue of enforced disappearance, the region of Latin America provides a highly useful context in which to investigate the information practices of families, because it is the place that has developed the most effective responses to overcome this policy along with new types of resistance and demands for truth, justice, reparation, and memory (Dulitzky, 2019: 427-428). Colombia provides a prime example of enforced disappearances occurring under democratic rule. Colombia's five-decade internal conflict has left at least 120,000 disappeared (ICMP, 2020).⁷ This number continues to increase as the latest (2021) briefing of the UN's verification mission to Colombia shows⁸.

This practice has been around in Colombia, a democratic state, since the 1950s during the period known as *La Violencia*. The practice re-emerged in the 1970s "as a counter-forensic method used by reactionary sectors of the security forces that opposed peace negotiations with the guerrillas, and illegally detained citizens (believed to be) part of, or colluding with, Leftist insurgent groups" (Rudling and Dueñas, 2021: 123). Since the 1990s, the practice has been exercised mainly by paramilitary groups working with the acquiescence of the state, sometimes with the aid of narco-traffickers (Rudling and Dueñas, 2021).

The links between the state and the paramilitaries mean justice is highly difficult. The underreporting of the crime is due to "factors of poverty, illiteracy, submissiveness to fatalism, fear of reprisals, weaknesses in the administration of justice, ineffectual reporting channels and

⁷ This number is problematic in that enforced disappearance is one of the most underreported violations in the world due to family members being less likely to report the crime for fear that the reporting may bring harm to the disappeared person (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2020). It also varies depending on the sources and grows every day. The fact that it is a round number is also problematic as the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska remarked, "History counts its skeletons in round numbers. A thousand and one remains a thousand, as though the one had never existed," so that the 1001st victim of enforced disappearance is thereby disappeared twice (Congram, 2016: 3).

⁸ Briefing by Carlos Ruiz Massieu, SRSG and Head of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia Security Council Meeting, 13 July 2021. See: <https://colombia.unmissions.org/en/search/node/disappearance>

mechanisms, deeply rooted systems of impunity, and a culture of silence” (Scovazzi and Citroni, 2007: 24). The “pervasive atmosphere of fear, intimidation and terror” that exists in Colombia is exacerbated by impunity, distrust and poverty, which affects not only the reporting of the crime (Scovazzi and Citroni, 2007: 24). Colombia has a culture where it has been difficult and even dangerous to acquire information on human rights violations. The State has been responsible for the persecution of journalists, human rights activists, and social leaders and for the restriction of information for decades (FreedomHouse, 2022).

It was in the 1980s, under Colombia’s ‘dirty war’ that the number of disappearances increased dramatically with the effect of creating the first and main organization that brought together the families of the disappeared, the Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (ASFADDES, the Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared) (ICMP, 2020: 29).

By the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the crime increased with the consolidation of paramilitarism which used enforced disappearance of mainly peasants and rural inhabitants to enforce control through terror over large stretches of the country (ICMP, 2020: 26). The violence of the FARC (Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and other guerrilla groups formed in the 1980s also increased, including their use of forced disappearance and kidnapping. This resulted in the diversification of victim and family associations dedicated to combating this crime (ICMP 2020 :31).

After the 2000s, enforced disappearance took on a new dimension in Colombia becoming a systematic practice based on institutional norms and codes of conduct within the military forces as part of extrajudicial killings and massacres, the now well-known ‘*falsos positivos*’ or false positives case. This was the practice of presenting civilians, primarily poor, marginalised men, who were arbitrarily executed as “guerilla fighters killed lawfully during combat”(Gordon, 2017). These victims were all disappeared before they were executed. It is estimated that the number of civilians disappeared and later killed in this case is 6.402⁹.

In addition, the 2000s saw a multiplication of civil society initiatives as a wide proliferation of NGOs, grassroots movements and family organisations took to the public scene and engaged in

⁹ See the Truth Commission’s interactive report on the case of the false positives: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/los-falsos-positivos>

increasing political activism that triggered a response of legal measures. In 2000, enforced disappearance was codified into Colombian law with the passing of Law 589, which criminalized the practice (CNMH: 28). This, however, did not change the systematic occurrence of disappearances in Colombia.

A period the disarmament ensued, accompanied by transitional justice mechanisms. In 2005, the demobilisation of paramilitaries was initiated with the passing of the Justice and Peace Law (Ley de Justicia y Paz). This gave rise to the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation and the Historical Memory Group (García-Godos and Lid, 2010). “For the first time in Colombian legislation, the Law recognised the victims’ right to truth, the state’s duty of memory, and the principle that the preservation of and access to archives had to be guaranteed” (Giraldo and Tobón, 2020: 5). In 2011, the Law of Victims and Land Restitution (Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras) gave status of documentary heritage to public and private archives relating to human rights violations and created the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) and the Victims’ Unit among others.

1.1.2.1 ‘A time of not-war-not-peace’

In 2016, another peace agreement was signed, this time between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian State, which saw the formation of a new transitional justice system comprised of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition (a truth commission), the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP, a special tribunal) and the Unit of Search for Disappeared Persons (UBPD, Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas).

Due to this peace agreement, the term ‘post-conflict’ is widely used to refer to Colombia’s current day situation. Unfortunately, this is a misnomer. Like Roxani Krystalli (2021), I also refer to Colombia today as living in a time of ‘not-war-not-peace’. This term was coined by Carolyn Nordstrom (2004: 167) to refer to societies that go through acts of brutality, which under any other circumstances would be considered acts of war or low-intensity warfare, but, due to a peace process or peace accord (which is failing), continue to be referred to as post-conflict or post-war societies. Many Colombians live in a no-man’s land where, due to the lack of State presence, other armed groups fight to gain control. Because of the peace process, many brutal acts of war are simply referred to as ‘banditry’, ‘police’ or ‘military actions’ or not mentioned at all (Nordstrom 2004: 167). Even though the disappearances I have studied here

all occurred before the 2016 peace accord, their accountability is being attempted now – at a time of ‘not-war-not-peace’. This has implications for *how* accountability is sought.

The driving factors behind the failing implementation of the peace agreement are disputed, they are many, intertwined and complex. However, one factor has been the instrumentalisation and politicisation of issues such as truth, memory, and justice. These are issues constantly contested and disputed in all societies. However, in Colombia the politics of memory is “deeply entangled in violent practices” that are ongoing (Rodriguez Castro, 2021: 677). Violence determines what is said and what is silenced; it has the consequence of determining narratives and hiding other ‘non-official’ memory practices. If historical memory and the struggle for truth is a battleground where power and violence determine narratives, as the interviews here attest to, then there is an urgent need to look at the information practices coming from below, specifically those that contribute to other memories, the ones ‘hidden in the shadows’ (Nordstrom, 2004: 3).

1.1.3 Families as the starting point of the study

In 2019, just a few months after the creation of UBPD, I visited Colombia on a preliminary field trip. Up to that moment, as I explain in more detail in the methodology chapter, my focus had been *access to human rights documentation in state archives*. During that period there was hope of a new era of accountability and reconciliation. However, the preliminary investigation made clear that access to government files or documents that could clarify past crimes was non-existent or excessively difficult. One conversation however, brought up something I felt deserved more study: “the families of the disappeared are the best archivists, it is from them we get all the information”. It was here I turned my attention to both enforced disappearance and the information practices of the families. The families occupy a unique place in society to help us maximise accountability, justice, and professional and institutional development by opening up knowledge that lies at the front line of struggles that are often hidden (Robins, 2013).

There is a very specific link between information, documentation, and the crime of enforced disappearance that is different from other crimes. Usually, when fatal crimes occur, there is physical evidence of the crime: a corpse. The body then becomes a source of information investigated by forensic medicine. Enforced disappearance is characterized by no bodies, thus no evidence. As it is a crime of the powerful (Gordon, 2017) – the state, groups acting in acquiescence or tolerance of the state, and other powerful armed actors – those who commit the crime have the power to destroy or thwart all evidence, and can refuse to cooperate or

investigate (Keller and Heri, 2014). This creates what Keller and Heri (2014) call ‘a wall of silence’. This situation triggers a need in the families to know what happened to their loved ones, where they are, whether they are still dead or alive and why they were taken in the first place. They embark on a search for answers, a search that, as Julia above tells us, takes over their lives (Adams, 2019), may span generations and very often spreads to their local communities, who also help in searching and documenting.

Under international law (ICCPED art.24:1-2) the families or any person who has suffered harm as the direct result of an enforced disappearance is considered a ‘victim’. Victims have the right to know the truth regarding the circumstances of the enforced disappearance, the progress and results of the investigation, and the fate of the disappeared person (ICCPED Art.24:2). It is *answers* to their enquiries about the disappeared that are the most immediate goal of the families, as these eventually allow for the finding of the bodies. It was the demand for information that created the principle of the *right to truth* in the first place. The *right to know the truth* materialized in 2006 through a judgement from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of Reyes v. Chile (Ciorciari, 2012, Accatino and Collins, 2016). The groundbreaking decision was based on the idea that people are entitled to the truth about their own suffering, that a record about this suffering is part of a cultural heritage and therefore the state has a duty - a “positive obligation” - to provide information, and to record and maintain archives (Ciorciari, 2012: 2,7)¹⁰.

Together, the needs and rights of the families is the basis for much of the international response to enforced disappearances, both legal and political (Robins, 2013). The concept of ‘information needs’ is taken from *information studies* and used in this research as the triggering factor behind information-seeking processes. **It allows a starting point and a theoretical concept for understanding the motivations of those who search away from the legal.**

1.2 Aims and research questions

Given that enforced disappearance is a crime that includes the constant concealment of information or outright denial of the event, I want to understand how families look for information despite the enormous challenges the search involves. By exploring the information-

¹⁰ See also *Updated Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity* commonly known as the Joinet/Orentlicher principles (UNCHR, 8 February 2005)

seeking processes of families in a context of mass violations, I also aim to find other information practices taking place or being created to deal with the challenges. By looking at a context where the use of informal systems is predominant it helps redirect analyses to grassroots (and sometimes hidden) information practices. There is much to learn from these practices, and I hope this will also expand the horizon of information-studies as a field.

The theoretical aim is to contribute to the building of theory at the intersection of archival studies and human rights, specifically in relation to the concepts of *human rights archives* and *personal archives* to reveal the strong relation between the two and the fundamental nature of the latter (personal archives) for accountability.

Overall question: What are the information practices of the families of the forcefully disappeared in Colombia in their search for their loved ones?

Research questions.

1. What characterises the information-seeking process of the families? (Article 2)
2. Which options are available to the families for discovering information in the face of the challenges the crime of enforced disappearance presents? (Articles 1 & 2)
3. What outputs are being developed in this information-seeking process? (Articles 1 & 3)

1.2.1 The structure of the research questions and articles

The questions are organised in the current order as information-seeking is the first process under scrutiny through which the challenges of the context can be assessed and therefore the different options can be studied. Researching the options for the families can reveal the outputs being developed.

This study is organized around the production of three research articles summarised in chapter 5.

Article 1: Bermúdez Qvortrup, N. (2022). "Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualizing the Personal Collections of Families of Disappeared Persons." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 14(2): 582-599.

Article 2: Bermúdez Qvortrup, N. (2022). "Finding ways of searching for the disappeared: the information practices of the families in Colombia." *Journal of Documentation* 78(6): 1371-1388.

Article 3: Bermúdez Qvortrup, N and Giraldo Lopera, M (2022) “Evidence of Jorge: Documentary Traces of a Forced Disappearance in Colombia” *Archivaria* 94, Fall 2022.

Article 2 answers the first and second research questions to i) reveal the information-seeking process with its dynamics of needs and barriers and ii) to demonstrate what outputs are produced. Article 1 reveals the importance of the output (personal collections) and how they come together through the information-seeking process, which answers the second and third research question. Article 3 is a concrete example of the concept created in article 1 and a trajectory of information-seeking depicted in article 2, which answers the third research question.

1.3 Situating the research project with archival studies and information studies

This is a study which spans over two related fields: archival studies and information studies, as they both share a focus on the *use* of documentation.

The starting point of the study is information-seeking. Information-seeking is defined as a process of “discovering patterns or filling in gaps” in an active and intentional manner that is motivated by some ‘missing information’ (Case and Given, 2016a). Like McKenzie (2003), I refer to information-seeking as a type of information practice, along with learning and information use which is composed of *record creation* and also *record use*¹¹.

Accordingly, this study is an information studies project as it concerns itself with *information-seeking* motivated by *information needs* and restrained by *information barriers*. These concepts provide the methodological framework for doing a ‘bottom-up’ study from the perspective of a specific group of people at the receiving end of violence. Through interviews with five family members (all women), representatives of four NGOs, scholars, former government officials, archivists and documentation analysis, I reveal how, in the course of their information-seeking process, the overwhelming obstacles lead families to rely on each other and NGOs, forming communities of practice (COP). This results in information practices of which the most

¹¹ The concept of records is expanded upon in chapter 3

significant for this study are ‘zoomed into’; *learning recordkeeping* (article 1 and 3) and record use (article 1 & 3) through engaging in *communities of practice* (article 2).

It is through the information-seeking process that records are created; families realize that it is them who carry the burden of documenting. It has been through the investigation of the former, the information-seeking process (information studies), that I have come to the findings of this study: the practice of creating records for personal collections, thus its relevancy to archival studies.

Although I take a practice-based approach to study the trajectory of the families’ search, I do this through the lens of archival studies, as this allows me to emphasize the role of records, how they are created and used. The prevailing definition of records in archival studies is that they are ‘representations and evidence of activities through time and space’ (Caswell, 2014a: 7). Recent characterisations of records allow us to see records less as static objects but as dynamic ones, not only as containers of information, but having ‘distinct roles in the performance of action and the construction of our social world’ (Yeo, 2018: XIII). This perspective on records is important to this study because it allows us to look at the variety of roles that these records have within archives.

My project uses the word “archives” in a similar manner to that of the UN definition in its Joinet/Orentlicher Principles: “collections of documents pertaining to violations of human rights and humanitarian law from sources including (a) national governmental agencies, particularly those that played significant roles in relation to human rights violations; (b) local agencies, such as police stations, that were involved in human rights violations; (c) State agencies, including the office of the prosecutor and the judiciary, that are involved in the protection of human rights; and (d) materials collected by truth commissions and other investigative bodies” (UNCHR, 8 February 2005). Nevertheless, since the 1990’s, archival studies has opened up discussions on the concept of *archives*, challenging and critiquing traditional views on archives, bringing about a new awareness of other voices, other narratives, other realities than those usually referred to and present in the mainstream (Cook, 2001). This has meant including other types of archives in the literature, such as *personal archives*.

Colombia’s most recent transitional justice mechanisms are also applying a broader definition to the concept of *archives*, to include non-traditional archives (audiovisual materials,

collections of indigenous peoples, artwork) that are found across the country¹². The growing recent literature and experience from places such as Colombia suggest the need to look at the preservation of records in new contexts to study *who* is doing the preservation, the nature of what is being recorded (including non-orthodox records and archives), and the impact of this type of recordkeeping (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). A practice-centred approach to records and archives allows us to look at how practices in contexts of conflict create records as evidence and representations of human rights abuse. A better understanding of these collections and their conceptualization may help identify similar practices emerging from similar situations in other countries.

With respect to information studies, the information-seeking process of the families is a well-known result of enforced disappearance; referred to as ‘the search’, it is rarely studied from the informational perspective – away from the legal. Considering how integral finding and obtaining information and documentation is to the victims of this crime, due to the concealment and elimination of evidence, it seems to me that an information study approach is not only useful, but necessary and currently lacking. There are important normative and practical reasons for looking at the information-seeking practices of families of disappeared persons and their collections. The information practices of the families may help contribute to theory-building of the concept *information needs*. By studying it in a context of real necessity, it helps us understand how information barriers arise or are imposed and how they are dealt with. It also helps us understand the contexts where structural violence and political submission are reproduced through bureaucratic documentation procedures (Auyero, 2012: 2) and what this means in terms of accountability. Finally, it helps us to better understand the role of the state and the production of bureaucracy in moulding and affecting citizens’ relationship with information and documentation.

There four interlinking concepts that make up this study: *information*, *knowledge*, *accountability* and *memory*. The two disciplines mentioned above (information studies and archival studies) are deeply linked to each other through these four concepts which cannot be disassociated from one another (Cox and Wallace, 2002). It is through the lack of, and search

¹² During his presentation at the International Conference *The Role of Archives and Transitional Justice (TJ) Archives after war and dictatorship: International experiences and the case of Colombia* at the Irish Centre of Human Rights Oscar Parra Vera (JEP magistrate) explained how both the JEP and the CEV are using broader definitions of archives and records to be able to use protective measures (‘medidas cautelares’) for these collections.

for the former two, that accountability and memory arise as goals for communities affected by enforced disappearance. By looking at the search for disappeared persons through the lens of archival studies and information studies, this project contributes to the academic development of both fields of study.

1.4 On positionality and motivation

To conclude this chapter, I wish to address a personal element running through this project. My particular assumptions and preconceptions are addressed in the methodology and theory chapters. Here I discuss my personal motivations behind this study.

In the words of Roxana Krystalli “I am not a neutral, objective observer, clinically parachuting into the lives of others to examine them as through a microscope. My own vocabularies of grief have informed the questions I ask and methods used” (Krystalli, 2021). I have a personal stake and interest in what I have chosen to investigate - enforced disappearance in Colombia - it is why I chose the setting in the first place. As a Colombian, I have an interest in promoting a more humane future for my country than the one we have been living the past six decades, bringing havoc on so many people I know and love. This does not authorize or deauthorize my voice on the matter. I’m simply locating it.

I have tried to present myself as a supportive researcher willing to tell the stories of the participants with an understanding of the abhorrence of the crime they have to endure to this day and a desire to support the work they do. I have approached this work, through the inspiration of Douglas and Alisauskas (2021) who state that writing about personal and intimate grief, loss, and trauma requires a particular approach “one that is gentle, generous, and respectful; it requires an approach that enacts caring for the people who share their stories and for the stories themselves” (Douglas and Alisauskas, 2021: 9).

I write this so as to convey the dimension of this crime which should not get lost in any research. More than 2000 people disappeared in Colombia in 2020.¹³ The nation-wide protests that erupted on April 28th 2021 triggered a wave of disappearances, many occurring in front of our screens. Even so, the Duque government denied the disappearances and denied wrongdoing.

¹³ <https://www.rcnradio.com/recomendado-del-editor/donde-estan-los-mas-de-2000-desaparecidos-en-colombia-durante-2020>

The pandemic opened a Pandora's box of impunity and militarization that overshadowed the peace agreement and jeopardize not only the efforts of those who search, but their lives too (n.a., 2020).

1.5 Project outline

Following this introduction, the thesis continues with a literature review on information studies and human rights, documentation in contexts of mass violations and the literature on archives and accountability in contexts of mass violations with the aim of identifying research gaps and establishing a baseline for research (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 lays out the conceptual framework of this study, introducing the concepts of social accountability, information practices, and records; the theoretical approach (practice-theory); and the relationship between all these elements, creating a coherent framework to guide the research. Chapter 4 discusses the epistemological assumptions behind the study, the research design, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. Summaries of the three articles are presented in the order of writing in chapter 5. The research project as a whole and specifically the findings are discussed in depth in chapter 6, from the general overview of the information-seeking trajectory of the families and their practices, to the ways they contribute to social accountability and why. Chapter 7 offers a brief conclusion and ideas for future research in archival studies and information studies.

Appendix A – Interview guide for the NGOs

Appendix B – Interview guide for the families

Appendix C – NSD assessment form

Appendix D – Letter of consent for NGOs

Appendix E – Letter of consent for Martha (English)

Appendix F – Letter of consent for Martha (Spanish – signed version)

Appendix G - Articles 1, 2 & 3.

2 Literature review

In this chapter, I outline the literature that has guided this study from the fields of information studies and archival studies. I show how there has been an attempt to engage with human rights as a topic, but as yet, no studies were found in information studies relating to enforced disappearance. I explain how, due to the importance of context, studies of information-seeking within other vulnerable groups have not offered a foundation for this work (section 2.1). My study has been built on previous empirical studies within human rights practice, more specifically transitional justice (section 2.2) and archival studies (section 2.3). I look at the literature on *human rights archives* which has focused primarily on three different categories – archives of repression, NGO archives, and Transitional Justice (TJ) archives. I round up with a look at what I consider to be an important but neglected category of human rights archives – personal collections – to demonstrate how my study fits into the literature and how it contributes to the current state of the art.

2.1 Information studies / Library and Information Science (LIS) and human rights

Since 2002, there has been an exponential growth in information-seeking research regarding contexts, people, and situations away from the institutional sources and systems-based focus, emphasising instead people or groups and how they make sense of their environment through information (Case and Given, 2016b: 4). It is in this trend of information-seeking research where my research sits and contributes to the field of information studies - emphasising “the importance of situation, time, geography, culture and other contextual elements in shaping individuals’ experiences of information” (Case and Given, 2016b: 4).

However, there is little existing literature on information-seeking, information behaviour, information practices, or information use in contexts of mass violations. There are increasing amounts of literature suggesting the importance of information studies or Library and Information studies in engaging with human rights as a normative framework to “evaluate and recommend information practices, policies, and laws” (Mathiesen, 2015: 1310, Samek, 2014, Smith, 2001, Jorgensen, 2019). This literature, which is part of a wider *information ethics* debate, has had a primary focus on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS) in the work of Capurro (2009), Himma and Tavani (2008), Jorgensen (2019), Mihr (2017) and

Smith (2001). They focus on issues such as privacy, access to information, intellectual property and free speech, and the ways in which repressive governments can curtail all these through technologies or how technologies can be used to avoid censorship (Bishop, 2012, Peters and Besley, 2018, Guberek et al., 2019). Examples include literature on the use of video, television, or social media in highlighting or revealing repression (Harlow, 2012, Aronson et al., 2018, Block, 2005). Any information-seeking or information practices in this context involve online searches. Nevertheless, already in 1976 Brenda Dervin pointed out that people use informal systems more than formal systems of information (Dervin, 1976), something which is accentuated in the global south (Luyt, 2004). This brings to the fore the issue of context “as an essential component for understanding information-seeking behaviour” (Kuhlthau and Vakkari, 1999: 723) and thus the need for empirical works done in different contexts.

Clemens and Cushing’s work highlights how studies of information-seeking have usually focused on two realms of life experiences: the ‘work related’ and ‘everyday life’ information-seeking (Clemens and Cushing, 2010). Their study shows how there are other contexts “that do not fit so easily into existing information-seeking behaviour models” but on the contrary are profoundly different and have significant life-long impacts. This means that the “perceived information needs and search strategies” of the people in these contexts directly affect “processes of decision making, coping and understanding of oneself” (p.1). Clemens and Cushings (2010) call these ‘other’ contexts ‘deeply meaningful and intensely personal’. Although, Clemens and Cushings do not refer to mass human rights violations specifically, mass violations would fall under Clemens and Cushings’ category. This category of ‘deeply meaningful and intensely personal’ contexts includes studies that look at ways in which particular groups or individuals who are facing significant challenges to their quality of life seek information precisely to improve or ameliorate a personal struggle. These studies are produced in order to better understand these minorities’ needs and behaviours. Previous studies include people with health associated risks such as cancer (Rees and Bath, 2000, Johnson and Meischke, 1993) or AIDS (Adebayo, 2019), vulnerable minorities such as refugees (Koo et al., 2011, Nekesa Akullo and Odong, 2017, Fisher, 2018), or simply marginalised from mainstream society such as prisoners (Canning and Buchanan, 2019), migrant workers (Fisher et al., 2004) single mothers, janitors and the aging population (Chatman, 1996).

Most of this literature, with the exception of studies on refugees (Nekesa Akullo and Odong, 2017, Fisher, 2018), is located in countries of the global north which provides a very different

account of everyday life and living than contexts of the global south. Yet, Morán Reyes' study notes how LIS concepts have historically been linked to a particular geography; the Anglo-Saxon (Morán Reyes, 2021). There has been, until now, no research about the information behaviour or practices of groups or individuals that have experienced enforced disappearance, which occurs primarily in the global south.

2.2 Documentation in contexts of mass violations

There has been a very clear attempt by those researching mass atrocities in organisations, think tanks, and academic institutions to identify, protect, preserve, and manage information, specifically documentation, for the purpose of evidence (Baumgartner et al., 2016). A special issue published in 2016 by the Journal of Human Rights Practice builds on the work of two organisations who have, during the last decade, taken up the issue of documentation and human rights violations: Incore (International Conflict Research Institute, based at Ulster University) and Swisspeace (an associate research institute of the University of Basel). Research published in relation to their work, studies the roles that documentation of armed conflict “can, does, and should play in addressing human rights abuses of the past, ensuring non-repetition of violations, and establishing a human rights legacy for the future” (Baumgartner et al., 2016: 2). However, the emphasis on the whole when referring to documentation has been on *archives*, how they are put together based on the narratives produced during times of political upheaval, and how they can hold a contestation of narratives which can affect judicial procedures (Accatino and Collins, 2016, Visoka, 2016). The ongoing theme in these publications is how processes of collecting documentation can include or exclude narratives (Rivas, 2016), the consequences of this for future reparations, and the importance of a constant dialogue in society and therefore of access (Jones and Oliveira, 2016).

Referring specifically to enforced disappearances, Baumgartner and Ott (2017) highlight the obligations of the State in maintaining and providing access to archives for institutions and individuals who are searching for disappeared persons, and they emphasize the importance of the preservation and protection of archives for dealing with the past. These publications are coming out of the legal and/or transitional justice fields which, as stated above, are increasingly engaged in the theme of archives (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2020, Keller and Heri, 2014, Hamber, 2016, Baumgartner et al., 2016). Their contribution has been the knowledge that the protection and maintenance of archives is crucial for evidence, reparations, and collective

memory to deal with the past, with a clear understanding of the importance of including a multiplicity of narratives and therefore opening up the spaces and forms from which documentation can arise.

Missing here, however, is a look at non-institutional archives and the view from an information studies perspective. Concepts such as *information-seeking* and *information use*, not used before in this context, can be applied to hone into the different practices in which information is being gathered in hidden spaces in between official fact-finding missions.

2.3 Archives and accountability in contexts of violations

Separately to the transitional justice and human rights field, literature has also emerged in the archival studies field on how records or documents are used in contexts of human rights violations. Since the 1990s, this field has increasingly engaged with human rights issues due to the work of prominent archivists or academics who have emphasised inclusion and critical thinking, laying the groundwork for a shift in both practice and research (Punzalan and Caswell, 2016, Stinnett, 2008). The earliest document on human rights violations from an archival perspective found for this review is from 1995, the report *Los archivos de la seguridad del Estado de los desaparecidos regímenes represivos* (The Quintana Report¹⁴). Michael Cook (2006) and Geraci and Caswell (2016) also trace the connection between human rights and archives to The Quintana Report.

There is a strong historical link between archival practice and the field of human rights, through the ability of archives to provide evidence, specifically *evidence of rights*, a “characteristic of archives which has been consistently valued over time” (Procter, 2017: 303, Cox and Wallace, 2002). Both legal and archival literature have written about the intersection of archives and accountability (Cox and Wallace, 2002, Cox, 2006), but it never seems more salient than in the aftermath of mass atrocities and human rights violations.

The term *human rights archives* has become more predominant in the literature in the last few decades with a growing interest and concern about institutional and governmental archives and their role in mass violations of the past (Caswell, 2014b, Caswell, 2016, Caswell and Gilliland, 2015). In 2014, *Archival Science* published a special double issue called *Defining Human*

¹⁴ Named after the author Antonio González Quintana

Rights Archives. It investigated “how societies use records, as well as archival institutions, programs, and functions, to come to terms with some of the most horrific abuses of the twentieth century” (Caswell, 2014b: 208).

2.3.1 Human rights archives

The introduction to the 2014 special issue *Defining Human Rights Archives* “examines records that document discrepancies in and abuses of power everywhere as human rights archives” (Caswell 2014b: 208). Acknowledging that this is an expansive view, it defines *human rights archives* as,

those collections of records that document violent and systematic abuse of power (...). The umbrella term “human rights archives” thus encompasses bureaucratic records that were created during the abuse itself; documentation created by human rights activists and lawyers after the fact for use in trials, tribunals, and truth commissions; stories recorded by survivors, victims’ family members and communities to memorialize the dead and forge collective memory of past injustice; and, increasingly, forensic evidence such as DNA samples and satellite imagery that establish scientific facts about large-scale violence (Caswell 2014b : 208).

The acknowledgment that the term *human rights archives* is rather vague due to the broad scope of what it wants to encompass (Andaur Gómez, 2012), is due to the fact that where the state has been particularly pernicious, evidence of a human rights violation can end up being found in any record, and it is difficult to determine beforehand which archives these will be (Alberch, 2017). As Anne Gilliland asserted at the UCLA symposium, “All archives are human rights archives” (Caswell, 2014b: 208). There seems to be agreement that the term *human rights archives* is linked more to the purpose of *use* of the records or potential uses rather than any ‘objective characteristic’ of a human rights document (Andaur Gómez, 2012: 166, Harris, 2014, Geraci and Caswell, 2016). This explains the importance of looking at the use of records in contexts of violations. Before expanding on how the literature has approached the term *human rights archives*, it is important to highlight the research that has looked into the *use* of records.

2.3.2 Records and their use

Geraci and Caswell have stated, ‘Despite increasing interest in human rights archives, little work has been done to define and delineate the conception of human rights records in the field’ (Geraci and Caswell, 2016: 1). They have delineated the concept of “human rights record” using five interlocking vectors: who created the record, why and when the record was recorded, where

the record is stewarded and how the record is used (Geraci and Caswell, 2016: 10). They conclude that human rights records are thus defined by their relationship to violence; as an integral part of it, documenting, memorialising or adjudicate it.

Douglas, Alisauskas and Mordell, write about the use of records but as part of working through the experience of grief and bereavement of families. They highlight different types of actions that result from “making and keeping records, including using and re-using records, creating and re-creating them, annotating them, working in and with them, and even imagining records or destroying them” (Douglas et al., 2019: 101). Literature on bereavement and records demonstrates that bereaved people use records as part of a process of continuing bonds with the dead through documenting the bereavement process and the person who has passed (Douglas et al., 2019, Douglas and Alisauskas, 2021, Blood and Cacciatore, 2014a, Blood and Cacciatore, 2014b). It shows how these materials are created, used, and reused for evidence of the deceased, to validate their worth and existence, and *create* memories through the accumulation of new things linked to the deceased that are imbued with meaning because of the way the families *use* these items. Information, therefore, in the literature on records, is recognised as simply one aspect of a record.

Photographs are one category of items that are both informational on one hand and representational on the other. They are used and activated in different ways in different contexts. Literature in archival studies, cultural studies and anthropology has investigated the meaning and function of photographs, including in contexts of mass violations (Blood and Cacciatore, 2014b, Riches and Dawson, 1998, Godel, 2007, Caswell, 2014a, Qvortrup, 2020). In the case of enforced disappearances, photographs play an evidential and representational role, having a social life of different uses, activations, and meanings (Da Silva Catela, 2012, Catela, 2012, Mazorra, 2010).

Photographs, like other records, are usually characterised by their ongoing participation in social processes or transactions in society (McKemmish, 2005: 13). Dependent on their activations, their purposes vary from vehicles of evidence, communication, and memory to instruments of repression and abuse of power. This is precisely due to information being the product of human perception and not a ‘pre-existing commodity’ (McKemmish, 2005: 154).

Having looked at what human rights records have been defined as, let us look at the concepts being referred to as *human rights archives*. There are predominantly three categories of human

rights archives in the literature which I present below: *archives of terror or repression*, *NGO archives* and *transitional justice archives*.

2.3.3 Archives of terror or repression

Research about these archives has been central to understanding how archives can be tools of repression, surveillance, and control, but also of accountability and liberation (Gilliland and McKemmish, 2014). This exposes the complexity of archives and their contents as well as their potentially powerful consequences (Gilliland and McKemmish, 2014, Ketelaar, 2002, Ketelaar, 2006, Bickford, 2000, Gerardo, 2011, Weld, 2014, Wisser and Blanco-Rivera, 2016, Villalta Luna, 2014, Slatman, 2012, Slack, 1996, Paiaro, 2018, Kornbluch, 2003). These type of archives consist generally of ‘the administrative records of the repressive regimes created not only by the surveillance systems, armed forces, prisons, concentration camps, and the police, but also paramilitary bodies, tribunals, psychiatric centres, hospitals, and other civil administrative bodies under the influence of the authorities’ (Ketelaar, 2005: 286). They are also comprised of other bureaucratic records shared within the state apparatus to ‘prove’ the subversive nature of the ‘enemy’ (Kornbluch, 2003, da Silva Catela, 2008, Da Silva Catela, 2002). Da Silva Catela describes how archives of repression often contain materials that the officers, officials, and policemen themselves stole or confiscated from the victims. Pamphlets, books, photographs, letters, diaries, and so forth that the officers would take as either trophies or proof against their ‘enemies’ (da Silva Catela, 2008: 397). These records are the product of a political system with the aim of increasing control and power, system that would, if necessary, manipulate or destroy information (Baumgartner and Ott, 2017, Piggott and McKemmish, 2002).

The predominance of the concept of *archives of repression* or *terror* in the literature on archives in Latin America attests to the centrality of these archives in the post-conflict/post-dictatorship period as a source for understanding the political history of a country, for legal justice, and historical memory (Gonzalez Quintana, 1995, da Silva Catela, 2008, Da Silva Catela, 2002). The history of human rights violations and their respective investigations has taught us that records that come from above, from governments and other powerful entities, as necessary and crucial as they are, only go a certain distance in revealing past atrocities. The literature also points to how the use of these archives and records for criminal justice is not the norm, but the exception. In the majority of cases, the documentation that proves wrongdoing is hidden, destroyed, or never produced (Andaur Gómez, 2012: 159, da Silva Catela, 2008, Da Silva Catela, 2002, Jelin and Catela, 2002). The barriers to access, the secrecy, disinformation, and

the unreliability of the parent institutions means corroboration is needed from below (Montgomery, 2004).

2.3.4 NGO Archives

Research on these archives has found that they provide documentation that can give some answers to victims, prove the degree to which actual violations were part of government policy, provide evidence of the systematic nature of government violations, and preserve the documentation for historical memory (Bickford, 2000, Bickford, 1999, Montgomery, 2004, Montgomery, 2001, Caswell, 2013). The archives NGOs build are diverse in their quality and size, but in general, these are created as a response to fact-finding missions in order to indict and provide “antithetical narratives to the secrecy, half-truths, and lies of government authorities” (Montgomery, 2004: 25). NGO archives are collections of evidence from a number of sources such as consultations with experts and other organisations; interviews with journalists, lawyers, military and government officials, underground agents, survivors, and witnesses; letters from political prisoners; medical, police and court records and logs; official statements; and scientific and forensic data (Baumgartner and Ott, 2017, Montgomery, 2004). However, much of this depends on the interaction NGOs have with families of victims and the information that families wish to share with them (Crettol et al., 2018). NGOs must have mechanisms in place to make sure that the handling and management of sensitive information is done according to the best interests of victims and the families of victims (Crettol et al. 2018: 612). They cannot acquire information, nor hold personal data without a legitimate basis or informed consent, and the information that is gathered must be used only for the purposes it was gathered for (Crettol et al., 2018). This means that many records that are important to the victims as memories, are not gathered by the NGOs.

The issue of trust lies at the heart of information gathering; NGOs must have the trust of the survivors for them to share information. Any influence NGOs have is down to their credibility (Montgomery, 2004), but for this to happen, NGOs must be visible. Contexts of extreme poverty, illiteracy, and isolation means that many times, victims or families of victims do not know where to turn for help, particularly in contexts where human rights defenders and institutions are persecuted or under surveillance and must keep a low profile or are based outside the area (Congram, 2016).

Research on the state of archives in small, local NGOs in Colombia shows the difficulties of keeping and preserving archives. Archives exist in precarious conditions, often fragmented and held by different people, or kept across different locations, housed in unofficial spaces, sometimes in a shared venue. On the whole, they are kept in ways and places never designed for the storage of archives (Taylor et al., 2021).

2.3.5 Transitional justice archives

There has been increasing amounts of recent literature on the archives and documents of transitional justice mechanisms because they leave behind a trail of documentation similar to that of NGOs, based on testimonies and documentation that prove violations and document historical events (Gruodyte and Gerviene, 2015, Krog and Mpolweni, 2009, Baumgartner and Ott, 2017, Viebach, 2020, Jones and Oliveira, 2016). Archives become the legacy of truth commissions (Jones and Oliveira, 2016). To investigate, document and then prosecute or report, they must be able to have access to other archives, which, like in the case of NGOs, some “logical imagination is required to think through what records might be relevant” (Peterson, 2006: 169).

Even though TJ mechanisms are often created and empowered by the state itself, they have, or should have, complete autonomy and independence for the credibility of their investigation. Nevertheless, their mandate of searching for the truth has had consequences for their investigations and the collection of data. Accessing police or military archives has not always been possible for them, especially for special tribunals that have a prosecution mandate. They face challenges accessing and using bureaucratic records because, if regime changes are in sight or courts are being set up, incriminating records will perhaps be destroyed or hidden by the repressive sectors (Baumgartner and Ott, 2017: 673, Crenzel, 2008, Crenzel, 2010).

One issue that has been flagged in the literature in general is the contestation of truth and narratives in transitional contexts where there are “active political struggle(s) around meaning; the meaning of what went on and the meaning of memory itself (...) These struggles unfold on various institutional, symbolic and subjective levels” (Jelin, 2007: 140, see also Harris, 2014). They also involve a variety of ‘vehicles of memory’ (photographs, the maps of possible graves, diplomas, death certificates, clothes, places, bodies) but also vehicles of justice (NGOs, TJ institutions, State institutions, media, communities and FOs). The power struggle in transitional contexts is also a struggle over the legitimacy of “the proper forms of remembering” who has “the symbolic power to decide the contents of narrative to be conveyed” (Jelin 2007: 155).

In general, there is an absence of research on TJ archives. “In transitional justice literature and the human rights field the topic [of archives] has been under-explored” (Baumgartner et al., 2016: 5). Viebach (2020) states that fundamental questions such as “what type, in what ways, by whom and for what purposes are archives used in transition contexts” are “rarely posed, much less answered”(Viebach, 2020: 1).

Missing from the three categories laid out above, are the private collections of victims who gather documents to prove their victimisation.

2.4 Personal collections

Because it is *use* that characterises and determines what a human rights record is, the study of *uses* of different types of records in contexts of violations can help identify other human rights records, such as non-institutional ones. Yet, as seen above, most of the literature has focused on institutional records, something which Douglas and Mills (2018) also mention.

Recent studies in archival theory also problematise “straightforward, legalistic and traditional archival definitions of evidence” (Cook, 2013: 105). Instead, evidence has become only one dimension of the value of documents. Cook mentions four dimensions of archival thinking: evidence, memory, identity, and community. These interweave and overlap with each other, animating diverse activities and approaches to archival thinking, a point also made by Yeo;

“Besides information and evidence, affordances of records may include construction or reinforcement of memory and senses of identity and community, as well as generation of emotions, ideas, inspiration and guidance for future action” (Yeo, 2018: 155)

The affective has also begun to take an important role in how we look at records, their uses, and their creation. By highlighting the personal in the world of human rights archives we can do as Douglas and Mills (2018) suggest and emphasize the personal dimension of archives, particularly important in contexts of human rights violations.

The opening up of the term ‘archive’ in recent literature on archives has thus led to a more inclusive concept that can apply to the non-institutional records held in private homes and personal collections gathered by an individual during the course of their life, such as the

research by Douglas et al. (2019) and Douglas and Alisauskas (2021) described above shows. Personal *archives* are “generated by people as part of the processes of living, working and leisure, individually and communally” (Williams, 2008: 55-56). The use of the term *archive* in much of the recent archival research reflects different recordkeeping and record-making contexts which can be different to the more traditional ones found in archival studies (Cook, 2013, Cook, 2001). These new understandings about archives have coincided with a new focus on contexts of violations, discrimination, and injustice which allows us to study new dimensions of record creation and uses in the public sphere as part of archival activism (Sexton and Flinn, 2019, Flinn and Alexander, 2015, Flinn and Stevens, 2009).

Studies now reveal that survivors of human rights violations often gather the evidence for their victimisation in the form of photographs of the disappeared, newspaper clippings, police reports, death certificates, photocopies of legal resolutions, and much more (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2021, Halilovich, 2016, Villalta Luna, 2014, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021b). They are the result of engaging with state bureaucracies and their official forms or preserving personal information for memorialisation, evidence, or advocacy (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2021, Halilovich, 2016). Cronin-Furman and Krystalli (2021) write about the folders that victims bring out in the course of an interview as “a personal archive of harms suffered, a trove of bureaucratic forms and a repository of legal instruments” (p. 81). These folders help to complete the accounts narrated (Villalta Luna, 2014).

In some literature these collections have been referred to as ‘archives of pain’, described as the evidence produced by the individuals “who turn for help to organisations which emerge to meet the need of those tracing missing relatives” (Forde, 2004: 119). Whether they are “photographs, bits of clothing or oral testimonies, they are often admitted as legal defence of human rights in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions all over the world” (119). It also refers to the vast quantity of information held in many private homes across Latin America, providing evidence of the abuse of the former authoritarian regimes (Forde, 2004).

This literature supports McKemmish’s argument that “On a personal level recordkeeping is a ‘kind of witnessing’. On a personal level it is a way of evidencing and memorialising our lives - our existence, our activities and experiences, our relationships with others, our identity, our ‘place’ in the world”(McKemish, 1996: 175). Furthermore, a personal archive’s capacity to

witness relies on the systematic way in which the creator preserves and organises the records (McKemmish, 1996). McKemmish and Piggott define personal archives as incorporating,

all forms, genres, and media of records relating to that person, whether captured in personal or corporate recordkeeping systems; remembered, transmitted orally, or performed; held in manuscript collections, archival, and other cultural institutions, community archives, or other keeping places; or stored or shared in digital spaces (McKemmish and Piggott, 2013: 113).

This expansive definition supports research coming out of Colombia that depicts how new documentation practices are signs of power struggles; the struggle to incorporate other stories and forms of narration and remembering in spaces that are controlled by the victims of human rights violations in response to a dominant narrative that denies mass atrocities or demonstrates impunity towards them (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines, 2011, Giraldo, 2018, Giraldo Lopera, 2021, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021a, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021b, Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2021, Aguilar-Forero, 2018).

In the recent years, there has been an explosion of works on *memory* and *memory practices* coming from Colombia, which has been referred to as a ‘memory boom’ according to Aguilar-Forero (2018) as the result of three factors: (1) the demand for justice, truth and reparation – known as victims’ rights (García-Godos, 2016); (2) A search for roots and a feeling of belonging in a society experiencing displacement, and upheaval; and (3) the need for a temporary anchoring which is necessary in societies suffering from brutal communicative and cultural revolts that dissolve socio-territorial bonds (Aguilar-Forero 2018:112). Publications from the National Centre for Historical Memory, the Truth Commission and researchers such as Briceño-Donn et al. (2009) have compiled memory and documentation practices from around the country that use what Diana Taylor (2003) refers to as ‘the repertoire’, or forms of memory that differ from those documents traditionally found in archives: performances, objects, dances, and oral narratives¹⁵. On the whole, the studies on these memory practices have left out the documentation practices happening on an individual level that are leading to the creation of personal collections of documents.

¹⁵ Other research on memory practices in Colombia include: (Cogollo-Ospina and Toro Tamayo, 2016, Mazorra, 2010, Numpaque Moreno, 2019, Mosquera and Tique Basto, 2014, Pinilla, 2015)

The only research found on personal archives of families of disappeared persons has been undertaken by Giraldo Lopera and Daniel Tobón. They have researched community archives but also the personal archives of Fabiola Lalinde and Mario Agudelo, two different actors affected by the Colombian armed conflict, the first the mother of a disappeared man, the second a combatant who later became a government official, a political activist, and a survivor of violations (Giraldo and Tobón, 2020, Giraldo, 2018, Giraldo Lopera, 2021, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021a). They show how personal archives are the result of a search for official answers, and their work with community organisations. The archives gradually take on a more public role as they become the source of artworks, documentary films, museum exhibits, and the source of research. They contribute to transitional narratives which search for reliable records that document structural and institutional failures of the country (Giraldo and Tobón, 2020: 8).

The exact extent to which relatives document is difficult to know, although the practice of teaching recordkeeping to the families has been institutionalised by NGOs and FOs (Giraldo, 2018, Giraldo Lopera, 2021, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021a, UBPD, 2019, Verdad Abierta, 2019, UBPD, 2020a, UBPD, 2020b, ICRC, 2020, ASFADDES, 1993). Nevertheless, very limited knowledge is available about these personal collections, how they are used, what they consist of, what they mean and what the consequences are of this new and growing practice.

To summarise, I have shown here how literature on information-seeking and use of non-institutional records in contexts of enforced disappearance is practically absent, except for the notable exceptions of Giraldo-Lopera (Giraldo, 2018, Giraldo Lopera, 2021, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021a, Giraldo and Tobón, 2021b) and Cronin-Furman and Krystalli (2021) whose work was published during the writing of my first article. I have shown that a significant category of human rights archives has been overlooked, that of the personal archives which, as the limited research emerging from Colombia shows, is a growing memory and documentation practice coming particularly from the victims of enforced disappearance. It is here that my research aims to contribute, by filling in this gap in knowledge on this growing practice coming from the families and how, through their seeking of information, they learn the importance of keeping records and then using them to pursue answers.

3 Conceptual Framework

This chapter brings together the main concepts, the theoretical perspective, and the relationship between them, to create a coherent frame that guides this work. To begin with, this is an information-practice study in a context of mass violations, the implication being that context weighs heavily into the concepts applied here, how we view them and why. David Johnson explains that “the persistent theoretical problem of accounting for individual action in a social context is seldom explicitly addressed and we are unaware of the different senses of context in use” (Johnson, 2003: 736). The context in this study is one of *human rights violations* (section 3.2), which accounts for why certain information practices are taking place, and in turn, has implications for the concepts I use. Accordingly, a clarification of the terms used in this study introduces the chapter (section 3.1). This is followed by the normative framework that responds to the context and explains how the concepts (accountability & information practices) manifest themselves and become relationally intertwined (section 3.2).

In section 3.3, I discuss the consequences of human rights violations for documentation seen through practice theory. The practice approach brings together the role of information-seeking, use, and record creation and activation as related concepts. I explain how using new and wider interpretations of the terms ‘records and archives’ in contexts of violations reveals other documentation practices which go beyond evidence, to include memory and activism. All of which are tools for *social* accountability, discussed in section 3.5. I conclude the chapter with a visualisation of how the three approaches come together to provide my conceptual framework - a practice-based framework for the study of archives and human rights.

3.1 Clarification of terms

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify a few terms used in the dissertation. The terms *searching* or *the search* in this study refers to the *search for disappeared persons* not the subset of information-seeking that focuses on the interactions with information search systems. The use of information search systems (i.e., the web) as a method for searching for information was not present in this research and information systems were not studied. *The search* is a vast, long, complex, and social process which intertwines with *information-seeking*, but encompasses much more than simply information-seeking. It includes the search for graves, exhumation of bodies, the *official search* process undertaken by the state or NGOs and, therefore also includes the reporting of missing people. As such, it includes a number of state and civil actors

(institutions and individuals) and a vast number of different practices. In other words, the *search for the disappeared* is necessarily a very broad term linked closely to an entire field of human rights and legal practice. Nevertheless, *the search for the disappeared* and *information-seeking* cannot be separated from each other, as the search for a person always involves a search for information *about* the person.

There are two major discursive umbrella concepts in information studies that draw on ‘different metatheoretical perspectives’ and are considered to be ‘alternative viewpoints on information-seeking’ (Savolainen, 2007: 110); these are *information practices* and *information behaviour*. I will not go into what Savolainen has called this ‘academic hair-splitting’ exercise of defending one of these umbrella concepts. It is important, however, for the sake of clarity, to state where this project sits in the field. This project is a socio-cultural study of information practices in a specific context. However, the study also draws on elements of information behaviour due to the study of the actions undertaken by individuals to meet their information needs. In my view, and as explained along the way, information practices and information behaviour are not incompatible. On the contrary, they have both contributed to this study by enabling to move between the choices of individuals, to their actions and then practices created both as a consequence as well as a determining factor of those choices. The study of information practices in a context of human rights violations requires considering the behaviour of individuals involved in the practices as well as, their motivations and needs. Human information behaviour is composed of “cognitive, physical and social actions, which constitute activities” or practices (Wilson and Savolainen, 2009b, Vakkari, 1997). *Information-seeking* and *information use* are both recognized as constituting practices (Wilson and Savolainen, 2009b).

3.2 Human Rights: the situational and normative framework

The philosophical backbone of this entire research project is the human rights project. Human rights implementation is derived from a written set of rules over which there is some, albeit often problematically, international consensus “with a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations”¹⁶ (UN 1948). The international human rights project is about *fundamental* rights, rights that are claimed against or towards the state.

¹⁶ See Preamble of the UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Properly conceived, a human right is claimed against a state. For example, where the human rights regime asserts a human right to ‘liberty and the security of the person’, this means in practice that ‘each state has the responsibility and authority to protect and implement the right to liberty and security of persons within its territory’ (Donnelly, 2003: 34).

From a human rights perspective, the families of the disappeared are individual rights-holders who make legitimate claims to the state. The state is the institution that carries the duty of protecting and upholding these rights and should be held accountable in the case these rights are breached, whether that is through acts or through omissions. The workings of the state are therefore crucial to scrutinize, especially in contexts of widespread allegations of violations. The workings of perpetrators of human rights violations, which in this project includes the Colombian government among others, cannot only be seen as instrumental power interests, but rather as a series of practices and cultural modalities (Risse and Sikink, 1999). Enforced disappearance is a practice, “a strategy to spread terror” (OHCHR, 2009), and is enshrined in both domestic and international laws. In this context, transnational advocacy groups, NGOs, and FOs have developed documentation practices based on gathering information on the violating state in order to shame it and call for accountability of its actions (Risse and Ropp, 1999: 237). These practices are tools through which NGOs assist the families and the families learn to deal with the state.

3.3 Practice theory

Practice theory is the study of ‘doing’. Practices are central to understanding human behaviour. Theorising it is necessary because they constitute ‘patterns’ of actions based on ‘initiatives, creativity and individual performance’ (Nicolini, 2013: 3,4). Furthermore, it includes looking as ‘things’ and their use, background and states of emotion and motivations (Reckwitz, 2002: 249). Because practices are socially produced, they have the potential of bringing us closer to the doings and the lifeworlds of the participants embedded into a broader context and paying attention to the role of materials, to produce knowledge relevant beyond academia (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018: 5).

More specifically, and in relation to this particular project, the practice lens allows us to study the production and reproduction of accountability forms and the way human rights standards are applied, broken or maintained. “(T)he reality of the idea (of human rights) is generated within practice” (López, 2018: 162). Social structures (family, authority, institutions, and

organisations) are kept, created, or changed through “the recurrent performance of material activities, and to a large extent they only exist as long as those activities are performed” (Nicolini, 2013: 3). Practice theory therefore also provides an understanding of different cultural social orders, from the grassroots and the workings of families, to how governments function or the NGOs that work to influence them, and how all of the above interact, affect, and alter each other (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018).

Focusing on practices and not on practitioners, practice theories are ‘theory-methods packages’ that produce a shift in the way we think (Nicolini 2013: 7). Social investigation emerges as a bottom-up analysis of understanding practices and untangling their relationship (Nicolini, 2013: 8). Even though Schatzki has proclaimed that there is no such thing as a unified theory of practice, Nicolini has brought together some of the ‘family resemblances’ which can be used as a toolkit of this theory-method approach to practices (Nicolini, 2013: 14). These family resemblances of practice theories encompass the following:

- *“Practices constitute the horizon within which all discursive and material actions are made possible and acquire meaning.*
 - *Practices are inherently contingent, materially mediated, and cannot be understood without reference to a specific place, time, and concrete historical context.*
 - *Practices are social accomplishments, even when they are attributed to individuals.*
 - *While practices depend on reflexive human carriers to be accomplished and perpetuated, human agent capability always results from taking part in one or more socio-material practices.*
 - *Practices are mutually connected and constitute a nexus, texture, field, or network.”*
- (Nicolini, 2013: 214).

The implication of this approach is that we can identify who the carriers of human rights practice or their accountability practices are and how this has been done. This allows for individual action to count but also it makes room for a “sociological grasp of context” where a practice must adjust to the contingencies of a given situation (Cox, 2012).

3.3.1 Information practices

Information practices are defined here as “an entire range of elements appearing in accounts of how information comes or is given” through the initiative one or more agents and their interactions (McKenzie, 2003: 25). They are therefore anchored in communities of practices

and develop over time “in relation to the social, historical and material structures that give a setting its particular characteristics” (Bonner and Lloyd, 2011: 1214). The term *information practices* is therefore a broad umbrella term that includes *information-seeking* (expanded on below) and *information use*, which in turn includes *collecting*, *creating*, and *keeping* records.

These practices can be divided into *forms* of information practice. Because knowledge is not a possession, but an activity, “as a collective and distributed ‘doing’” (Gherardi quoted in Cox, 2012: 179) the purpose of the ‘doing’ is considered differently depending on which perspective we look at it from – materially, politically, or disciplinary. One practice that generates information may be a *documentation practice* if it is materially recorded in some way; the same practice can be considered a *memory practice* for the creator, due to the purpose of remembering an event or a person. If used for the purpose of accountability for a human rights crime, it will be considered a *human rights practice*. The term *information practices* thus includes all manners of interactions with information undertaken by social actors, and it includes the possibility of distinguishing purpose, even though purposes may overlap; documentation practices, such as the creation, preservation, gathering and use of *records*, can overlap with memory practices, the creation of markers that allow for the preservation of memory (these can be events, performances, or *records*).

3.3.1.1 *Information-seeking process*

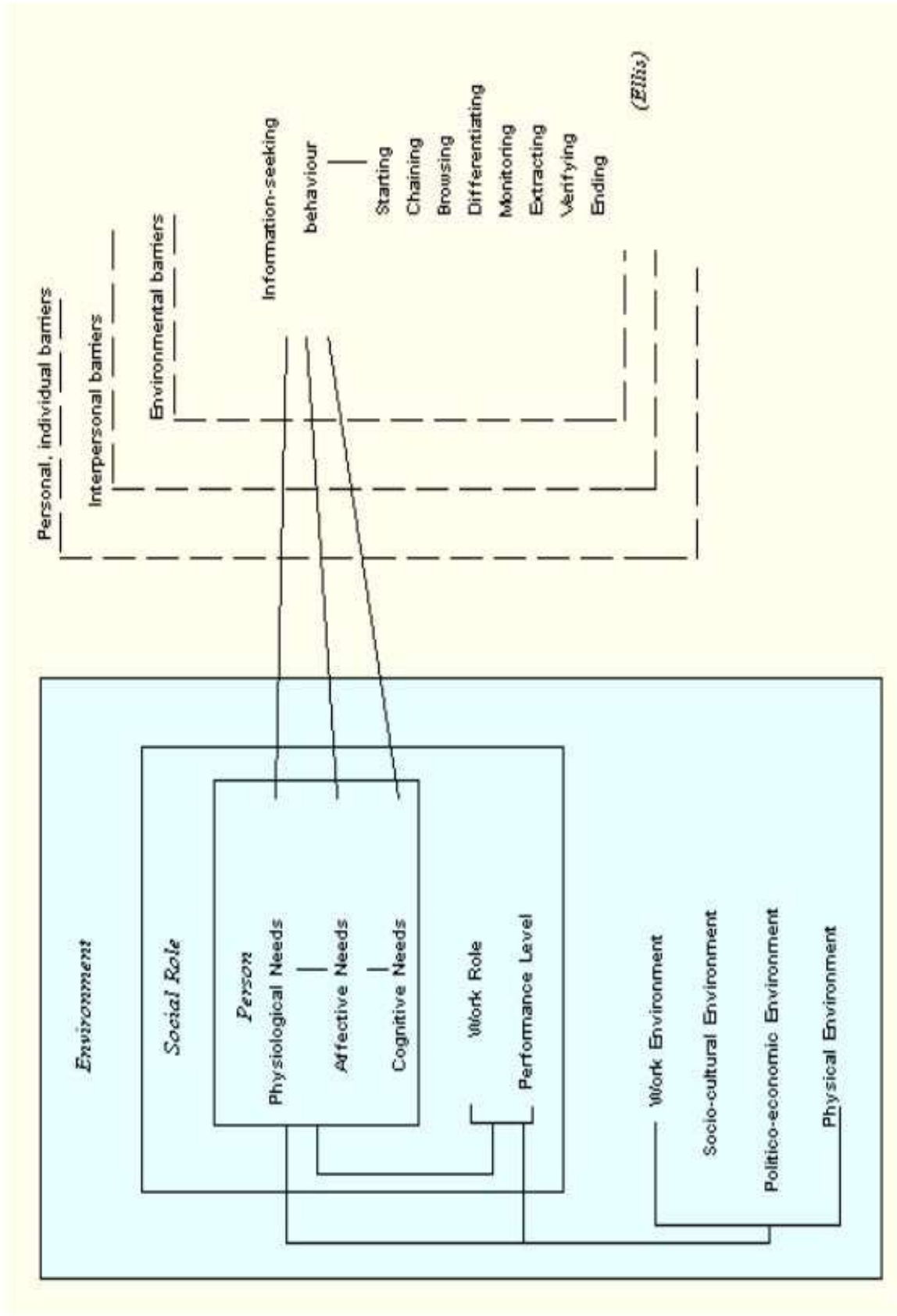
In this study, the starting *information practice* is information-seeking. *Information-seeking* is defined by Case and Given (2016b) as “a conscious effort to acquire information in response to a need or gap in your knowledge. Information also comes through serendipity, chance encounters, or when others share information that they believe may be useful to you” (p. 7). It begins when a person is confronted with a situation where they must find information to help them deal with their situation; thus it responds to an *information need* (Dunne, 2002).

The concept of *information needs* has been defined by a number of scholars as a multidimensional concept linked to seeking answers, reducing uncertainty, and making sense of the world (Case and Given, 2016a: 91). Concepts such as information needs and information-seeking have been researched in information studies as part of essential human behaviour in how we ‘perceive, seek, understand, and use information’ (Case and Given, 2016b: 4). Information-seeking therefore should be considered as a process within the range of human information behaviour (Vakkari, 2008).

Wilson's 1981 information-seeking macro-model presented below (fig. 1) offers a guide to help understand how "information needs arise, and what may prevent (and by implication, aid) the search for information" (Wilson, 1999: 252). It highlights the relevance of contextual information needs as the central triggers of the information-seeking process; how needs are framed as personal, yet within a specific social setting and environment; and how during the information-seeking process barriers arise (Wilson, 1999). Information barriers, the obstacles that arise in the information-seeking process that prevents the finding of information, serve as an important analytical tool for understanding the extent to which constraints are 'human-made' stemming exogenously from values, norms, institutions, or economic and political forces, or from within the person (intellectual, affective, or cognitive).

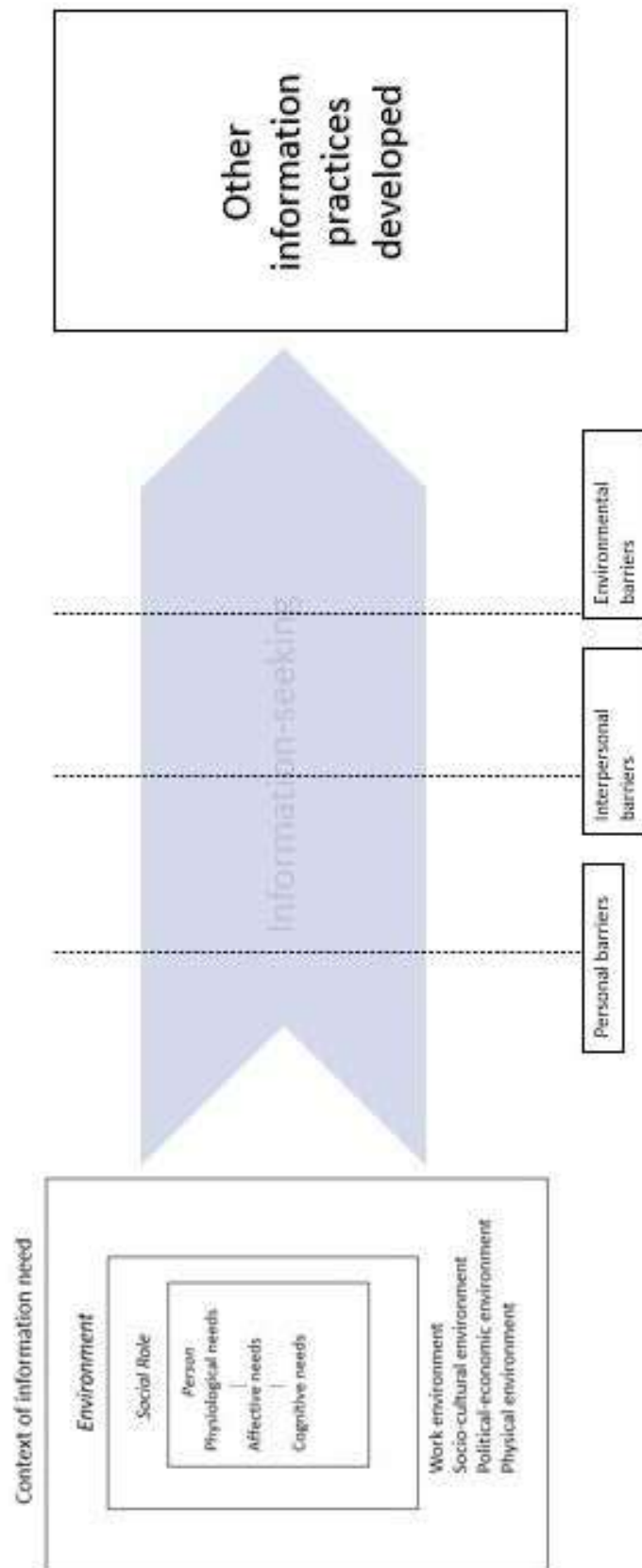
The model (Wilson, 1981: 4) helps draw attention to the interrelationships between concepts that arise in a process of seeking information in general, and helps align it to a chronology, which in the case of disappearances is crucial. The model was chosen for this study to model information behaviour in a way that is broad enough to look into the different concepts and the process as a whole (Savolainen, 2007). This broad approach to the wide range of information-related phenomena leaves space for the analysis of the different actions.

Figure 1. Wilson's 1981 macro-model of Information-seeking behaviour



Wilson's 1981 model is a general model that applies to a variety of populations and contexts in which needs arise. It cannot convey the complexity of the real world. Therefore, the model presented above has been adapted (see figure 2) by removing the additions made by Ellis (1989) (starting, chaining, browsing etc.), to allow the inclusion of other information practices that might arise from the seeking process. By allowing *information practices* to become elements in the range of human information behaviour, they can become useful analytical tools, and be conceived of as modes of (information) behaviour (Wilson and Savolainen, 2009a: n.a.). Adapting the model allows me to ask what information practices arise within the specific context studied, one with its own specific information needs and barriers. It also allows me to ask how the information is obtained and used.

Figure 2. Adapted Wilson's 1981 model



3.3.1.2 *Information use: from physical use to materiality*

Information use is another concept central to information behaviour which tends to proceed information-seeking processes (e.g. Wilson 1981). *Information use* has been defined as the *outcomes* (Kari, 2007) or *effects* (Taylor and Taylor, 1986) of information-seeking, or as “whatever the particular population says it is” (Taylor, 1991: 220). There seems to be disagreement as to what exactly it refers to, whether it is when the individual interacts with an information source, whether it is an internalizing of information-as-thing (Spink and Cole, 2006), or whether information use is only possible after the information “has been absorbed by the person” (Kari, 2007: n.a.).

According to Dervin (1999), just like *information-seeking*, *information use* is a communicative practice (p.729). Whether it is communicative or not, there is agreement that *information use* is an “instrumental activity, rather than an end result” (Kari 2007). Information use then, as Kari (2007) points out, seems to refer to both the utilization and utility of information. In other words, it is the effects of finding information, how it changes thinking and how this information and the effects are subsequently applied in practice, actions, or decisions. This seems to resonate with the account that *use* is both process and outcome (Rich, 1997). A useful definition is that “When using (information), the person does something to or with the knowledge” (Kari, 2007). As stated by Todd (1999), “As a whole, the literature conveys the sense that information utilization is all about people and information coming together; it is about people ‘doing something’ with information that they have sought and gathered themselves or provided by someone else” (p. 852).

Kari identified different criteria of information use, one being physicality of use, involving actions that are perceptible to others. Focusing on the ‘physical use’ criteria, Kari refers to the importance of the materiality or embodiment of use, the actions that come out of obtaining information, something which Kari argues has been neglected in information studies research (Kari, 2007).

Research from fields such as anthropology, cultural studies, or archival studies provide useful analytical concepts and tools for the study of the physical use of information (see for example Appadurai et al., 1986, Sundqvist, 2015, Sundqvist, 2021, Caswell, 2014a). The focus on those studies are the tangible aspects of *using* information that have vast rippling effects. Materiality is one aspect that comes from this action or practice of using information (Sundqvist, 2021), what Buckland (1991) calls information-as-thing, but extends not only to artifacts and objects

but “bodies, spaces, and technologies” where the interest lies in “how human relationships are formed by a material environment, how humans act on and are acted on by material objects, and in the materiality of the human body as well” (Sundqvist, 2021: 2).

3.4 Archival theory on records

Archival theory is “a set of propositions” about the concept of archives and their contents – records – rather than being a theory for how to conduct research or a set of universal rules (Sundqvist, 2009: 39, Mortensen, 1999). The creation and keeping of records lie at the heart of archival theory, thus helping to provide some explanations for why records are used and created (Sundqvist, 2009: 39). It covers not only the records themselves, but also “the context of creation, management and use and their sociocultural context” (Duranti and Franks, 2015: 84). Archival theory is used here to be able to reveal the documentation practices emerging in this context and understand how and why the records created or gathered here are linked to accountability. Recordkeeping is defined here as, “a broad framework for making and managing evidence and memory that is brought into specific application by discrete processes serving multiple purposes and operating through time” (Duranti and Franks, 2015: 319). The consequence of this practice, the creation of records for personal collections,¹⁷ requires a theoretical framework to understand their meanings and how they are used in this research.

Records are defined broadly in line with more recent literature on archives and the use of the definition in Colombian TJ mechanisms (see chapter 2), to include the variety of objects and materials that families collect. Douglas et al. (2019) acknowledge the active part of recordkeeping where records are created, kept, used, and reused by different actors in different circumstances, who “work with them and within them” (Douglas et al., 2019: 101). It reveals what the records can accomplish and how (Douglas et al., 2019).

This approach to records is relatively new. As Anneli Sundqvist (2021) describes, the conceptualisation of records has gone from being focused on tangible, documentary objects in a physical context to more conceptual notions in the current context of digital information (p.1). This is why it is important to see their creation as a larger part of information practices, in order to integrate the way they are used and activated in specific contexts. With this in mind, it may be more productive to see records as representations rather than in informational terms, because

¹⁷ Materials they have assembled from a variety of sources, gathered either purposefully or naturally (Paraphrasing Pearce-Moses definition of collections see: (Pearce-Moses, 2005: 76))

they elucidate both the material and the social world, making sense of the many “aspects of human behaviour and experience” (Yeo, 2018: 130), which is also my aim here.

Central to archival theory lies the concept of creator as “the corporate body, family or person that created, accumulated and/or maintained records in the conduct of personal or corporate activity” (International Council on Archives, 2000). In this study, the creators are the families who preserve and gather personal papers. The main emphasis for personal archives is that they are created by “individuals acting communally”, not by institutions (Douglas and Mills, 2018).

Since the 1990s there has been increasing literature (see chapter 2) on the problematic nature of archives in contexts of mass violations, authoritarian regimes or conflicts, revealing issues of reliability, validity, missing evidence, records destroyed or hidden, and other limitations (Luft, 2020: 337). The engagement of archival theory with these contexts has meant a reconsideration of older established perspectives on concepts such as records, archives and recordkeeping by bringing in the dimensions of memory, community, and identity attached to objects and their representations. This is significant for social accountability, where records’ contributions goes beyond providing legal evidence, by also presenting narratives that can challenge master narratives imposed by the state (Jelin et al., 2003).

3.5 Accountability

Accountability is the theoretical link between recordkeeping practices in human rights contexts and justice mechanisms, through the provision of evidence (Cox 2006). Accountability refers to “the ability to ensure that public officials are answerable for their behaviour —forced to justify and inform the citizenry about their decisions and possibly eventually be sanctioned for them” (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006: 5). In other words, it demands responsibility from political power. In the field of human rights, it is States that are to be held accountable in the case of violations. In practice, the question to be asked is *who has the responsibility and power to require answers from public officials* (Blanco-Rivera, 2012: 19).

There are many typologies used to define accountability, applying different criteria (Mulgan, 2003). Guillermo O'Donnell (2007) introduced the concepts of horizontal and vertical accountability to refer to different ways to exert control of political power. Horizontal accountability refers to those mechanisms within nation states that oversee the workings of

government, such as state agencies including the executive, legislative or judicial powers. He defines it as “the capability and availability of state institutions legally enabled to check and sanction actions or omissions of other state institutions that may be deemed illegal” (O'Donnell, 2007: 77-78). Horizontal accountability depends on internal forms of control. It depends upon a democratic state of law, important not only for what it does, but what it prevents, because it entails public officials to “accept and respect the legal and constitutional limitations of their respective jurisdictions” (O'Donnell, 2007: 101).

Vertical accountability however, is the accountability that stems from the participation of civil society, such as through elections and other activities crucial for democratic life relying on the idea of *voice* or *voicing upward* (suggested by the vertical metaphor) (O'Donnell, 2007: 106). Vertical accountability constitutes external forms of control of the government – external from that of the government itself. Elections are considered a form of accountability as the electorate is given the opportunity to punish those in office by forcing out incumbents who do not represent the interests of the people. However, elections as a form of accountability can be problematic when average citizens lack enough information to make informed decisions about their representatives.

3.5.1 Social Accountability

Peruzzotti and Smulovitz identified a form of vertical accountability as *social accountability* to refer to alternative mechanisms of accountability grounded on citizens' actions, social movements, and media organisations (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). According to these authors, social accountability is composed of three elements that must work together to achieve its goals; the more they interact the higher the chances for social accountability to be effective: judicialization, mediatization, and social mobilisation.

Judicialization entails the legal actions that citizens use to make claims to the state. Citizens force the state to engage in disputes it otherwise would like to avoid. This involves social demands articulated as legal claims; this provides a seal of legitimacy to claims that governments might not wish to legitimate (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). In Latin American, there has been an expansion of legal institutions and mechanisms in the last few decades to deal with growing legal claims (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). In Colombia, the development of

mechanisms such as the *tutela*¹⁸ have allowed common citizens easier access to lower courts for smaller cases (Taylor, 2018). This includes the creation of local offices to provide legal advice such as the ombudsmen's office or *la defensoria del pueblo* (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). In the case of enforced disappearance this involves access to report cases with the *Fiscalía*,¹⁹ placing *tutela*'s to obtain answers from state institutions not answering enquiries or creating legal cases against the state or specific institutions. The expansion of judicialization does not mean the mechanisms are efficient or that citizens trust that these procedures will work, but citizens are left with few other alternatives (Taylor, 2018, Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006).

Mediatization is the ability of citizens, social groups, or movements to mobilize the media into taking up the stories that need to be told or circulated to inform and mobilize the public. It allows for the visibility of the victims, the cases and, when possible, who the perpetrators are or are claimed to be. In any case it allows for the visibility of State response to the atrocities. Mediatization can occur via the mainstream channels or alternative media, local or national. It facilitates the third element of social accountability: social mobilisation.

Social mobilisation is the work that civil society does to move and inform the public about human rights violations occurring in society. It includes the work of NGOs, victim groups, and family organisations which are usually expressed, in the language of 'human rights' and legality (O'Donnell, 2007: 106). It can include a variety of different channels such as protests, artwork, and the formation of groups or movements. Different sectors of society or different groups or citizens may choose to focus on one issue or some politicians that they wish to influence. The aim is not only to make the situation visible, but also to mobilize the public. Therefore, social mobilisation works around the *intensity* of claims and their capacity to move public opinion (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006: 22). Public exposure of wrongdoing and intense claims of injustice, particularly where a large part of society has been affected, can have consequences for the political establishment such as the reputation of individual politicians or a political party. Yet these reputation costs, as Peruzzotti and Smulovitz argue, are only symbolic (2006: 11).

¹⁸ The *tutela* is a legal mechanism in Colombia that allows citizens to make legal claims to have their rights protected without the need for a lawyer (Taylor, 2018).

¹⁹ The *Fiscalía* is the Office of the Attorney General which is part of Colombia's judicial branch of Government. It has administrative autonomy and was designed to prosecute offenders, investigate crimes, review judicial processes and accuse penal law infractions against judges and courts of justice <https://www.fiscalia.gov.co/colombia/en/>

Together, these three components – judicialization, mediatization and social mobilisation – can make social accountability possible, yet certain freedoms do need to be in place, such as freedom of expression (including freedom of the press), freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement and association (O'Donnell, 2007: 102).

Social accountability exists in Latin American countries to a certain extent “not because there is full democratic rule of law or a government that accepts it” (O'Donnell, 2007: 102). Rather because, “There are people and organizations in society who feel with enough intensity that it is worthwhile to engage in initiatives of social accountability and have the individual and collective capabilities to do so” (O'Donnell, 2007: 102).

Horizontal accountability and social accountability can be interdependent to a certain extent. Social accountability “if well organised, continuous and present in the media” can be a source of stimulation for horizontal accountability (O'Donnell 2007, 104). The workings of civil society organisations and citizens can not only add new resources to governmental accountability, but can sometimes compensate for deficits of horizontal accountability (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006: 10).

Unlike electoral mechanisms, social accountability can be exercised between elections and does not depend upon fixed calendars. It is activated “on demand” and can be directed toward the control of single issues, policies, or functionaries (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006: 11).

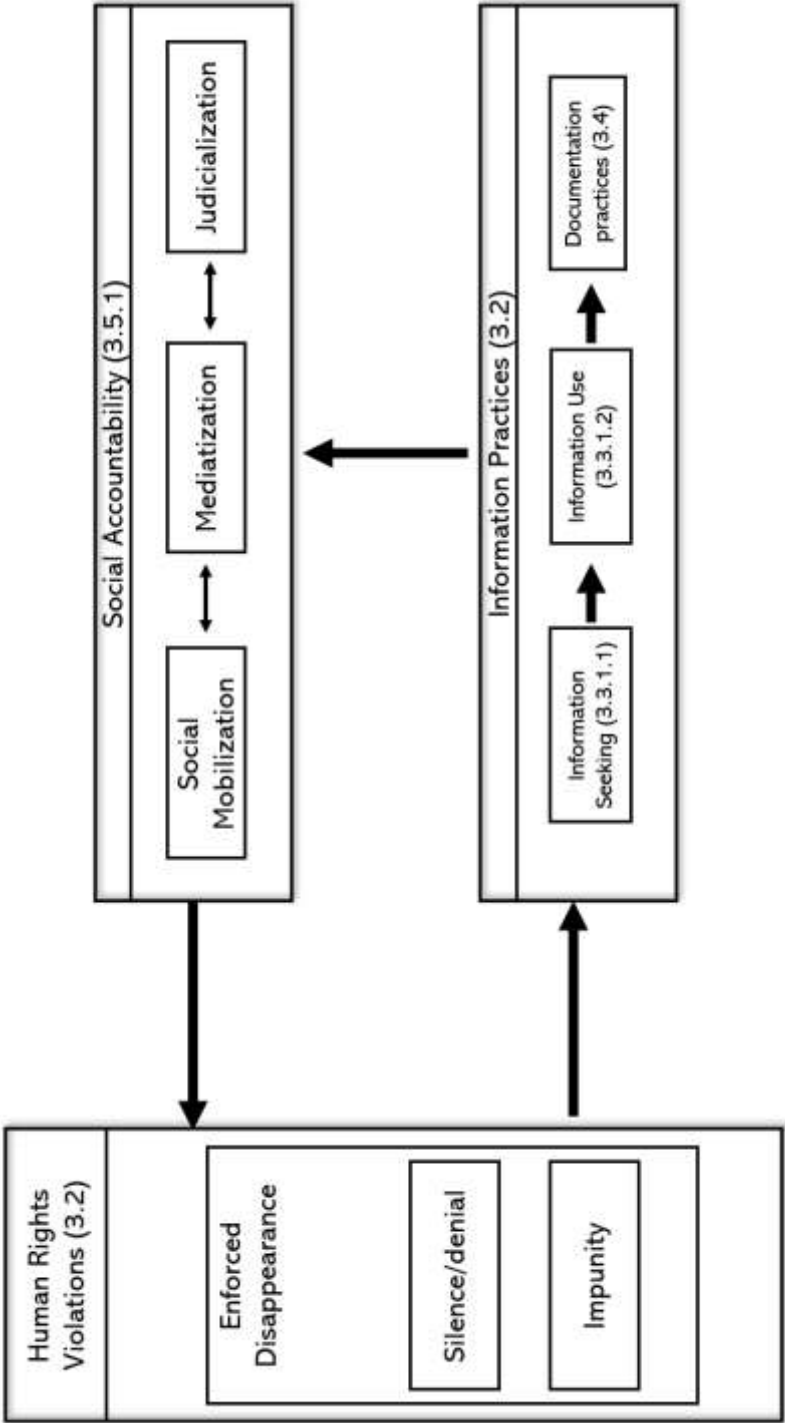
Social accountability entails, as mentioned above, the reputation of the state and the extent to which a state can be in any way legitimate according to its citizens. Fact-finding missions and the gathering of evidence are central in documenting and denouncing violations of states and as a shaming strategy. This has been the work that human rights groups and organisations have relied upon (Sikkink, 2012), along with the collection of documentation, oral histories and collective memories. These documents keep a historical record of violations and allow “future generations, from historians to family members, to thoroughly investigate what happened and reach their own conclusions.” (Bickford, 1999: 1099).

3.6 A practice-based framework for the study of archives and human rights

Accountability is underpinned by information: the right to receive it and the obligation to provide it, to provide explanations, and to receive explanations. It begins with the gathering and keeping of evidence, and is followed by the explanatory dimension (Schedler, 1999: 15). Effective recordkeeping, gathering evidence and fact finding, cannot guarantee accountability, but they can provide accountability tools, for example, of human rights violations (Hurley, 2005: 224). These tools contribute to a public dialogue between different actors. The conceptual framework I presented here builds on this idea of documentation practices as accountability tools, arguing that a practice-based perspective towards information helps highlight the process from which information is sought to the moment records are created and activated and the implications of these different actions. Looking at the physical use of information, a study of documentation practices at the grassroots level helps us understand the extent to which they also are tools for social accountability.

Figure 3 visualizes the three pillars that comprise the conceptual framework laid out above, and the relationship between each one. It shows how this study uses the context and premise of human rights violations, specifically enforced disappearance to study information practices at a grassroots level, contributing to an understanding of these practices for social accountability. Here lies the value and societal contribution of information practices. We will return to this figure in the discussion chapter to include findings and how they fit into the framework.

Figure 3. The conceptual framework



4 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological approach applied in my research. I begin with a narrative description of the research process from the start, how the project changed with time, and why. I introduce the epistemological assumptions and the research design, a multiple qualitative case-study. I present the setting and the four case-studies. I then follow with the data collection, the data analysis and ethical considerations, although ethical issues are addressed throughout the chapter. I end the chapter with reflections on the method and the limitations of the study.

4.1 Narrative description of the research process

I want to begin this chapter with a short narrative of my research process; a process which was messy, complicated and very different to what a neat method chapter or summary might suggest (Krystalli, 2021: 182). The idea for this research project began with the signing of a peace agreement in Colombia in 2016 and the establishment of a transitional justice system that was to bring greater oversight and accountability in dealing with Colombia's past 60 years of conflict. Originally, the aim of the project was to investigate the extent to which human rights defenders were accessing documentation for those purposes. This changed as it became clear from conversations and interviews with a number of organisations and members of civil society during my preliminary field trip to Colombia in October 2019, that due to the growing opacity and violence, it was dangerous to seek official information and that 'there is no access'²⁰.

It also became apparent that different groups of victims were having different experiences regarding their information access, seeking, and use. I decided to focus on enforced disappearance, in order to focus on one specific issue and community of individuals who were experiencing their own particular difficulties. An informal chat with the UBPD brought to my attention that the government was not helping in providing information about the disappeared. Rather, it was the families who were doing all the work: "The families are the best archivists" (UBPD informal chat October 2019). It was here that I decided to investigate the information practices of the families, Where were they obtaining information from? How were they dealing with the barriers? How were they undertaking their search for their loved ones in this context? I also wanted to include the perspective of the different records offices that held human rights

²⁰ This answer is a general response of a number of interviews with NGOs and family members: 'No hay acceso' referring mainly to the documentation needed to prove the chain of command.

documentation (State archives and public recordkeeping offices such as the Procurator's Office - *Procuraduría*).

During March 2020, the pandemic imposed restrictions on international travel which impeded travel plans for fieldwork. This affected my aim of including state record offices such as police and military archives, the offices of the ministry of defence and the ministry of the interior in the investigation. By 2021 the situation in Colombia had worsened, and nationwide protests and strikes meant that not only was it not possible to travel to Colombia, but travel would be dangerous. The uncertainty regarding travel and safety until the beginning of 2022, meant I had to decide whether to continue to extend my research period or focus my research on those interviews and data that I had managed to obtain. The focus became the families and the organisations that assist them.

4.2 Epistemological assumptions

This research is approached from the epistemological position that a mind-independent reality exists (Hjørland, 2004: 488), that social phenomena and structures have causal powers which means we can make causal assessments of them, and that social practices represent a basic component of human affairs with which we can theorise (Nicolini, 2013:162). This approach, known as critical realism, does not suggest that all social phenomena are directly observable nor that which is observable is always a correct picture of a phenomenon or its effects (Marsh and Stoker, 2002). It simply states that positing the existence of social phenomena and their effects provides an explanation of social action (Hollis & Smith quoted in Marsh & Stoker p.30). According to critical realism, reality is “theory-laden but not theory determined”, which means that some theories can get closer to reality than others and can help explain events and phenomena rather than give us an empirical description (Fletcher, 2017).

This has an implication for how we collect data. The interviews from this study, for example, are understood as interview-data-as-resource, more than interview-data-as-topic (Rapley, 2007: 16), that is, “as (more or less) reflecting the interviewees reality,” rather than a “reality jointly constructed with the interviewee and interviewer” (p 16). They provide the information about the participants' perspectives and interpretation of personal experience. It follows the epistemological assumption that we can deduce reality from data to a certain extent. This does not mean, however, that the way my interviewees spoke and how they communicated was not

important or not considered. Their emotions, silences, evasions and difficulties in speaking were considered as, what Fujii (2010) refers to, ‘metadata’ (see below) of interviews that help colour in and understand the content of what has been said, in this case, the difficulties and trauma experienced by the families.

The *critical* element of critical realism has been important in highlighting the content and power relationships that determine documentary heritage, narrative, and representation (Cook, 2001: 25). I hold the view that revealing the information practices of families in their search for the disappeared persons is crucial for revealing a phenomenon of social action (the networking, sharing of knowledge, and creation of records) that is very often hidden due to the marginalisation of the families. The research design below explains the choices that have been made to help reveal and understand these grassroots manifestations.

4.3 Research Design

One advantage of critical realism is its approach to research techniques which are not ends in themselves but means to an end, being therefore highly adaptive. The aim is to gain access to information essential to understanding the focus on the study (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014). This research is exploratory in nature, and the qualitative methods used attempt to reflect this by assembling those tools that gave me the possibility to explore the phenomenon as much as possible, focusing as well on; the primacy of context, thick description, process, and the perspectives of those participating (Gorman and Clayton 2005). The data collection (below) consists of interviews, informal chats, and document analysis. The data has been ‘cased’ in different ‘domains of reality’ centred on the families (see section 4.3.4) (Carter and Sealey, 2009: 69).

4.3.1 Centring on the victims/families to build case studies

Only fairly recently has the micro level, i.e. the role of victims, been ‘discovered’ (Kiza et al., 2006: 5). There has been a lack of empirical knowledge about what Kiza et al. (2006) call the ‘missing link’, “inquiry into the perceived needs of the affected population” (p.5). Centring the study on the families comes from an understanding that affected populations²¹ have much to teach us about atrocities committed, as they are often the only witnesses of grave violations (Rothenberg, 2019: 189). The choice of centring on the families is therefore about making

²¹ I use this term to refer to survivors and victims of mass human rights violations.

visible their experiences and their consequences, to break down regimes of denial, but also to improve the relevant disciplinary fields and make them more relevant to all (Brett, 2018: 289).

“Some professionals may fear that a shift to a victim-centred response calls for allowing the victim/survivor to make all the decisions about who does what and how it is done. This is not the case. Victim-centred denotes an awareness of the centrality of victims/survivors and their needs to the whole” (SAIC 2010 quoted in Robins, 2013: 58).

I would agree with Clive Seale that “it is a mistake to assume that oppressed groups have the best insights into the sources of their oppression” (Seale, 1999: 10); however he does state that they can explain some of the consequences. Accordingly, my aim is to reveal information practices that are relevant to the field in archival and information studies respectively, practices that until now have remained relatively hidden. What do these practices mean – how do they contribute to knowledge in our field? Centring on the families helps make the research more objective rather than less, by taking into account the needs, and roles of people we hear from less, due to the silencing by political repression, and yet who are at the front line of structural failures we can perhaps attempt to address (Rothenberg, 2019).

4.3.2 Multiple qualitative case-study design

I have used case-studies for this research as it allows the possibility to “tease out and disentangle a complex set of factors and relationships” even though it is only in a small number of instances (Easton, 2010: 119). Case research is usually rather eclectic regarding its data collection. The choice can be governed by the researcher’s need in that context and what is possible (Easton, 2010). In this case, as explained in the limitations of the study, what has been possible has been limited due to unavoidable factors external to the study (Covid-pandemic, social upheaval in Colombia). Nevertheless, I have used different sources of data to help build the cases more thoroughly. NGOs and experts were consulted, and they offered documentation that has helped enrich the case studies, by corroborating data and give more socio-political context.

Multiple cases are studied not to generalise, but to understand differences or similarities in what is being studied and to reveal a phenomena within a bounded setting (Mishra and Dey, 2021: 240). The cases I present here are revelatory – they reveal something about a particular issue that usually remains rather hidden due to complicated conditions of access to people or the

situation. Because the same category of subjects of this study (the families of the disappeared) is found around the world in different contexts, it provides new knowledge about a global issue, meaning some of the findings and implications of this study can go further, to be applicable in similar contexts of other regions.

Even though the cases are centred around the families, each case is built with data obtained through NGOs and FO interviews and the documentation studies. Furthermore, all of the cases corroborate each other as their experiences are intrinsically connected to the wider social structures they are formed by.

4.3.3 Setting

The choice of Colombia as the setting for the study is based on deep personal links to the country and the usefulness of this context for the archival and information studies fields. Coming from Colombia, it is a context I know well. Nevertheless, the setting was also chosen 1) because of the limited amounts of research on Colombia's information culture, due to the current and historical opacity; 2) to support the current efforts of victims and their organisations to implement domestic and international laws to reach accountability for enforced disappearances; and 3) because it provides an interesting context that is comparable to other similar contexts around the world, particularly in Latin America.

The advantage of focusing entirely on one country is that close attention can be paid to the influence of the social, cultural, and political context (Stake, 2008). Nevertheless, Colombia was not chosen so that we have a better understanding of Colombia per se. Instead, the setting plays a supportive role by drawing attention to an issue - information practices in the face of mass enforced disappearances (Stake, 2008).

4.3.4 The four case-studies

Case study 1: 'Karla'²²: I came into contact with Karla through a researcher in Colombia. Karla then passed on her friend's number (Maria). Karla is a sister to a disappeared man whose remains have not been found. She has been looking for information about her brother since his disappearance and leads a community group of other families (FO) in her village. The recent history of this village is an emblematic case of the conflict in Colombia. Karla's case is used in articles 1 & 2.

²² The names of the relatives are pseudonyms except for Martha's, as explained in depth later in this chapter.

As the leader of a community group, Karla had information about other family members and spoke often, not only about her case, but that of other family members. This influenced her answers because she was able to refer to other cases she knew had gone through similar experiences, as examples of “this is normal here”. She answered the questions by chronologically narrating her story of her search for information. Her case made clear the bureaucratic difficulties involved, such as the difference between an *official search* (the search undertaken by the state or NGOs) and her own personal information-seeking process. She had to perform her own investigative process because she had difficulty registering her brother’s disappearance with the authorities and therefore did not receive help from them. The main reason in the lack of assistance from the authorities was her lack of information about events, names, dates, places, details about the clothes her brother was wearing, who he was with, and other details. She blames her lack of knowledge on the fact she didn’t *record any information*. She told me she didn’t know at the very beginning how important it was to write things down, so she forgot things.

Her case (and Maria Fernanda’s) is an example of how some family members, when denied assistance from the state, recur to doing their own investigation. Karla’s search centred around the location of her brother’s body. She visited fields around the village asking farmers about graves on their land and questioned people regarding sightings of her brother or witnessing of attacks. The difficulty in obtaining information this way has led Karla to believe that some people do know but are “hiding information” because they do not want to get into trouble, or they are working for one faction or another. She does not trust the information she is given.

The interviews from the NGOs acknowledge the difficulties that so many families have in finding assistance or support, and in saving important information with the consequence that the families perform their own information gathering process which is oral and not systematic. Information is thereby lost or scattered, and thus difficult to pass it on later to the NGOs. The NGO data corroborated how, as Karla’s case showed, *memory-making* and *truth-telling* have become ways for families to be heard, to articulate what they know and network with others. In this way, information can then be recorded by NGOs or FOs to recount the experiences of entire communities, regardless of the specifics of the individuals.

Due to the stagnation of Karla’s search, both official and personal, she is focused on *making memory* and *truth-telling* as part of her local community project and by doing this she receives

assistance from both the state and NGOs. The local project has shown other families the importance of keeping records and how to do this. Her interview provided the insight of how other families with more experience teach recordkeeping as a resistance mechanism to the denial and deligitimisation of individual claims. I was able to investigate the local community project which can be seen online as a way to study their use of photography in the public sphere for the mobilisation of the general public and the media, which in turn has made Karla's village a source of investigation in transitional justice mechanisms.

Case study 2: 'Maria': mother to three disappeared sons. She lives in the same village as Karla and has stopped searching. Her case is used in articles 1 & 2.

I obtained Maria's contact details through Karla. They became friends through the local project Karla leads. Karla has encouraged Maria to participate in the project by sharing her story. Maria however rarely leaves her home due to depression. She is an elderly lady who, as she states, has "given up" her search for her children because she doesn't know who to ask or where to go. Her last disappeared son disappeared 14 years ago.

Maria's search is mainly a story of abuse and disorientation, where the questions she has about her sons are not answered, rather she is offered help by individuals or organisations who assist her by instructing her on how she should proceed with the *official search*. This means applying for medical or judicial documents she does not understand, which require emotional and financial efforts to obtain. She mentioned that different people and organisations contact her to offer assistance, but she doesn't know who they are. "Many come here now, to ask me what happened. I have told my story many times. They come from all over to ask and ask but never to give me information".

The sequence of events in this case were difficult to understand as Maria jumped back and forth in time and referred to her three sons at different moments. She also would break off at times in anguish. She didn't know what offices she visited nor why, she was simply doing what different organisations told her to do. At one point she informed me "there is no information, and no documentation". She has received some compensation from another violation she endured and with that money she is able to live. She told me that many other women, however, don't have the money to spend their time going back and forward to Medellin to get information and collect papers. She has decided to live quietly, and stop searching.

The interview ended with Maria asking if I wanted to see her sons. After an emotional interview, her humour lifted when she showed me the photographs of her children that were placed around her room and took out some of the items (clothing, notebooks) that she had kept of theirs and explained their meaning. She also explained how she had presented some of the photographs to the local community organisation when they were making a storyboard of the local disappearances.

Maria's case was corroborated by the information given by NGO 1, 2, and 3 and Karla. The NGOs described the following issues that were identified in Maria's case: the 'desgaste' (wearing out) of the victims through the bureaucratic procedures, the illiteracy of many of the victims, and the obstacles in going around gathering information – abuse, insults, marginalization and delegitimization of the victims by authorities. The data given by the first three NGOs, in particular the second interview with NGO 1 and NGO 3 focused very much on the vulnerability of the victims and the high numbers of families who are left to fend for themselves and, therefore, simply give up actively looking for information. The public however, hears about the families who succeed in being vocal in the public sphere.

The NGO data highlighted the following issues which explain Maria's case: the overwhelming nature of *barriers* to information, many of which are overlooked; *the role that violence plays* as a barrier to information-seeking; the role that cognitive barriers play in affecting social performance and vice versa; the role of trust or in this case, lack of it; the discomfort victims feel towards documents; and the fact that few families document.

Nevertheless, Maria did hold materials representing and commemorating her children and has used them in the public sphere. NGO 3 explained that although many NGOs work in a highly judicial context, some FOs focus on building memory, something which is easier for the families to understand and participate in, as the case of Maria shows. Maria's small collection in her home provides some source of information and evidence, as some of the items have become part of a larger project (the local memory project) that documents the vast numbers of disappeared in that village. The project has been documented in the media and received national attention. This has led the case of the village to be taken up by different transitional justice mechanisms. Maria's case which assisted in the analysis of articles 1 and 2, shows how, regardless of how successful information-seeking processes are in this context, documentation

practices may still be present, and can also be important for the community as small additions to larger community projects, for media mobilisation, and judicialization.

Case study 3: ‘Maria Fernanda’: Leads a well-known FO of mothers that has grown in importance and recognition in the last decades. Her case is representative of the case of ‘the false positives’ (the extrajudicial killings of the state where the bodies were buried). Maria Fernanda has been searching for information about what happened to her son, whose remains have been found. Her case is used in articles 1 & 2.

Maria Fernanda’s case builds on Karla’s and cases relating to state violence and state crimes. Her case is one of thousands of the political crime referred to as the *false positives*.²³ The answers about her information-seeking process were short. Her inability to seek information is due to what was, at the time, a complete denial and political suppression of the facts behind this crime. Her case recalls the bureaucratic denials, delays, or outright delegitimization of the families and their claims. She was told she had to wait 72 hours before reporting the missing with the Fiscalía (something which is now known to be disinformation spread by the authorities). The information she had at hand about her son (his physical details, medical issues, job, circumstances) and which she offered to the authorities as an incentive to help her were not taken down but dismissed. She recounted the abuse and insults received at the local police station and later other state institutions. This was corroborated by the NGOs, in particular NGO 2 and 3 who also assist victims of the false positives. Like Karla, she decided to initiate her own investigation scanning her local environment and visiting friends, families, and usual locations for her son. With time, she widened her search and began visiting the morgue. She gave the morgue written details about her son’s physical appearance in case he turned up. It was the forensic doctors who eventually contacted her after a body came in matching her son’s description. They were able to answer questions about how he was killed and when, but not why.

During the period when she was trying to recover his body, Maria Fernanda met other mothers who went through the same ordeal. They formed a small community that eventually became an informal organisation. Together they set out to investigate what had happened (the why). The authorities accused the disappeared of being terrorists and guerrilla fighters. Media interest in

²³ See Introduction (section 1.1.2) for a short description of the false positives or *falsos positivos*

the story began when the number of women voicing their demands in public, through protests and lobbying, grew. This resulted in more families coming forward. Eventually, investigations into the case of the false positives have uncovered the reasons as to why this practice took place in the military and some of the officials who gave the orders.

Documentation used to expand and explain Maria Fernanda's story was provided for by NGO 1, 2, and 3 as well as, public testimonies found at the Truth Commission and NGO websites (among others Maria Fernanda's FO). What the false positive cases, and Maria Fernanda's case in particular, offer this study is the knowledge that even though bodies are recovered and some of the families' information needs are answered (the where, how, when and why – as well as the remains), documentation practices are developed to demand accountability. Documents and items collected have been used to mobilise the public and the media. Maria Fernanda's case focused mainly on the use of documentation, both the organisational documents collected and those created and gathered by the individual family members. Maria Fernanda showed me some of what she held in her home, photographs, posters, letters, and items, but stated that, like many family members she had copied some and given others to the central office which she helps run. She talked about the division of items (records) between what the families held and what the organisation held. Many records, however, have been lost in the activism process as they were lent or given to institutions or activists.

Case study 4: Martha Soto Gallo: Martha's case was built on an interview, a presentation at a seminar at the Escuela Interamericana de Bibliotecología, and the documents from her personal archive. Her case is the basis of article 3. Martha is still searching for her disappeared brother – no remains have been found. Her case is representative of the collective judicial case; the extermination of the political party the Unión Patriótica (UP). Because of the amount of data on this case and the ability of Martha to participate in interviews and conferences meant that this case became the most in-depth of the four cases.

The advantage of this case was the detailed personal archive I had complete access to due to its digitalisation. The data was enriched by the interview as well as other online events Martha participated in (conferences and seminars) and materials (YouTube videos, newspaper articles). The records were analysed in relation to the creator, the subject, and their relation to the wider community, with close reading of each document and analysing the context. Martha's

information-seeking process is well documented through the materials, showing her requests and the response of the state and organisations.

I wrote down step by step how she had amassed the papers and why, recording each process of ‘doing’ and the significance she gave to each paper. Finally, I analysed Martha’s documentation practices in relation to the wider society and found Gould and Harris’s term of *liberatory memory work* to fit our understanding of Martha’s work (Gould and Harris, 2014). Rather than simply using deductive or inductive reasoning, the analysis was an iterative process of building from and going beyond prior theoretical assumptions to consider other possible explanations, having a dialogue between the ideas and the data (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013: para.2.5).

Martha’s case is a revelatory one, worth investigating due to the value of the descriptive information alone (Yin, 1989: 48). It is also self-selected, meaning that the case was possible to study due to the willingness of the creator to have her archive analysed. This provided a wealth of data on her search process, the role of information-seeking and the creation of documents as well.

4.4 Data Collection

4.4.1 Scanning phase

The scanning phase consisted of a three-week preliminary visit to Colombia in October 2019 to identify relevant research participants. It included informal chats at the UBPD, the research institute DeJusticia, and the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH). Once I narrowed the issue (enforced disappearance), it became clear that those at the centre of these processes were mainly human rights organisations (NGOs or FOs) and the relatives of the disappeared. I chose to focus on those two groups to identify research participants.

The International Committee on Missing Persons (ICMP) pointed me to their mapping study of all the NGOs and family organisations in Colombia (ICMP, 2020). This list became a basis for contacting organisations. I contacted NGOs that assist in the search for disappeared persons and that are big enough to have offices and emails. Their representatives were usually contacted through a chain of other contacts (personal and previous informal chats). They were contacted via WhatsApp or email.

Once the organisations were contacted, they were asked for referral to family members. I contacted large international organisations and the *Victim's Unit* in Colombia to put me in touch with relatives. Through their own internal process, the Victim's Unit contacted victims, to which Amparo (see section 4.4.2) responded by giving the *Victim's Unit* approval to pass on her contact details.

I also contacted a researcher in Colombia who has a close working relationship with a large group of families. Through her contacts and the snowballing method, three individual family members, all women, eventually agreed to be interviewed and have been included in the study (Maria, Karla, Martha). Finally, though emailing the organisation she leads, I eventually found Maria Fernanda who agreed to speak to me. The cases and participants in my study are self-selected – they were the ones who agreed to be interviewed.

Roughly 20 NGOs were contacted by phone and email. Six answered and five agreed to be interviewed, but only four were included in this study, as the fifth was not relevant for the study. The fifth NGO interview helped to understand the context and overall issue of disappearance, but did not contribute to data on information practices of the families. The four NGOs included in the study differ in size and level of organisation but are all central to the human rights work on enforced disappearance. An overview of research participants and NGOs is provided in the next section.

4.4.2 Interviews

There are three groups of participants that were interviewed: relatives or family members, NGOs and FOs, and third persons. A relative of a disappeared person is usually someone who represents herself/himself as such. Relatives or dependents are also victims of enforced disappearance under international law. There is an overlap between research participants belonging to NGOs, family organizations (FO), and relatives. FOs are by definition NGOs, and one of the NGOs (3) is an FO that is recognized as one of the leading NGOs in this field. Four of the five women relatives, work for, lead, or are closely aligned to FOs. Some NGO representatives also had loved ones missing. For simplicity's sake research participants are referred to as either relatives/family members or NGOs, recognising that FOs play an important role as an intermediary.

Relatives

‘Amparo’: In our initial talk, Amparo agreed to an interview, however, she did not show up for the interview and never replied to my messages. It seemed to me the issue was with signing the informed consent form, as she stopped her communication with me after I sent the form to her. Due to the limited amount of data from Amparo, I left her out as a case study, but I do include some information she offered through our chats which was used in article 2. Our informal conversations took place on 3rd November 2020, and 9th and 26th April 2021.

‘Karla’: Interviewed 18th September 2020. Roughly a one-hour interview.

‘Maria’: Interviewed 22nd September 2020. Roughly a one-hour interview.

‘Maria Fernanda’: Interviewed 24th May 2021. Roughly a one-hour interview.

Martha Soto Gallo: Interviewed 18th January 2022. Roughly one-hour telephone interview.

NGOs and FOs

Six interviews were done with NGO participants, including two with NGO 1 and one with an extra NGO (5) whose interview data was not included (see section 4.4.1).

NGO 1 – Interviewed 14th and 16th November 2020 – A well-known and established national NGO working for more than 20 years exclusively with the issue of enforced disappearance focusing mainly on the disappearances at the hands of state entities. Two project officers were interviewed separately, referred to as interview 1 & interview 2.

NGO 2 – Interview with a project officer on 11th December 2020 - Regional NGO focusing for nearly 20 years on a number of human rights violations, peacebuilding and social justice.

NGO 3 – Interview with one of the leaders of the organisation on 26th November 2020 – Internationally renowned Colombian NGO that started out as a family organisation. Still predominantly made up of the families of the disappeared, working for more than 20 years exclusively with the issue of enforced disappearance at the hands of state entities.

NGO 4 – Interview with the director on 27th November 2020 - New small national NGO focusing exclusively on enforced disappearance from any armed group.

The interview data from all NGOs was supplemented with NGO documentation found either on their websites or provided personally by them.

Third persons

A host of third persons who do not fall into the categories above were consulted from the beginning of the project to get an understanding of the political background and organisational details. These are people who work, or previously worked, with the government or in important international or national organisations within Colombia. These include university lecturers, researchers, independent human rights defenders, archivists, scholars, and lawyers. They were contacted through snowball sampling. I conducted informal conversations where they would often offer opinions, contacts, practical tips, or knowledge from the field. Informed consent was not necessary as no personal information was collected, the conversations focused mainly on advice or insight into the search process, the situation of access to documentation, and the situation of NGOs and family members.

4.4.2.1 Interview process

In total, 28 interviews/conversations were done in the stretch of roughly three years. Ten formal interviews in conversational style with family members, NGOs, and FOs and 18 informal conversations with third persons.

All the interviews were conducted in Spanish which I then translated into English. All the relatives interviewed were women, and this is representative of the subject group in general, as the overwhelming majority of the disappeared are men and those searching are women (ICMP, 2017). On average the interviews lasted around one hour each. No recordings were made, only written notes were taken as we spoke.

The interviews with relatives began with a brief introduction of myself, my project, and what I was aiming for with the project and their interviews. These were unstructured interviews based on general questions about their information-seeking process within the search for the disappeared, and the extent to which they were able to obtain information and how²⁴. I emphasised the topic of information and documentation in their search. I allowed them time to tell their story on their terms at their pace in a rather conversational mode. I wanted to build rapport with the person and was very aware that I did not want them to relive their trauma.

²⁴ See interview guide appendix B

Karla and Maria: Both Karla and Maria expressed anguish. I was told by Maria, “I have told my story so many times to many people and this has not changed anything”. From then on, I opted to talk to my informants informally first, to assess whether they were able to go through with the interview. I also decided to look for stories of families elsewhere, public testimonies that had already been given to others and were available publicly (see ‘document studies’ below).

Maria Fernanda: Maria Fernanda was very willing to speak to me as an FO leader and spokesperson. Our informal conversation was very positive as she focused on the work her organisation was achieving. The focus of the interview was mainly the documentation that the families were creating themselves for memorialisation purposes and activism.

Martha Soto Gallo: This was my last interview, which meant she was left out as a case for the first two articles. This interview was planned by both myself and my co-author in Colombia, Marta Lucia Giraldo, and conducted digitally on Zoom. The main data source for this case-study however, is Martha’s personal archive and was the focus of the interview. Martha’s archive was digitalised by the University of Antioquia during the research for article 3. The interview was easier to conduct mainly because the documents were the focus of the interview and Martha was able to ‘read’ the archive, informing us how she obtained this or that, where and how she has used them.

With Martha’s case, we were able to obtain full informed consent and it seemed to us that she understood the risks. To lessen the risk, we focused on the papers and not on her legal case. My co-author facilitated a computer and scanner so that Martha could sign and send a written consent form.

NGOs: The interviews with NGO representatives, contrary to those with family members, followed loosely a previously planned script (see appendix a). The information was more directed towards the official search process, the NGOs experience in the collection of data, and their relationship with the relatives, FOs, and government officials. They also gave information about the different state entities and how they work, the TJ system and the laws in place that guide their institutions. Some participants expanded on their personal experiences as family members or the experiences of people they know in the search process.

4.4.3 Document analysis

The second method of data collection was the study of documents that complemented the interviews, by providing knowledge about the role of NGOs in the search, the legal frameworks, and the broader role of victims, organisations, and archives in information practices. The primary sources included were the personal records of the families, pamphlets, newspaper clippings (articles cut out and selected by the families themselves to be integrated into their archives), photographs, personal communication and letters, written testimonials, and video testimonials. Secondary data included NGO and governmental reports and media articles.

Public testimonies and personal documents

The following public testimonies were used as empirical materials:

- Julia Buriticá's story (Mother to Daniel) testimony to the UBPD.
- Fabiola Lalinde's story (Mother to Luis Fernando) testimony found in the work of Marta Lucia Giraldo and Verdad Abierta.
- Maria del Carmen (Mother to Diego) testimony to the UBPD
- Rosario Parra (Mother to Nestor) testimony to the UBPD
- Marujita (Mother to Pedro) case offered by ASFADDES
- Other names or cases that appear in the literature but are not direct testimonies, have been referenced in the study: Teresita Gavia (Palacio, 2016) and Luz Marina Bernal (Salinas, 2017).

These testimonies are all publicly available and are useful for completing and triangulating the data from interviews and personal records ²⁵.

Martha's personal archive is composed of 45 documents consisting of 65 pages in total. The documents of the archives include her communication with the state (it makes up the majority of the archive), family photographs, a drawing of Jorge by Martha, birth and membership certificates, newspaper clippings, a profile of the disappeared, legal documents (the legal registration of Martha as a victim of the conflict), and Martha's fingerprints and blood sample certificate. I have approached each document as both carriers of content and "functioning agents in their own right" (Prior, 2004: 346). They serve not only as a source of information and ideas, but as a component of processes (Prior, 2004: 353).

²⁵ The cases documented by Asfaddes, UBPD and Verdad Abierta (Ronderos, 2009) were chosen based on their detailed testimonies on information-seeking.

4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 Applying Wilson's 1981 model

The linear process outlined by Wilson in his 1981 information-seeking model (described in chapter 3) informs the overall trajectory of families, how information *needs* can be understood as central triggers of the information-seeking process, how they are framed as personal within a specific environment or social setting, and how during the information-seeking process barriers arise (Wilson, 1999).

In this case, 'the environmental' is the political and cultural context of Colombia and its historical development of the last few decades. This includes a violent armed conflict within a malfunctioning state that inflicts violations on its citizens, and the response of civil society. The social role refers to the role of the families who assume the responsibility for the search. Families, therefore, also take on a political role. Their social role is also connected to their social, political, and educational standing which can affect their performance level (Wilson, 1981).

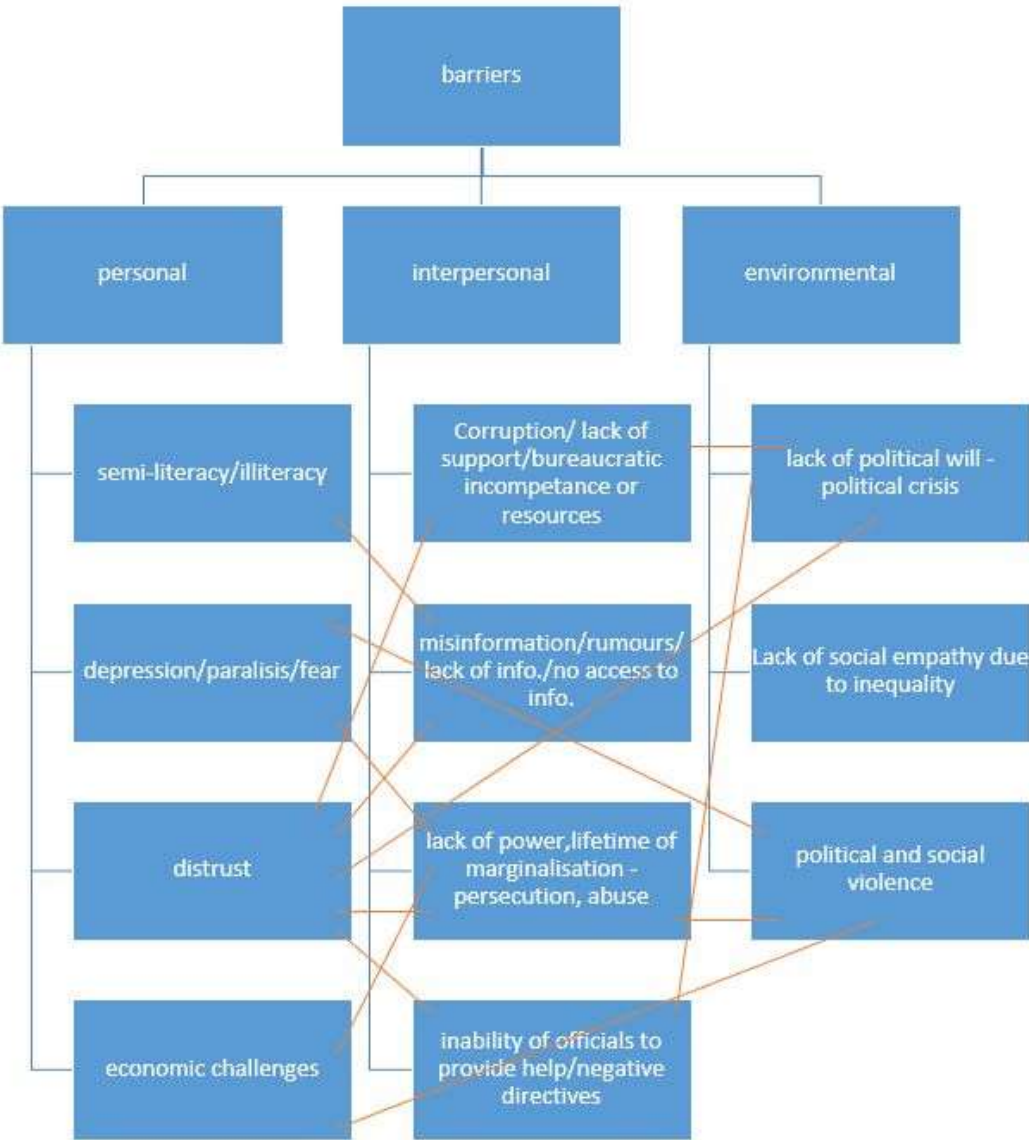
On a personal level, the information needs are mainly affective and cognitive. The intensity of those needs can affect a person physiologically through their state of mind. In each case study, I look briefly into the different contexts of information needs and each of the articles addresses needs in a different manner: article 1 from a general perspective of needs as triggers to the search and collecting process; article 2 shows how needs are dynamic, present throughout the search as the motivating factor and in interplay with barriers; and article 3 provides a specific example of how information needs can result in collecting documents.

Information barriers have been considered here as a vast interrelationship of constraints where the personal, interpersonal and environmental interact. Barriers were always present in my conversations with the participants and are part of Wilson's 1981 model. They serve as an important analytical tool for understanding the extent to which constraints are 'human-made' stemming exogenously from values, norms, institutions, economic, and political forces, or within the person (intellectual, affective, or cognitive). Barriers were looked at, not necessarily as to *why* they exist, but their role in obstructing the seeking process.

The data was analysed with NVIVO software for an overview of codes from the bottom up. A Word document was used to draw out a chart of the information barriers and obtain an overview

based on Wilson’s three categories (personal, interpersonal, and environmental barriers). The barriers were coded inductively, but the categories revealed overlapped with each other and were too interconnected to be able to make any clear statements about their generality. I expand on the concept of information barriers in the discussion chapter below. In figure 4, I show how the coding process for information barriers was developed.

Figure 4. The coding process for information barriers



The analysis of barriers contributes to the three articles. Article 2 discusses how families continue, stop, or change their search methods and explains *why* the families resort to finding other ways of obtaining information. Article 1 and 2 mention most saliently Maria and Karla's challenges as two specific examples of personal, social, and environmental barriers that affect the personal capacity to search, whilst also showing interaction between barriers and needs. Article 3 highlights the challenges in the specific case of Martha to see how they affect information gathering and recordkeeping.

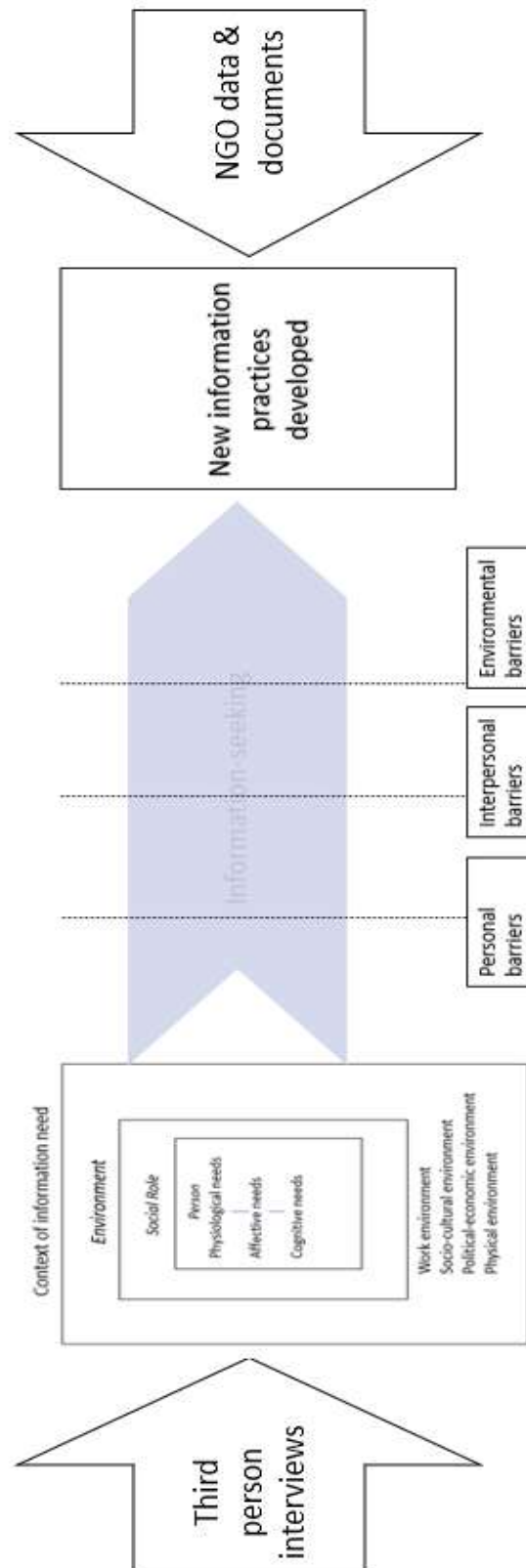
4.5.2 'Zooming in' on information practices

The information-seeking process was studied as a temporal process from the moment the person disappeared, to map out a general chronology of a search, laid out in article 2. The chronology shows how other practices arise from information-seeking. 'Zooming in' on each practice 'makes sense of the local accomplishment of the practice and the other more or less distant activities' (Nicolini, 2013: 219). From there I 'zoomed out' to understand the 'trails of connections' between practices from a larger scope (Nicolini, 2013: 222).

The 'zooming in' is achieved through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and the study of personal records. The case studies help do this 'zooming in' process. In-depth interviews describe the context of people's lives, their feelings, opinions, experiences, and actions, understanding thus, how ideas become actions and how their practices are played out (Gorman and Clayton, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the process in which events occur - the overall trajectory of searching for the disappeared - and map it out (Gorman and Clayton 2005, p 3).

Figure 5 shows how each case study was approached methodologically to analyse each search and follow the trajectory of information-seeking whilst 'zooming into' practices.

Figure 5. Building each case-study.



The figure shows how third person interviews and documentation were used to corroborate and add to existing data for each case. These sources drew attention to the sequence of events and the temporal dimension of the practices, their meaning, and their boundaries, but also to the objects, such as the documents used, and their performative role (Nicolini, 2013).

The interviews with the families provided not only the content of the interview, but also ‘the metadata,’ “the spoken and unspoken expressions about people’s interior thoughts and feelings” (Fujii, 2010: 232), the silences, rumours, abrupt ends, so forth. “(T)hey indicate how the current social and political landscape is shaping what people might say to a researcher” (Fuji, 2010: 232). These elements are prominent in periods of uncertainty and violence (Fujii 2010). *Rumours* were present in both the interviews with the NGOs and the relatives, of what happened to certain victims, the role of military or paramilitary combatants, the corrupt behaviour of officials and the suspicions towards outsiders. *Evasions* were another strategy that was encountered, such as Amparo’s described above. These difficulties and fears helped make sense of the ambiguities and complexities the phenomenon raises (Fujii, 2010)

‘Zooming out’ involved looking at how each case is enmeshed in a relationship of practices, and how the context and contextual factors affect, enable, or constrain them. This was done through the analysis of data given by NGOs, the institutional reports, media articles, testimonials, personal records, (photographs, bureaucratic records, letters, poems, stories) and other texts.

4.6 Ethical considerations

The ethical implications of this research are both methodological and analytical. The reasons for doing the project in the first place involves taking a normative position, in favour of human rights standards, which plays into the partisan narrative within Colombia and perhaps outside Colombia, too. Many of the decisions as to how to protect the informants came down to personal judgements through the direct knowledge of the context more than protocol. Providing a supportive and empathic position toward the families was my priority.

I implemented the ‘do no harm’ ethic, making sure all the protocols demanded for confidentiality were in place for the research data. The participants were informed of what my project consisted of, how their information would be used and how it would be published.

Nevertheless, due to the difficulties in obtaining informed consent (mentioned earlier and discussed below), I made sure that there was no personal data collected or analysed in the process, except for that of Martha's.

Research requires that subjects “understand the terms in which they participate in research and that they give informed consent to those terms” (Robins, 2013: 22). The lack of understanding regarding the nature of research, publications, and anonymity, the lack of trust and the building of relationships based on very different premises than official consent procedures, all meant I had to approach the interviews beyond these demands. There is an asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the researched that, as Robins states, goes beyond the terrain of confidentiality, consent, and risk/benefit (Robins, 2013). The term ‘research’ itself was problematic as the Spanish translation is *investigación* (investigation) made some family members nervous and required a more detailed description of the purpose of academic research. Terms such as *research*, *consent*, and *anonymity* can be difficult to explain to people with limited education and within a limited timeframe. Some of the family members were thus not in a position to fully understand the informed consent form.

There are very high levels of distrust in Colombian society in general, people are not willing to sign something that they might think can jeopardize them; this was the case with Amparo mentioned earlier. Consent became difficult also due to the digital aspect. My interviews were on the telephone. The consent had to be emailed and then signed and then scanned and sent back. Oral consent is allowed to be given under the NSD²⁶ regulations, but not on WhatsApp, which is what my participants used. Neither Maria nor Karla have email addresses, only Amparo had a computer. Maria, Karla and Maria Fernanda rely on internet cafés or institutions to give them access to digital infrastructure. This would have meant putting them at risk. The difficulties in obtaining informed consent resulted instead in the elimination of all personal data from the interviews, the NGO interviews included, in order to minimize risks for all.

4.6.1 Anonymization of interviews

The NGOs offered important information in exchange for full anonymity. The NGOs have been numbered 1-4. Family members, on the other hand, expressed hope for their stories “to get out there” and wanted their names and the names of their disappeared relative to be published and

²⁶ NSD is the Norwegian Centre for Research Data which is responsible for managing the data for the Norwegian research community.

known. This was problematic, however, due to the exposure that their interviews bring to third persons, their community, public officials, human rights researchers, or other family members. I have tried to make a balanced judgement, opting to anonymise all participants with the exception of the last case-study; Martha Soto Gallo. Martha's case is already in the public domain and the information she gave my colleague and I can also be found online.²⁷ We judged that writing her case with care and not including information on any third persons would not bring her more harm and may assist her case by making it more visible.

4.6.2 Safety vs visibility

The protection of informants was paramount; however, there is a dilemma regarding anonymisation related to the crime of enforced disappearance. This is a crime shrouded in secrecy with the sole purpose of making someone invisible, eliminating all trace of that person and what happened. Some families risk their lives for their stories “to get out there” so that the disappeared person becomes visible again and is remembered by society, not only the family.

Martha, who has become a prominent activist for the Unión Patriótica case and regularly speaks publicly insisted in having Jorge's name published. Martha's has worked for more than 30 years in keeping Jorge in the public eye, that I did not want to diminish her work by disappearing Jorge in my writing. Unlike some of the other family members, we (my co-author and myself) felt that she understood the risks. Because the focus was on the contents of the archive, we believed there were fewer risks involved and the information she provided is already in the public domain. Nevertheless, registering this data for approval with the NSD was difficult due to an institutional lack of understanding about the concept of enforced disappearance. Without proof of Jorge's death, the NSD stated, we could not publish his personal data. The concept of ‘presumption of death’ was a bureaucratic obstacle for the assessment of this project. It was solved by directing the NSD officer to the International Commission on Civil Status (ICCS) Convention relating to the establishment of death in certain cases (Convention No. 10) of 14 September 1966 (referred to as “the Athens Convention”) and the *Principles Concerning Missing Persons and the Presumption of Death: Recommendation and explanatory memorandum* by The Council of Europe²⁸.

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cJ7UIfTYKs>

²⁸ See <https://rm.coe.int/16807096bd>

Finally, there were also emotional challenges involved in doing this work during periods of uncertainty. This related to logistics (mainly distance, access to participants), feelings of inadequacy to the task, fear for the safety of my participants and the emotionally draining and stressful topic. I mention the emotional challenges here, as I have tried as best as I can to work in a preventative manner, but without knowing what can come of future uses. As Elizabeth Wood describes, “(e)ven with research practices and protocols tailored to specific field conditions, inevitably field researchers rely on their judgements in interpreting these norms” (Wood et al., 2007: 221). There is an emotional dimension to the weight of ethical considerations that may affect the way I have made certain decisions.

4.7 Evaluation of the method and limitations of the study

The main challenges in this study relate to consequences brought by the pandemic, travel restrictions to Colombia and increased security difficulties. Recruitment of participants was more difficult digitally than it would have been residing in Colombia. The digital interviews had implications for the data collected. The interviews lacked the physical interaction and therefore much of the communication that also occurs with body language and gestures was less present.

Communication with some of the relatives was difficult and faltering in the first attempts to contact them through text (messaging or emails) due to illiteracy and semi-literacy as well as lack of email addresses. Misunderstandings were also present in the interactions. Certain words or concepts, such as *barriers* or *obstacles to access, research, documents*, were not understood and had to be explained or referred to by different terms – the families usually talk about *papers* instead of *documents*.

The interviews also raised emotions, with the result that some questions were not answered or were evaded. Maria and Karla focused primarily on their pain and difficulties, highlighting the injustice of the crime, which meant it was difficult, understandably so, to get a focused answer about their information-seeking process or documents. Even though they were answering the questions in unexpected ways, I used this as data in the best manner I could to answer questions about the larger picture regarding barriers to information-seeking. The interviews with NGOs helped compensate these limitations to a certain extent by filling in some of the gaps.

Public testimonies were also used to include more data. The use of documentation arose gradually with time as I realised the need to triangulate the data I had and refer to other cases. However, I was not originally aware of the high numbers of testimonies publicly available, and thus, a better and more systematic method for collecting more cases would have improved the data.

The study would have been improved by doing the data collection in Colombia to study more closely and in person the collections. It is not certain that accompanying the families on visits to request information would have been necessary or possible, as families' searches take years and my interest lay in the overarching result of many meetings and interactions, not any specific meetings with officials. Instead, viewing more personal records (objects and documents) first hand would have made a difference to this study. Most families have records of their disappeared loved ones in physical form. Since the interviews were on the phone, I was not able to go through, hold, and study the records they showed me on video call. Having done so would have meant getting more specific answers about their trajectories by seeing dates, offices visited, and authorities dealt with. It would have also allowed the families to focus more on the objects or materials that resulted from information-seeking and the obstacles to the seeking, rather than their general stories of search.

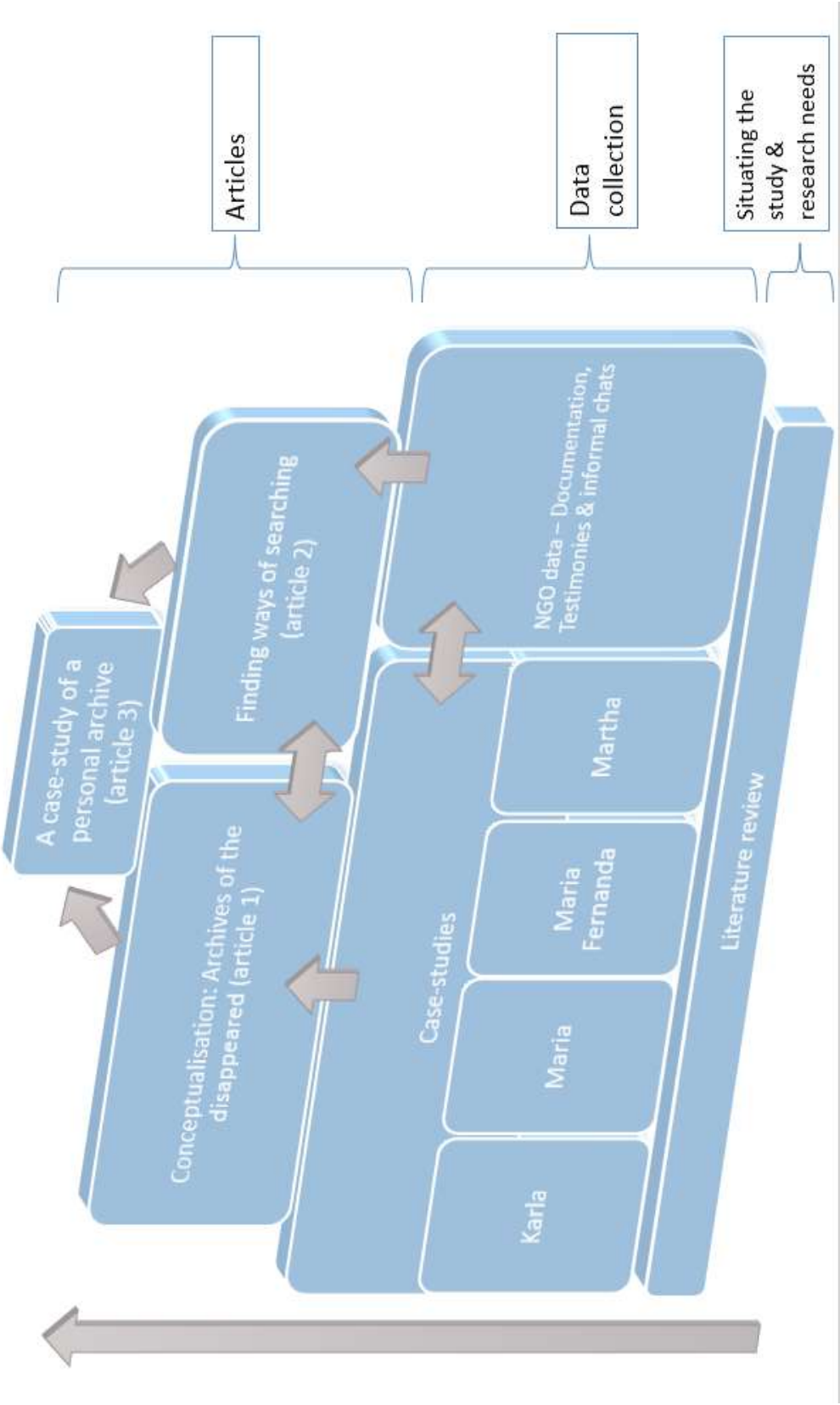
The small number of case-studies may tell us little about the wider situation, the extent to which archives of the disappeared are being created nationally, the extent to which recordkeeping is being taught, and to what extent the families are being informed about and involved in the fact-finding missions. However, this study has been an explorative one that can shed light on a previously unresearched area.

Finally, there has been much more to the findings than what made it into the three articles. I have tried to summarise and generalise as much as possible for the articles. However, publications or dissemination about the other cases would have enriched the study and provided a greater foundation for the discussion. However, due to the lack of time and the delays in the research process, further publications on the findings will have to wait. In the meantime, I have tried to include some of these subsequent conclusions and thoughts in the discussion and conclusion.

4.8 Summary of the methodology and methods applied in this research

The study has relied on interviews and document analysis to build an idea of the trajectories of the families in their information-seeking process. Due to the limited number of families interviewed, each family was made into a case-study to explore in depth their information-seeking process and discover other information practices being developed at the grassroots. The decision to build this project from the bottom-up was to centre on the families and their information-seeking experiences. Figure 6 gives an idea of how the study came from the bottom up yet is not entirely inductive, where the literature, through the concepts of *information-seeking*, *communities of practice*, and *information practices* helped inform the study. The focus on empirical data built an idea of what is happening on the ground, which could then be confirmed, corroborated, or problematised considering theories, previous research, and concepts. The case studies were built through interviews, the study of their records, third person interviews and NGO data (interviews, testimonies, and documentation analysis). Both NGO data and case-study data informed each other to form the basis of the articles.

Figure 6. Methodological building blocks of the study



5 Article summaries

The following chapter presents the three articles written and published as part of this PhD project. The order in which they are presented below is the order in which they were written, not published. This matters, as the first article went through a two-year review process in which the content and purpose of the article changed significantly, from a literature review that assessed the state of the art of the term *human rights archives* to its current form which includes primary data to support the conceptualisation of *archives of the disappeared*. The development of this concept was foundational to the analysis in the other two articles.

5.1 Article 1

Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualizing the Personal Collections of Families of Disappeared Persons was published Open Access in the *Journal of Human Rights Practice* (JHRP), 16 May 2022. The article was first sent 18 August 2020 and accepted with major changes. The journal is published by Oxford University Press and was chosen for this article as it is the main academic journal focusing on human rights practice and activism.

Summary: The aim of this article is to conceptualise the personal collections gathered and preserved by families of the disappeared to make visible a documentation practice that until now has been relatively hidden. The term offered - *archives of the disappeared* - recognizes the ownership, the provenance, and the subjects in the records.

Based on three case-studies (Maria, Karla, and Maria Fernanda), interviews with four NGOs, and document studies of recorded and published testimonies of other family members, I follow a general chronology of a search process to understand who the creators are, and to trace the creation, accumulation, and uses of these archives. The article demonstrates how recordkeeping and documenting are being taught by NGOs and FOs so that families can interact with the state. Families gather records to prove that their loved one existed and assert the significance of that person. Unintentionally, Colombian bureaucracy has had a role in fostering these archives through its demand of paperwork.

The collections primarily cover four dimensions, both in their creation and their activation: (1) as legal and historical evidence of violations; (2) as memorialisation of the disappeared; (3) as political and social activism; (4) all three are brought together through the familial bond

between the person searching and the disappeared. The conceptualisation of these collections opens up reflection and engagement regarding these collections, recognising them as separate entities from NGO archives, or transitional justice archives, but still part of the umbrella concept of human rights archives.

5.2 Article 2

Finding ways of searching for the disappeared: the information practices of the families in Colombia was published in the *Journal of Documentation*, 3 March 2022. The article was first submitted 15 October 2021 and accepted with major revisions. The journal is published by Emerald Publishers Ltd. and was chosen due to its wide significance in the information-related disciplines.

Summary: This study explores and identifies the information-seeking process and practices of those searching for the forcefully disappeared in Colombia. It answers the questions how do families in Colombia seek information about a disappearance, how is this seeking process mediated and how are information barriers dealt with? Based on in-depth conversational interviews with three family members (Maria, Karla and Maria Fernanda), data from the chats with Amparo, interviews with the four NGO representatives who assist families and document analysis of testimonies - to corroborate the interviews and triangulate the data, a general trajectory of an information-seeking process is laid out. Wilson's 1981 model helped identify common practices related to interactions and solutions built upon the temporal structure of their information-seeking process. The most significant practices found were learning recordkeeping and documenting, activism, memorialisation, and knowledge exchange among loose networks of other families through participation. It reveals how communities of practice (COPs) are being formed as a response to a common set of issues brought about due to a socio-political dynamic. Barriers to state information and records are not overcome in this context, yet they are dealt with through these practices at the grassroots. The information produced here becomes the main source of knowledge about the crime of enforced disappearance.

5.3 Article 3

Evidence of Jorge: Documentary Traces of a Forced Disappearance in Colombia co-authored with Marta Lucía Giraldo from the Escuela Interamericana de Bibliotecología, University of Medellín, Colombia. Published (Fall 2022) in a special issue of *Archivaria* the journal of the

Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA). It was first submitted as an expression of interest on 1 September 2021, and the full proposal was submitted 22 September and accepted without changes. The journal was chosen due to its focus on the history, nature, and theory of archives and the use of archives meant for scholars, practitioners, and users of archives²⁹.

Summary: This article explores and analyses a personal archive created by Martha Soto Gallo as a result of her search for her disappeared brother, Jorge Soto Gallo in 1985. The aim with this article is to understand her recordkeeping practice as an example of a wider ongoing grassroots practice of families of the disappeared. Jorge is one of the thousands of disappeared people in Colombia whose families are still searching for answers. Yet Jorge's case is part of a wider national legal and political case concerning the extermination of a political party, the Unión Patriótica (UP). Jorge's life and disappearance have been memorialised and evidenced through his sister's work of gathering information and creating, preserving, and activating records, which has led to a broad repertoire of political activism.

In the article, we ask which records are included, how are they brought together during periods of upheaval, what they mean, and what role they play. We analyse these personal documents in relation to their creator, their subject matter, and their relationships to each other and a broader community. We argue that creating and preserving these archives of the disappeared is an instinct and a form of liberatory memory work against forces of impunity and denial. We show this memory work operates on a person-centred level, but goes beyond the individual, affecting communities and accountability mechanisms by attempting to mobilise the public, the media and legal systems, and by going beyond transitional justice frameworks.

²⁹ The data from this article has also been used as the basis of a publication in progress: *Om å formidle det umulige der også historien står i fare for å forsvinne – en nærlesning av Martha Sotos arkiv for sin forsvunne bror og Sara Uribes Antígona González* (Working title). The article, written for the Norwegian journal *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening*, is currently being written with co-author Linda Sandbæk. The article compares and contrasts two different accounts of enforced disappearance, one being Martha Soto's personal archive the other being a fictional account in Antígona González by Sara Uribe.

6 Discussion

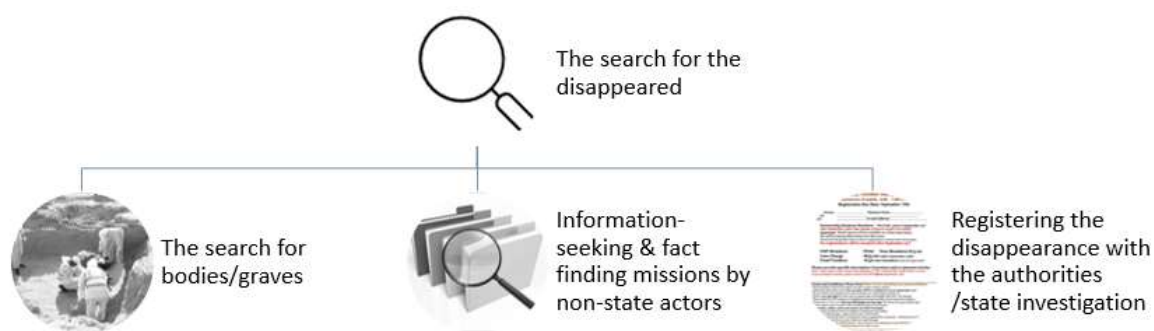
In this chapter I discuss the findings, assessing how they come together and what their significance is within a larger social and political framework. The chapter is organised in two parts. In the first part (6.1), I discuss the information-seeking process addressing information needs and information barriers in more detail than in the articles, and thus answering the first research question (Q.1). Describing the families' trajectories shows how different pathways open up to the families along the way (section 6.1.5). This, in turn, answers the second research question (Q.2). Even though other practices may also be found, there is one practice that produces a specific output relevant for archival scholars as well as human rights practitioners: the gathering, creation, and preservation of records done by the families. Section 6.1.6 discusses some of the issues surrounding the collections that these records are a part of and links them to the conceptualisation made in article 1, which answers the third research question (Q.3). I introduce a model which serves as a visual summary of the theoretical development of the concept *archives of the disappeared*, and a second model which maps out the different human rights archives referred to in the literature, and how they relate to each other in society.

The second part of the chapter (section 6.2) discusses *how* and *why* these personal collections are part of a wider repertoire of social accountability forms.

6.1 The information practices in the search for the disappeared

The *search for the disappeared*, the broad umbrella term used all over the world, encompasses many facets and phases depending on the context. Based on the data collected, I have made a model of what *the search* encompasses to show how information-seeking falls under this larger process and to communicate the difference between the two terms that I have used in this study: *the search for the disappeared* and the *information-seeking process*.

Figure 7. The search and its components



Information-seeking can be part of the fact-finding missions that NGOs or transitional justice mechanisms undertake, as well as a practice undertaken by the individual families. The two are usually and necessarily connected, something which I lay out below.

The question of what characterises the information-seeking process of the families (Q.1) has to be studied in two ways; answering the *why* and the *how* in order to understand the purpose and process. Wilson’s information-seeking model was a starting point for the undertaking of the project, because it provides a clear and broad guide to a process that begins with needs. Even though information needs are not the main focus of this study, they should be considered when looking at an information-seeking process.

6.1.1 Information needs

It is the information needs of the families that keeps the information-seeking process going for decades. This tells us something about the intensity and existentiality of information needs in the context of enforced disappearance that is different from information needs in other contexts. The data gives some grounds for making the following assumptions regarding information needs in this context. I found that, like the work of Simon Robins (2013) shows, the women I spoke to articulate a *need* to know the truth, not a *right* to know. “Uno tiene que saber que le pasó a sus hijos” - *One needs to know what has happened to one’s children* (Maria). However, Robins argues, families’ *needs* are rarely articulated as needs in the literature of enforced disappearance due to the legal dominance of human rights and transitional justice systems that turn *needs* into *rights* (Robins, 2013). This study reveals that families’ needs consist of a complex array of multiple factors that Wilson described in 1981; cognitive, affective and

physiological all contextualized in the social life of the ‘searchers’ and their roles in society as family members of the disappeared.

In other words, understanding the triggering factors behind the information-seeking process helps say something about the nature of information needs: (i) the basic nature of these needs and (ii) what is meant by the term *information* in this context. Regarding the first statement (i), articles 1 and 2 show how the families use the scarce resources they have to search for answers, often prioritising the search process over their own safety or other basic needs such as food, clothing, and, in some circumstances, even the care of other children (such as Julia, Daniel’s mother UBPD, 2019). These are not only visceral needs, but also rational and well-justified, they are connected to the familial bond to the disappeared – their intimacy, the feeling that they, the relatives, are responsible for the disappeared and their fate. These needs are revealed as the information-seeking process develops, in the manner in which information is sought and through the persistence of the families.

I take up the concept of information *needs* to differentiate it from information *uses*, *enquiries*, *aspirations* or *requests* and highlight the importance of this term in the search for the disappeared. Information *needs* are usually assumed to be followed by formalized *demands* or *requests* for information (Brittain, 1970). This study shows that this is not necessarily the case. There are information needs that are never acted upon due to fear (see below *Violence as a barrier*). The study of the information needs of families of disappeared persons posits the concept in a new light. It reveals how information needs can often trump basic needs, such as food or safety. The unresolved status of these needs extends the trauma to affects others, such as younger members of the family who were unaware of (for example) their father’s disappearance and grow up without a father (Julia’s story UBPD, 2019). The psychological effects can take a toll on the body or physiology – Maria who suffers from severe depression has shut herself off from the world, surrounding herself with her children’s objects in her home, and leaves very seldomly for only the most necessary reasons.

It becomes clear through the interviews that the needs are instinctual, yet conscious, and usually long-lasting due to these crimes being seldomly resolved, and they are more than simply ‘desires’ or ‘demands’: Maria has stopped making these demands but she still speaks about her ‘need to know’.

To a certain extent, the needs can also be ‘seen’ in the families’ despair, the risk-taking and the creation of local practices that can help alleviate some of their suffering and fears³⁰. These needs are expressed outwardly in a multiplicity of manifestations: documenting the life of their loved ones, holding events, creating new memory practices, and other expressions (artistic and performative). We see, then, that information needs have social manifestations. Families around the world, with the same information needs and making the same demands, gather and organize to express these needs collectively. As discussed in article 2, these are also collective needs. Not only are many people expressing the same need to know, but society as a whole has an interest in knowing about past violations which make up a common history. People who are not directly affected by enforced disappearance may not express a *need to know* as they have not lost loved ones, but there are societal implications for not meeting the information needs of the families who are directly affected. Public and private institutions in charge of transparency and accountability work for ‘the right to truth’ not only for the individual, but for society as a whole, through the principle that democracy works better when citizens have truthful information and accountability of past crimes for the sake of non-repetition (Groome, 2011).

Which leads to the second statement (ii) regarding the nature of needs in this context; what is meant by *information*. In the search process ‘information’ is demanded or wanted both as a *process* (changing what is known) and as a *thing* (documents, objects, videos) (Buckland, 1991). This is reflected in what the families end up collecting (see below in Gathering and recordkeeping). To continue to use Buckland’s terms, I would add that the information demanded or desired by the families is to help them move the search process forward, and this entails *moving from pieces of information to knowledge* – to construct a narrative of the events.

6.1.2 The information-seeking process

For the families, initiating the information-seeking process is complicated precisely due to the lack of information available about what exactly one should do and where to go for assistance. Contact with specialized practitioners is crucial in order to know where and how to begin. Yet one obstacle is trust; the anxiety of having to trust strangers with their cases, or alternatively, not trusting people and therefore not obtaining help. Trust becomes one factor of the search process, but as we will see, it is not a determinant factor (see section 6.1.5).

³⁰ Other practices include that of ‘adopting’ unidentified bodies found in rivers, giving them names, and burying them in return for the favour of looking after their own disappeared (Rudling and Dueñas, 2021).

6.1.3 From paperwork to the truth

The beginning of the information-seeking process is characterized by the aim of finding information that can locate their loved ones alive, but at this early stage, most of the information is collected orally and not systematically documented. This was the case for all the women I spoke to and corroborated by the NGOs as normal for most families. This is something the NGOs are aiming to change by teaching recordkeeping and literacy.

As time passes and the search proves unsuccessful and therefore prolonged, the family's aim regarding information changes; they realize that they must try and prove the disappearance happened, prove the existence of the disappeared, and interact with the state. The state must be included in the search process, whether the families do it directly or indirectly through an NGO or FO. All the cases I looked at involved one state institution or another. Communication with state institutions is necessary in order to obtain copies of documents necessary to prove the identity of the disappeared and it is through state mechanisms the disappearance is officially reported. The NGOs spoke of the importance of befriending officials and 'knowing who you can work with' or 'who is on your side' precisely so they could obtain information or ease the reporting of cases.

In some cases, such as Maria Fernanda's, the authorities' (in her case the police and the Fiscalía) abusive response and refusal to help, motivated her to begin her 'own investigation' collecting information without reporting the disappearance. Her information-seeking led her to the morgue where, in the end it was forensic medics who assisted her by keeping her up-to-date about incoming bodies with her son's characteristics.

Officially, interactions with the state happen through paperwork. As Martha's case shows, it is here where many dossiers, folders, and collections of papers begin. This is expanded upon below under the recordkeeping and creation process, but what is important to note here is that the character of the information-seeking changes when families realise that the process will be a long-term one involving the state in some way, and therefore requires some level of information organization and recordkeeping to keep track of the authorities' answers. As Martha and Maria Fernanda told me, they learnt to keep copies of their letters with the state, so that when they wrote complaining about the lack of investigation or assistance, they had proof that they had written previously, and nothing had been done. By keeping all the letters to and from state entities, they could in turn go to NGOs to show the lack of assistance from the state.

At that stage however, ‘recordkeeping’ is simply, “hold(ing) on to the papers that I send to the state and the state sends me” (Martha), as proof of what the state communicates and when.

The information that is sought ‘*where is my family member?*’ scatters into a multiplicity of bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic channels that do not necessarily lead directly to information about *the whereabouts* of the disappeared, but rather to information *about* the disappeared so that bureaucratic information requirements can be fulfilled to formalize the search process. This procedure can be difficult for the families to understand due to the legalistic and paper-hunting nature of the work required. It becomes a frustrating bureaucratic loop where they must find documents (medical records, identity records, dentist records, photographs) to hand over to a state official, who the families know cannot give them the assistance they need nor answer their questions and who oversees cases that are either seldomly investigated or answered. Martha’s correspondence with the state is representative in terms of time, effort, frustration of families, and after more than 30 years, hopelessness regarding state responses. As the search becomes more long-term, official, and institutional, the aims of the families may change, becoming broader (not only finding the remains but finding what they call ‘the truth’) or narrower (limiting the search to the remains and resigning themselves to not knowing why or who did what).

What the truth means in this context varies from family to family. For some it is solely about the whereabouts and what happened (Maria, Karla), but for others it is also about answering *why* this occurred and for this to be acknowledged nationwide (Maria Fernanda, Martha and Amparo).

The way my participants spoke about wanting to find *the truth* follows Patricia Naftali’s statements about the use of the term in these circumstances. The families invoke the word *truth* as a political tactic of protest against the State’s denial of their repression that is shrouded in secrecy. It is invoked, as Naftali states “at the intersection of humanitarian, religious and cultural references to initially present the search for the disappeared as a moral imperative” (Naftali, 2016: para 6). It is this reason as well as the ones laid out above, that I believe more research is needed by information scholars to help disentangle the analysis of *truth* on the one hand and *information* on the other, away from more legalistic explanations.

Buckland (1991) argues that what is informative is situational. During the search for the disappeared, what is considered informative for finding the disappeared is the result of collaboration and communication between the families and the experts, either the NGOs, lawyers, or forensic medics. The information can come from a broad spectrum of possible sources and informative tools. This raises the issue that, if there is no clear path, directive, source, system or guidance about sources or tools, then families find themselves constantly at a crossroads and multiple paths, which affects them emotionally and can increase their risk-taking behaviour by trying to access information directly through perpetrators. The most obvious source of knowledge - the government and its institutions - is often seen to complicate the search, due to obstacles in terms of language and bureaucratic procedures that lead to no answers or denials as well as the absence of protection mechanisms from further violence.

6.1.4 Information barriers

Due to information barriers in this context being all encompassing and highly interwoven with socio-cultural structures, the study has not looked at them in depth. As one of the participants from an NGO told me, “the barriers (to the search) are all of them” (las barreras son todas). In other words, for the people searching, the barriers are everywhere and overwhelming. This was corroborated by the interviews with all NGO participants. This is rather self-explanatory as that is the nature and purpose of the crime of enforced disappearance in the first place. Nevertheless, a description of the types of barriers and constraints that families face in this context, found in the data, can prove useful to current discussions about information barriers in information studies.

External barriers

The external barriers found in this case are a combination of factors all interwoven with the society and culture of the country – specifically, the political dynamics. They are imposed from the outset through norms, regulations, symbols, or institutional culture.

For my participants, the biggest weight of constraints to the seeking process, is ‘the lack of political will’ from the current government. The data shows that this materializes in a manner of ways:

First, in the form of limited government assistance and access to information. The laws in place to resolve governmental inertia or apathy are overridden in the name of national security which

then materializes in state representatives' unwillingness to apply laws of access (Ramírez et al., 2017). This adds to and is enhanced by the structural inertia of bureaucratic complexity and corruption.

Second, the schemes of legal and administrative standardization that have been put into place in Colombia to centralise and strengthen power have meant that many rural people, who do not master the linguistic legal discourse of the state, are rendered, as James Scott has described “mute and marginalized” (Scott, 1998: 72). To add to these bureaucratic complications, not only is access to information in any official capacity highly complex, families also have to deal with unwritten norms, knowledgeable only to experts in the field (NGOs, FOs, officials, or researchers) or highly experienced families; knowing which government office is in charge of which specific cases, knowing informal practices (the need to and how to befriend officials), identifying rumours (the rumour that families must wait 72 hours before reporting the missing – this is not the case), and dealing with partisanship (the partisanship of public officials). The need to access this knowledge hinders ‘normal’ requests for information. Families are left in need of guides to interpret and navigate their own state’s culture. For the families, these *guides* have come in the form of NGOs and FOs, who bridge this knowledge gap within communities of practice. These communities, comprised of individual families, groups of families, FOs, NGOs, and other experts, teach these unwritten norms and how to overcome them. Nevertheless, the existence of these socio-cultural barriers to information means a further alienation as a consequence of the anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and incomprehension that accompany families during their search.

Third, the most salient materialization of the current socio-cultural barriers due to the political climate and faced by all those seeking information is the constant threat of violence or the use of violence. While the first and second issues have been explored in the articles from different perspectives. I expand on the third issue here, as I believe it is likely the most pressing barrier in the information-seeking process of the families and one that there is currently little research on.

Violence as a barrier to information-seeking

Violence is a constant threat to the people in search of the disappeared in Colombia, either families or institutions and organisations. As article 2 shows, bureaucratic inertia can be dealt with in some cases by befriending officials, and a change in political climate can result if a pro-

peace accord government is elected. Violence however, grows from obscure places, comes with other tragedies attached to it and from people who move in worlds of violence (Nordstrom, 2004). Just like we talk about different types of wars, we need to talk about different types of violence (Nordstrom, 2004). In Colombia, the violence is not neatly contained nor restricted to one area or one people. The conflict is played out by a variety of different groups that work as “networks of power” (Castaño, 2010: 54). As the players fight for control of territories and people, it spills into social and political institutions, impacting how they work. As Carolyn Nordstrom reminds us, “War itself now spills across the landscapes and cityscapes of prosaic life. The image of the complete battle, separate from the civilian life around it, is antiquated, unreal” (2004: 58).

In other words, families and those who search cannot easily navigate around the violence, but on the contrary, have to engage in worlds where “perpetrators, victims, and witnesses come from the same social space” (Das and Kleinman, 2000: 2). This type of daily living affects the way people interact with each other and restricts communication (Castaño, 2010). Violence then affects people’s everyday behaviour and, in this case, affects both the way people go ‘seeking information’ and institutional information practices (see article 2). It leads people to create ways to both fill the void of ‘not knowing’ and navigate the relationships with institutions that hold information (article 3). As the articles show, family members will proceed to act ‘following the rules’ of the official search process, whilst also seeking elsewhere (on their own, with the perpetrators, with other families), thereby adapting their daily lives to developing new ways of knowing and understanding (see below), due to the constant threat of violence.

The combination of bureaucratic inertia and violence towards people who are already socially and economically marginalised unleashes a series of internal emotions that exacerbate the high level of constraints already present in the families’ information-seeking.

Internal barriers

Fear, anxiety, and uncertainty were the emotions articulated by the participants when speaking about their information-seeking process. These were mentioned by Karla, Maria, and NGO representatives as reasons why some families cannot gather information. The death threats and persecution Martha experienced which forced her to relocate, were, according to Martha, in order to prevent her from gathering information about what had happened to Jorge. Although it

did not work with Martha, nor Amparo (who continues her search in exile), the violence experienced by Maria has prevented further searching.

The families' uncertainty is not only related to fear, it is also related to their lack of education, language difficulties, and their general social marginalization. This has led them to 'feel' they are not up to the task of dealing with the state, which includes communicating with state officials and dealing with legalistic papers on their own. Yet, feelings of inadequacy to specific tasks were often overcome with the assistance of NGOs or other families in FOs.

In Maria's case, her depression and trauma have been cognitive factors that have affected her ability to continue searching, but also feelings of inadequacy to the task which come from her lack of education and lack of income combined with emotional fragility.

Even though barriers can be categorized as 'internal barriers' to the person searching (cognitive, intellectual, and affective), I would argue that they are a response to external factors, a reaction to the environment, in other words, more than simply an 'internal wiring' issue. The interplay between internal and external factors should be taken into account when we define barriers as either internal or external. The emotions produced which make people hesitant to seek information in the context of enforced disappearances are defence mechanisms - to protect themselves and their living family members.

To summarise, internal barriers are exacerbated by external factors and the reverse is also true, external barriers can be exacerbated by internal barriers such as emotional or intellectual conditions. There is a fluidity to the internal and external categorization which problematizes such simplistic categories. Simultaneously, social and political violence must be considered as a significant information barrier.

6.1.5 Learning from others: the opening up of options

Just as war affects institutions and changes the way societies operate, individuals also change and learn to live with the atrocities (Arjona, 2016: 2). The challenges mentioned above, have not stopped Martha, Karla, Maria Fernanda, Amparo or others such as Teresita Gaviria and Fabiola Lalinde from trying to obtain answers. Instead, they have attempted to find increasingly creative ways of sharing their experiences and knowledge.

They have learned different options to register their experiences, both of their trauma, and of the search process. This learning has occurred through the networking of families and NGO representatives, which provides a wealth of information about the search process: who the supporters of the search process are, who to trust, who cooperates, who doesn't, how to interact with the state (how to write letters, who to address them to, how to report a disappearance, how to make their voices heard, how to use the legalistic language of the state), and how to share the tacit information the families accumulate during their years of experience.

NGOs have courses in literacy and recordkeeping, teaching how to replicate highly legalistic inscriptions in order to engage with the state. They teach families to insist on replies, insist on their claims, and demand answers. Families are taught that they must write in Spanish and by computer or typewriter, never by hand. The state must be mimicked in language and form (Scott, 1998). NGOs teach the families to request specific dates, names, offices, addresses, and institutions. Not to leave anything to chance. The families know already that they cannot trust the state.

In turn, the families teach the practices they have learnt to 'new' families, just like Martha, Karla, and Maria Fernanda do. By connecting and networking, the families realise they are part of a greater movement and social group that has learnt these practices that have been developed with time and developed through overlapping with other communities. There is 'mutual engagement' and a 'sense of joint enterprise' (Wenger, 1999) among the families, who gather explicitly to share, not only their knowledge, but their engagement in doing things together as a shared discourse of their place in society and in mutually defining identities (Wenger, 1999). They interact face-to-face (not digitally) in specific spaces where their identity is strengthened through their participation in a learning and knowledge generation process (Amin and Roberts, 2008). Their status as *families of a disappeared person* is central to their inclusion, and through this identity, they build their aims and demands collectively. They learn narratives and discourses they take with them to justify their political discourse and demands for information.

Whether these groups and communities are explicitly 'communities of practice' in Lave and Wenger's definition, can of course be discussed, as the nature of these relationships cannot always be sustained – a key characteristic of 'communities of practice' according to Wenger (1999). This is due to the fluctuating and uncertain circumstances of the families, the fact that many are persecuted and must uproot, like Martha and Amparo had to do. It may also have to

do with their emotional vulnerability. Maria has been brought in by Karla to participate in their local group of families to create memory-building initiatives; yet, though she may participate sometimes, she seldom leaves her home due to her depression. But as Amin and Roberts (2008) argue, the homogenization of the term ‘communities of practice’ is perhaps unhelpful as it “glosses over significant varieties of situated practice with very different creative outcomes” (p. 355).

This knowledge sharing is not always institutionalized but fragmented, resulting in difficulty to assess the different ways in which knowledge is shared within these groups. My focus however, has been on *how the families obtain information about their loved ones*, not on the dynamics of their communities. Even though the documentation practices are learnt within communities, these are individual documentation practices, *every family bears the onus of documenting their own disappeared*. Nevertheless, as article 3 has shown, documenting one disappeared person can help document others.

What particular characteristics these communities of practice have is not a question I can answer here. It was never a question I set out to answer, nor do I have the required data available. This would require an in-depth study of how these groups function, meet, and interact; I mention it here as it provides directions for future research. What *can* be stated from my research is that during the networking stage, the families learn practices that provide new opportunities and “dynamics of knowledge creation” (Amin and Roberts, 2008) which help them engage in political activism, and memorialization, as will be explained later.

It is at this stage in the families’ trajectories where I begin to specifically use the term *documentation practices*. Until now, the families have been focused on obtaining information in any way and form they can and on learning how to do so. It is only when they become aware of the importance of preserving documents, that we can talk about *documentation practices*.

NGOs, as explained in articles 1 and 2, teach literacy and recordkeeping with the precise aim that families learn to create collections of records to trace their communications, and to document the disappearance, the search process, and the disappeared. This is to help systematise human rights information that families already have. As the NGOs I interviewed clearly stated, ‘it is the families that have information’. Families have information about their loved ones that only they hold due to their life-long closeness to the disappeared. This information must be

recorded to be used by NGOs or TJ fact-finding missions. Even though, as I have argued in article 2, the families do not *always* have information, it is widely recognised that *when* they do and it is recorded, it can be a determinant factor in their search, as we will see below.

6.1.6 Gathering and recordkeeping: the making of outputs

Having answered the question of what options open up to the families in their information-seeking process (Q2), the gathering and preserving of records (addressed in articles 1 and 3), emerges as a grassroots practice of the families – as an output.

Contrary to other memory practices, the recordkeeping of families has not been written about in great detail. Two articles were published half-way through my investigation, Giraldo-Lopera and Tobón (2021) and Cronin-Furnan and Krystalli (2021), which explore the relationship of families or victims with documents. Giraldo-Lopera and Tobón's was the most detailed and specific referring to Fabiola Lalinde's archive. Some Latin American literature does mention the private collections of families, often referred to as *archives of pain*, in passing, or not as the main focus of the study and not from the perspective of archival studies (Da Silva Catela, 2002, Cieplak, 2020, Da Silva Catela, 2012, Alberti, 2004). Nevertheless, they helped confirm my initial reading of the data and the context, that there are personal collections being created by families of disappeared persons as a response to the inactions of the state.

6.1.6.1 From 'unintentional' to 'intentional' recordkeeping

Based on the in-depth study of Martha's case, I found a two-step process in the gathering of the records. First, the need to preserve the documents necessary to communicate with the state: letters sent and their replies; papers proving a procedure was followed, that the crime was reported, and that the disappeared person existed (records of identity numbers, medical conditions, physical characteristics). Within this initial step, the families also learn to write up the story of their loved one. In the pedagogical materials she developed for ASFADDES, Fabiola Lalinde describes the process of how to create a folder or 'dossier' as she calls it - see figures 8 and 9 (Giraldo and Tobón, 2020). It advises the inclusion of photographs, descriptions of physical characteristics, hobbies, and activities of the disappeared person; where they went to school, worked, lived; copies of the missing person's report; witness reports; newspaper clippings; and other traces of the search process (see figure 8).


Figure 8. "Como elaborar una denuncia y un 'dossier' (How to create a missing person's report and a 'dossier') Vélez and Bautista (1994)

Artículos de prensa relacionados con el caso. - Respuestas de los diferentes organismos donde se encuentra el proceso.

A HORA VEAMOS EL EJEMPLO :

1 ELABORACIÓN DE LA "HOJA DE VIDA"

CASIMIRO PACHECO PEREZ



FECHA DE DESAPARICIÓN: 15 de mayo de 1987.
LUGAR: Ant. Medellín, zona urbana, barrio Mariposa.
LUGAR Y FECHA DE NACIMIENTO: Medellín, diciembre 25 de 1948.
EDAD: 38 años.
NÚMERO DE CÉDULA: 36.342.761 de Guat. Int.
ESTADO CIVIL: Soltero.
NOMBRE DE HIJOS: Ninguno.
DOMICILIO: Medellín, calle 24 #18-12B.
OCUPACION: Comercio.
EDUCACION: Segundo semestre de economía.
SECTOR SOCIAL: Informal.
FILIACION POLITICA: U.P. Accionista

Este es el ejemplo de elaboración de denuncia y a la vez fue presentada en los diferentes organismos gubernamentales

2 ELABORACIÓN DE DENUNCIA.

DENUNCIA

Medellín, 20 de mayo de 1987

1. IDENTIFICACION DEL DENUNCIANTE: Sr. Florentino Alvaro Torres con cédula de ciudadanía N. 21.841.001 de Medellín.

2. OBJETO DE LA DENUNCIA: Desaparición. La desaparición de mi hijo (hijo) Sr. Casimiro Pacheco Pérez con cédula N. 36.342.761 de Guat.

RESUMEN DE LOS HECHOS:

El día 15 de mayo de 1987 a las 2:00 pm. El esposo de la policía municipal de la parroquia San José, señor Alvaro Torres (desaparecido) a la casa del señor CASIMIRO PACHECO PEREZ, con cédula N. 36.342.761 de Guat. con el propósito de solicitar un documento que acredite su identidad y la casa del Sr. Pacheco Pérez se encontraba vacía y no se encontraba el Sr. Pacheco Pérez. En consecuencia se hizo un informe al Sr. Torres y se le entregó un documento que acredite su identidad y la casa del Sr. Pacheco Pérez se encontraba vacía y no se encontraba el Sr. Pacheco Pérez.

El día 15 de mayo de 1987 a las 2:00 pm. El esposo de la policía municipal de la parroquia San José, señor Alvaro Torres (desaparecido) a la casa del Sr. Pacheco Pérez con el propósito de solicitar un documento que acredite su identidad y la casa del Sr. Pacheco Pérez se encontraba vacía y no se encontraba el Sr. Pacheco Pérez.

3. MEDIDAS QUE SE TOMARON: Se hizo un informe al Sr. Torres y se le entregó un documento que acredite su identidad y la casa del Sr. Pacheco Pérez se encontraba vacía y no se encontraba el Sr. Pacheco Pérez.

4. LA DENUNCIA: Se denuncia la desaparición de mi hijo Sr. Casimiro Pacheco Pérez con cédula N. 36.342.761 de Guat. el día 15 de mayo de 1987 a las 2:00 pm.

5. SOLICITUD: Se solicita al Sr. Torres, que se informe a la policía municipal de la parroquia San José, para que se informe al Sr. Pacheco Pérez y se le entregue un documento que acredite su identidad y la casa del Sr. Pacheco Pérez se encontraba vacía y no se encontraba el Sr. Pacheco Pérez.

6. FECHA DE LA DENUNCIA: Fecha de elaboración: 20 de mayo de 1987.

7. FIRMA DEL DENUNCIANTE: Sr. Florentino Alvaro Torres (desaparecido) y Sr. Casimiro Pacheco Pérez (desaparecido).

8. FOTOS FAMILIARES Y DE ACTIVIDADES DEL DESAPARECIDO

Figure 9. "Como elaborar una denuncia y un 'dossier' (How to create a missing person's report and a 'dossier') Vélez and Bautista (1994)

amenazas anónimas ("de una muerte anunciada").

2- DURANTE EL CRIMEN: * Ocultamiento de la identidad de los victimarios. * No inscripción del capturado en los libros de registro. * Abandono de la víctima asesinada en sitio de difícil acceso y jurisdicción diferente a aquella en que se cometió el crimen.

3- DESPUES DEL CRIMEN: * Hacer aparecer al desaparecido o asesinado como "muerto en combate". * Concesión de ascenso o condecoraciones a los victimarios.

« POSIBLES CIRCUNSTANCIAS QUE SUCEDEN PARA QUE UN CRIMEN QUEDA IMPUNE »

A AL INICIAR UNA INVESTIGACIÓN DEL CRIMEN:

- * Amedrentamiento de testigos, denunciadores y familiares.
- * Acusar a la víctima de culpable de su suerte como guerrillero o delincuente. * Negación de solicitudes de exhumación de N.N. de desaparecidos * Renuencia de autoridades al recibir el denuncia.

B ALREDEDOR DEL PROCESO Y DEL JUICIO:

- * Autoridad es juez y parte: el mismo organismo de seguridad, está comprometido con el delito, lo investiga.
- * Morosidad. Mínima práctica de diligencias, dejar pasar el tiempo hasta que las acciones prescriban.
- * Utilización de justicia secreta (Jueces sin rostro, pruebas secretas), en favor de los victimarios, obstaculizando la labor del abogado.

E - **Anexos**

- 1 COPIAS DE LAS DENUNCIAS.
- 2 COPIAS DE RESOLUCIONES INTERNAC.
- 3 DECLARACIONES DE TESTIGOS.
- 4 RECORTES DE PRENSA.
- 5 COPIAS DE LAS DECISIONES DE FISCALIAS, PROCURADURIA, TRIBUNAL ADMINISTRATIVO
- 6 FOTOS FAMILIARES Y DE ACTIVIDADES DEL DESAPARECIDO

Y de esta forma se elabora un "DOSSIER".
Para mayor claridad
Vemos un ejemplo:

A ELABORACIÓN DE LA "HOJA DE VIDA"

CASIMIRO PACHECO PEREZ

FECHA DE DESAPARICIÓN: 15 de Mayo de 1987.
LUGAR Y ZONA DE NAC: Antioquia Medellín, zona urbana B. Mariposa.
EDAD: 38 años.
NÚMERO DE CÉDULA: 36.342.761 de Guat. Int.
ESTADO CIVIL: Soltero.
NOMBRE DE HIJOS: Ninguno.
DOMICILIO: Medellín, calle 24 #18-12B.
OCUPACION: Comercio.
EDUCACION: 2º semestre de Economía.
SECTOR SOCIAL: Informal.
FILIACION POLITICA: U. P. Accionista

During this process, this ‘unintentional archive’ becomes intentional, and a more conscious effort occurs to save traces of the disappeared, as the families add more documents and other records in an effort to expand their archive. This change of purpose may come early on: at the beginning of their search as soon as the paperwork production starts, like in the case of Fabiola Lalinde; after some years of search, once a substantial collection has been amassed, like in the case of Martha; or, so late in the process that much of what the family member knew has been forgotten, like in the case of Karla. Whichever the case may be, there is the realisation of the inherent value of the documents or records, which indicates a change in the perspective of the families towards the documentation. The collection of documents, whilst at first an unintended consequence of the seeking process, becomes a conscious part of their seeking process, an aim in itself.

This realisation occurs once activations of the records are deemed useful either for political activism, memorialisation, or evidence for legal procedures. This realisation triggers a more active practice of collecting and guarding records, which may or may not provide information, yet, they represent the disappeared due to their material qualities. This is not a tidy process as many of the objects and items are already in the families’ homes from before: clothes, photographs, and personal objects. Some are collected from friends or other members of the family, such as photographs of the disappeared person in other settings (at school, at work, during a protest or strike). As Maria shows me, they become part of an explicit collection of ‘things’ of the disappeared. Not all these ‘things’ will seem to be records as such, for example clothes, but they represent a loved one who used to wear the clothing, and thus helps embody them. As Maria says, she can smell the item of clothing to remember her children. As such, they have practical functions that relate to the emotional or relational (Yeo, 2018: 130). In this sense, these items are seen as *representations* (Yeo, 2018: 132) of the person, the event of disappearance, or what the families want to represent. But this is the case for all records. Records are never independent of the world-view of the recordkeepers (Yeo, 2018: 139, Ketelaar, 2008).

They collect items or papers that are a reinforcement of the existence of the person – a “reinforcement of memory and senses of identity and community, as well as generation of emotions, ideas, inspiration and guidance for future action” (Sundqvist, 2021: 7).

A couple of my participants were able to ‘read’ their records to me. Passing the pages or showing the items one by one they would say, ‘look, here is where the government told me my case was not open’, ‘here was when my family was complete’, ‘this is when XXX was really young’, ‘this paper is really important, it took me years to obtain’ or ‘this is when XXX was at school’. In some comments the disappeared come to life; ‘Aquí está XXX’ (*Here is XXX*) or ‘Que lindo es XXXX, no?’ (How beautiful XXX is, no?). The records collected, seen together, are able to communicate the story both of the disappeared and their families.

The clearest example of this is Martha’s profile of Jorge, where she writes his story in the first person thus embodying her brother, “my sister (...) rebuilds my life”. She invokes him and talks not only about him, but literally for him, giving him a voice and thus also communicating with him. Something similar occurs with the objects families keep. Items that might still smell of their loved ones or depict their exact size or portray their tastes, embody the presence of the disappeared, bring their image back from the past, and materialise them in the present in a physical space (Aranguren Romero et al., 2021). These records become or are conceived as tools to maintain a link with the disappeared and through them, “it becomes possible to invoke the relation with the missing person in the scenario of public denunciation” (Aranguren Romero et al., 2021: 16). Thus, the materiality of these collections obtains a significant meaning which perhaps in other violations may not have the same resonance.

Martha explains to ‘newer families’ to this crime that even though many of the papers from the state are now sent digitally, there is an urgency to printing them and having them in paper – in physical form. For ease of access, storing them ‘in that special drawer’, and compiling them together with the other objects and photographs that are not digital; as a collection. Martha explains how she always knows where her papers are and guards them safely in her ‘special place’. Digitally, they may also be safe, and Martha was very happy to have her papers digitalised. But she explains, there is a difference when looking at them and holding them.

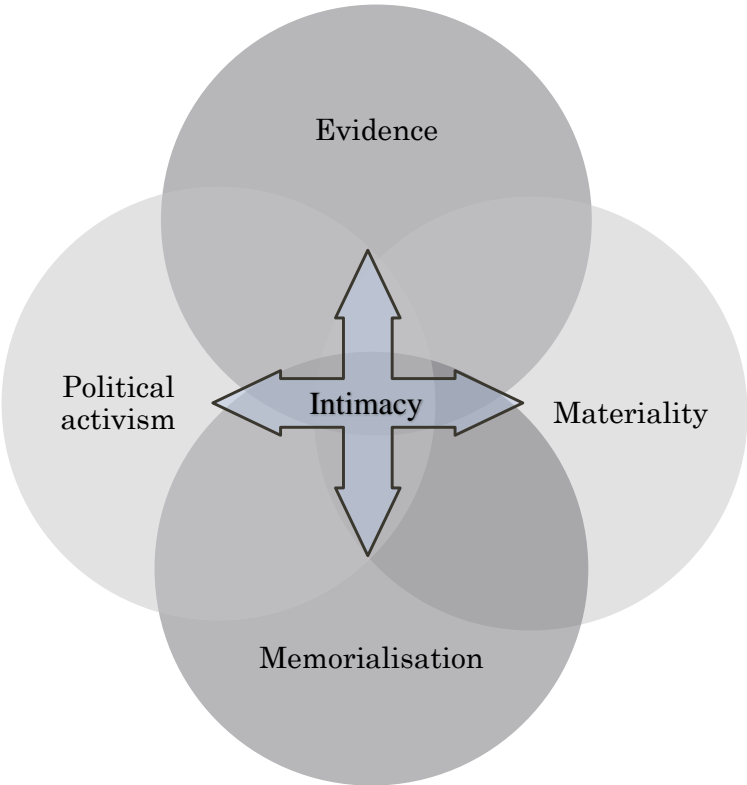
The information about the crime and the person emerges through the collection as a whole, as the records come together in interaction with each other. The collections of the families consist of a personal narrative of events of their trajectories of information-seeking, providing evidence of the disappeared person and of impunity; yet, they end up taking on other meanings; resistance, love, care, memory, trauma. These collections I have called *archives of the disappeared*.

6.1.7 The Concept of Archives of the Disappeared

The concept of *archives of the disappeared* emerged to name and describe the families' collections placing them firmly under the category of *human rights archives*. The work of Catherine Hobbs, Jennifer Douglas, and Alison Mills on personal archives, which has been the inspiration for conceptualizing the collections of the families, shows that personal archives have traditionally not been of interest to archival theory, focusing instead on institutional repositories. I wanted to create a concept to represent the growing number of personal collections in Colombia which have a meaning, purpose, and use, not only for the families, but also for society.

Four main components are identified in article 1: *evidence, memorialisation, political activism*, all brought together through the family bond (*intimacy*). Article 3 however, identified *materiality* as another component. Based on the totality of findings from my three articles, and what has been discussed in this chapter, figure 10 depicts a model of the concept.

Figure 10. Archives of the disappeared

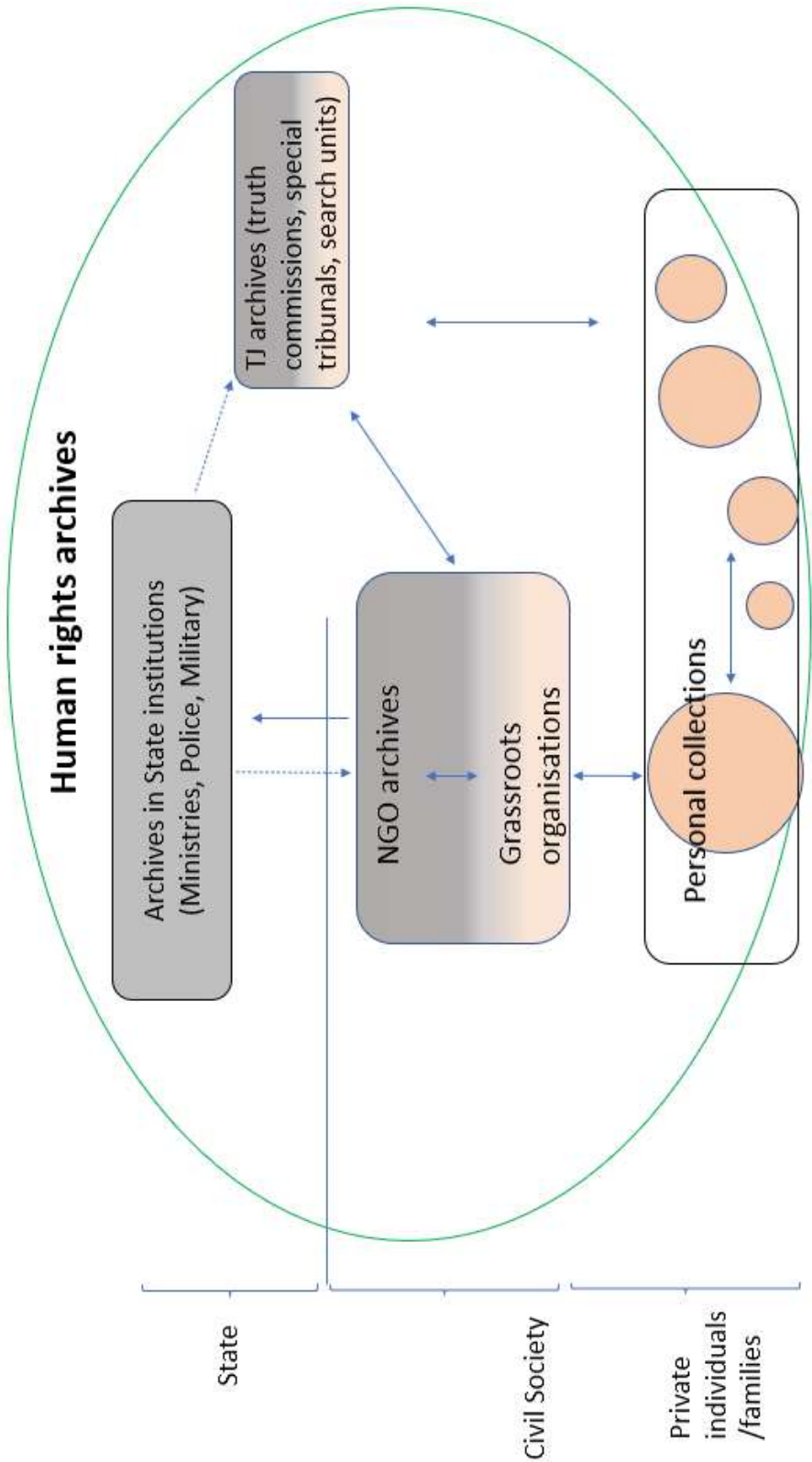


Evidence and *memorialisation* are the two main components that are always present, followed by *materiality* and *political activism* which although important, are only present sometimes. Political activism is only present when the records are activated in public, making them visible to others and to the state. Nevertheless, the four are intertwined with each other and are bound together by the *intimacy* of the family bond - love, care, loyalty, but also, when these are absent, the bond which people have to this primary social unit through their knowledge of the disappeared. Families and loved ones are the only ones who know and remember the disappeared well enough to become the guardians of their memory. The intimacy of the family bond provides the reason for the persistent pursuit and collection of the records in the first place; the dedication to memorialise the disappeared, the need to mobilise the public, inform the media, and to have physical representations of the disappeared in the form of objects. In this way, intimacy is linked to memorialisation.

The intimacy element in the archives of the disappeared is that which allows the other components to function, as article 3 makes clear. When the memorialisation or providing evidence cannot occur in public, the family remains the unit for passing knowledge (memory + evidence) on to future generations. The material records, as explained above, have a role as touchstones for storytelling and remembering.

Figure 11 locates the position of *archives of the disappeared* in the world of human rights archives, considered the umbrella term under which it resides.

Figure 11. Mapping human rights archives



The concept *archives of the disappeared* is valuable for distinguishing these private collections (of differing sizes) from the rest of what is usually considered to be *human rights archives*. Figure 11 highlights and positions the different categories of human rights archives. The arrows point to the sharing of records for the purpose of disclosing information that can assist the search for the disappeared. The broken lines indicate discontinuous or sporadic sharing of data. The colouring shows how the records move from the personal collections (orange) to other repositories, contributing to NGO and TJ documentation and therefore, leaving their marks in those archives. At the bottom of the figure, at the grassroots level, the personal collections are depicted in different sizes, showing the variety of collections found and how there is also a sharing of information and documents between them.

6.2 Social accountability: The role of personal archives

The South African constitutional judge Richard Goldstone has written that “in a perfect society, victims are entitled to full justice, namely trial of the perpetrator and if guilty, adequate punishment. That ideal is not possible in the aftermath of massive violence. There are simply too many victims and too many perpetrators. Even the most sophisticated criminal justice system would be completely overwhelmed. It is for this reason that such societies have to find other solutions” (Minow, 1998: X). Social accountability is one of these ‘other solutions’ and, as I argue in this section, the personal archives of families are a tool for social accountability.

In Colombia, there are institutional failures and deficits that have led to criminal state practices and then to their impunity, due to institutional incapacity to uphold accountability through traditional mechanisms. The term *social accountability* was coined as an alternative to intrastate systems of checks and balances or elections. Instead, social accountability relies on sectors of society both organised and non-organised, institutional and non-institutional that can mobilise public opinion (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006); in this context, the *intensity* of claims is important. As discussed in the theory chapter, there are three components that have to be in place for greater social accountability to occur: social mobilisation, mediatization, and judicialization. I will argue here that the work the families and their FOs have done in Colombia has been effective to promote social accountability; underlying this effective work has been the activation of the documents collected by the families. Below, I discuss the three components of social accountability in relation to personal collections.

6.2.1 Social Mobilisation and Mediatization

The family members I have interviewed and the family organisations they are associated with, have used their status as victims of the crime of disappearance and as mothers, wives, sisters, and family members in general, to voice their demands in the public sphere and influence public opinion. This political activism consists of public performances; exhibitions; protests and demonstrations; lobbying national and international institutions and NGOs; and giving their stories to the media, both national and international, with the clear aim of shaming the state and demanding justice.. Records have been produced for these purposes, but also as a result of them.

The families have, in turn, reached out to the media and the media to them, to share their stories using their photographs, private letters, communication with the state, papers, songs, artwork and other records created or collected by them. Thus, not only does the media circulate the stories of the families, but also some of their records, the photographs being the most common and representative visual reminder of the disappeared.

Some records are also lent to produce documentaries or books telling the stories of the families³¹. Media attention and the mobilisation of public opinion have gone hand in hand leading to increased visibility of the crime and who the victims are. The louder the voices of the families, the greater their ability to keep the issue in the public debate. This is one reason why some family members do not want to remain anonymous, and why, in the end, I agreed to make public Martha's name. She explained that she has given many interviews to the media and has an online media presence precisely because the public needs to see who the victims of the crimes are, not only the disappeared person but the families too, who are more than statistics and have a voice. Even though due to European privacy regulations (GDPR) I was not allowed to publish the family photographs that Martha has added to her collection (as they include third persons I could not get a hold of to give their consent), the photographs are available in a YouTube video created in Jorge's honour³². For the families, even though their political activism may imply a risk, it also provides a voice to regain their agency, clearly stating that they will not be silenced.

³¹ The documentaries such as *Operación Ciriri: Persistente, insistente e incomoda* (2017); *Unión Patriótica* (2015) Video Colombia https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brrDpX_6M00; *La historia que no contaron - José Antequera* (2010) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dutvL53_dVg; *Las caras del horror: Las voces de los falsos positivos: memoria del conflicto* (2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jIDfzTjSoE>

³² The video is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YalC2hqI_9A

Peruzzotti and Smulovitz have argued that social accountability requires public efforts. The work families do, their recordkeeping, activism and risk-taking, are efforts in social accountability and although they may not have mandatory effects on government policies, they can activate other mechanisms that do (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006).

6.2.2 Juridicialisation

The work these records *do* when they are activated has provided not only a response from the public but from other mechanisms. The clearest example of this is Fabiola Lalinde's digitalised archive of Operación Cirirí (the search for her son), the most well-known case in Colombia. Her recordkeeping work and the activation of her records helped support her case, which was analysed and reviewed by the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights in 1985 and sent to the Inter-American Human Rights Court in 1989. Her correspondence with the lawyers, judges, and the State was sent to the Commission. Her documents helped to ensure the support of Amnesty International, the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, and prominent politicians, lawyers, academics and human rights defenders from all over the world. She documented every name, place, witness, interview, meeting, and procedure; kept every letter, newspaper clipping, interview, and copy of every document and receipt; and kept a diary of her search (Giraldo and Tobón, 2021a).

Most collections do not resemble Fabiola's meticulous recordkeeping, but they can provide similar functions in terms of supporting their claims and appeals to the public, the state, and NGOs. Martha's collection was the second largest collection I managed to analyse due to the possibility of getting it digitalised. Martha's collection has been able to work in a similar manner to Fabiola's as a support tool for her search, for furthering her interactions, for providing evidence of her communication with the state, and thereby for providing evidence of their denial and refusal to investigate. Her records also document her brother's active membership in the UP and political inclinations, which were the cause of his disappearance. These records help build Jorge's case which today is part of a collective case at the JEP³³ and another at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights³⁴.

³³ Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP in Spanish) is one of the three transitional justice mechanisms in Colombia and the only one that has a legal mandate, meaning it has the power to pass sentences and convict. Their review of the UP case can be found here: <https://www.jep.gov.co/especiales1/macrocasos/06.html>

³⁴ See <https://corporacionreiniciar.org/caso-up/caso-up-sistema-interamericano/>

The JEP's judicial review of the extermination of the UP being a major case for Colombia, is precisely due to the pressure by the families and the wider UP network as well as NGOs providing the documentation of victimizing acts, to which Martha's records correspond. National reports³⁵ about the extermination of the UP detail the experiences of the victims and the consequences of their suffering. There, the photographs of the disappeared provided by the families, their testimonies, and other records are actively used.

The case of the unlawful killings of people by state agents who declared them as killed in combat (the case of the 'false positives') is also under review by the JEP as case 3³⁶. The reason why the JEP cases are so important for the families is that it is the first time any criminal accountability for these crimes has been attempted in Colombia. In addition, the JEP guarantees the centrality of the victims and therefore their participation in the legal process (JEP, 2020). This participation allows families to approach the JEP directly or indirectly, through the assistance of NGOs, to give their testimonies and records to help support their case. Indeed, the NGOs are obliged to include the records in the application to the JEP. Furthermore, the JEP does not only receive testimonies or individual records, but entire private archives. They have also received other types of records that can support victims' testimonies such as textiles or artworks. The JEP, like the Truth Commission, applies a broad definition of 'archive' and 'record' when collecting information precisely to be able to use the wide range of records that many victims have collected in other ways, due to illiteracy, different cultural traditions of recordkeeping, and different languages (Oscar Vera Parra, JEP magistrate 2022 – see footnote 12)

As we assess the judicial component of social accountability, it is important to highlight that the legal/judicial activity allows for more visibility of the cases: the media is more likely to take up the issue and present different cases – and vice versa. Due to media and civil society pressure, there has been greater judicial engagement with some cases of enforced disappearance such as 'false positives' or the extermination of the UP. The three components of social accountability (public mobilisation, mediatization, and judicialization) are thus interlinked, and private records link all three by circulating among them.

³⁵ The three reports are: *Todo pasó frente a nuestros ojos, el genocidio de la Unión Patriótica (1984-2002)* by the National Centre of Historical Memory, *Victimización a miembros de la Unión Patriótica (UP) por parte de agentes del Estado* by Fiscalía General de la Nación and *¡Venga esa mano, país! Memoria viva de una vergüenza nacional by the Corporación Reiniciar.*

³⁶ See <https://www.jep.gov.co/especiales1/macrocasos/03.html>

As Peruzzoti and Smulovitz (2006) point out, how to measure the extent of social accountability in its ability to be a form of control is difficult to assess. Social accountability might not deliver the affordances or retribution that families want, nor the truth of what happened, but often neither do the courts of law (Minow, 1998). My argument is that the collections of the families are tools for, and a consequence of, the seeking of some alternative form of justice – social accountability.

6.2.3 Memory practices and social accountability

Memory of past violations and the harms produced are considered to be part of the heritage of a nation. In Colombia, however, contestations over human rights violations mean that memory and heritage are currently a battleground³⁷ (Rodriguez Castro, 2021: 670). On the one hand, transitional justice mechanisms have motivated the advancement of memorialisation processes through the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH), Houses of Memory, the Colombian Truth Commission, the Unit of Search for the Disappeared (UBPD), truth-telling spaces, exhibitions, publications, documentaries and more. On the other hand, the state exercises its power to withhold information not only from transitional justice mechanisms, but also from society in general whilst pushing denialist narratives (Rodriguez Castro, 2021). In this context, social accountability can be seen through a long-term time frame where the cumulative effects of its three components – judicialization, public mobilisation, and mediatisation - help to build a longer-term vision of the past, helping to counter the denials of the state.

The personal collections of the families contribute to building a more complete picture of the inner-workings of the armed conflict, the crimes, and the impact on common citizens. Internationally, the commemoration of victims of past atrocities has been usually dealt with under memory laws or memorialisation policies and initiatives, acknowledged as being part of the collective dimension of the right to know and the state's duty to remember. The Updated

³⁷ In August 2018, the acting director of the CNMH was replaced with a new director who sided politically with the incoming government at that time of Ivan Duque and his party discourse of denying the existence of an armed conflict in Colombia. The repercussion was that military and paramilitary groups were no longer considered perpetrators of the violence in the armed conflict (Rodriguez Castro, 2021). This has had the effect of delegitimising the previous work the CNMH has done due to the lack of trust particularly from the victims, victim groups, and NGOs. One result of this change of narrative has been the removal of the CNMH from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the request of many NGOs and FOs to have the archives they donated to the centre returned to them (Uprimny Yepes, 2020a)

Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity, which writes about both the *Duty to preserve memory* and the *right to know* reads:

A people's knowledge of the history of its oppression is part of its heritage and, as such, must be ensured by appropriate measures in fulfilment of the State's duty to preserve archives and other evidence concerning violations of human rights and humanitarian law and to facilitate knowledge of those violations. Such measures shall be aimed at preserving the collective memory from extinction and, in particular, at guarding against the development of revisionist and negationist arguments (E/CN.4/2005/102/ Add.1, principle 3).

These mechanisms are necessarily fractured in nature, as they can never tell the story of all of those who suffered. As Carolyn Nordstrom's citation at the beginning of this capstone paper states, most stories get lost in the shadows. But the efforts of families to document the disappeared and the search, is a form of resistance to the political ravages pretending to erase voices in the move towards an official account of history. They are efforts in the resistance to forget and the resistance to allow society to forget.

The activation of the records in each of the collections depends very much on the capabilities of each family member and their involvement in a network or political movement which can help activate the records of families. This in turn relies on the emotional strength and interactive capacity of the families, which shows how trauma can silence individuals. Furthermore, there is a lack of trust in many official memory or justice initiatives with the consequence that many victim groups or NGOs want to keep the information to themselves because the conflict is still ongoing in many parts of the country and collecting evidence is, in itself, a dangerous activity.

Even in cases where family records are not shared with the outside world due to fear, they may not be useful for any current social accountability, but they may become touchstones for the passing on of family histories. Knowledge about the family's past, about their disappeared members, can be passed on to future generations so they may know that this person existed, that they were disappeared, how the family looked for them, and the history of their family and of Colombia at a particular moment in time. This may allow the records to move into the future to younger generations. Whether or not these collections are mobilised or mediatized they

remain narratives of a family's search process and micro narratives about Colombia at a specific moment of history.

6.3 Summary

Information-seeking is an intrinsic part of the lives of families who have loved ones disappeared. As a concept, information-seeking seems not only relevant to this context, but necessary in order to highlight the relevance of *information needs* and *information barriers*, both very present and salient when searching for the disappeared. To answer Q.1, the information-seeking process of families can be said to be characterized by a chain of events - a trajectory - interwoven with information needs on the one hand, and information barriers on the other, both of which push and pull, motivate and restrain the families through dynamic cycles as they interact with people, institutions, norms, and unwritten rules. Whilst the barriers have been all encompassing, affecting the capacities of the families to obtain any official information about the disappearance, the results have been that the families turn to each other and NGOs to form communities of practice or loose networks working towards the common aim of demanding answers from the state.

It is at this juncture, through the assistance of these communities and through the sharing of knowledge within these networks, that different options open up to the families. These include learning how to use a variety of strategies (artwork, performances, recordkeeping) that allow families to communicate and document their experiences and demands to the state. These 'memory building' and 'truth-telling' projects provide options for the families to confront the denial of the state and provide information to others. It does not overcome the lack of answers from the state, but collectively goes some way in providing information to society about the disappearances. This answers Q.2.

The families' recordkeeping helps them deal with their communication with the state and organise the documents they learn they must preserve. They record the disappeared person's life with photographs, objects and stories. This is liberatory memory work on the one hand and the preservation of evidence on the other, both of which interact and give families the option to use the records for political activism, mobilizing the public, the media, and legal processes.

This brings us to Q.3 and the outputs that are being developed in the information-seeking process. The records created and gathered, which are collected in private homes, I have named *archives of the disappeared*. They are created or developed as an unintentional result of the families' demands for justice, and the instinct to preserve. The affective and memorialization functions that the materiality of the records have as well as their usefulness as evidence make the families realise the importance of their collections for the search itself; thus, the collections become intentional archives. These collections and the records they are composed of, are foundational to help build social accountability, and as long-term grassroots memory work, thus placing these collections firmly under the umbrella term of *human rights archives*.

7 Conclusion

I conclude this dissertation by providing, first, an overview of the trajectory of this research, with the aid of figure 12. This is followed by a discussion of the implications and the main contributions of the research. I finalise with some suggestions for future research.

I have used information-seeking as a method to study the trajectories of families of disappeared persons, from their own perspectives, and the acquisition of information in a context of silence and concealment to highlight hidden information practices. Information-seeking was a means to an end, not the end itself for this study, and it has been applied to a ‘new’ issue: enforced disappearance. The ‘making-sense’ that occurs in this context is one of attempting to understand the new paths and strategies each family can take to ‘find’ answers. *Information-seeking here is revealed as a pathway to other information practices, such as networking with others and learning how to gather and create records which, in turn, leads to the creation of personal collections.* Some families learn to master these strategies, and this mastery becomes a way of life for many and could potentially be seen as an every-day life information-seeking practice in what is an extreme situation, yet shared by many.

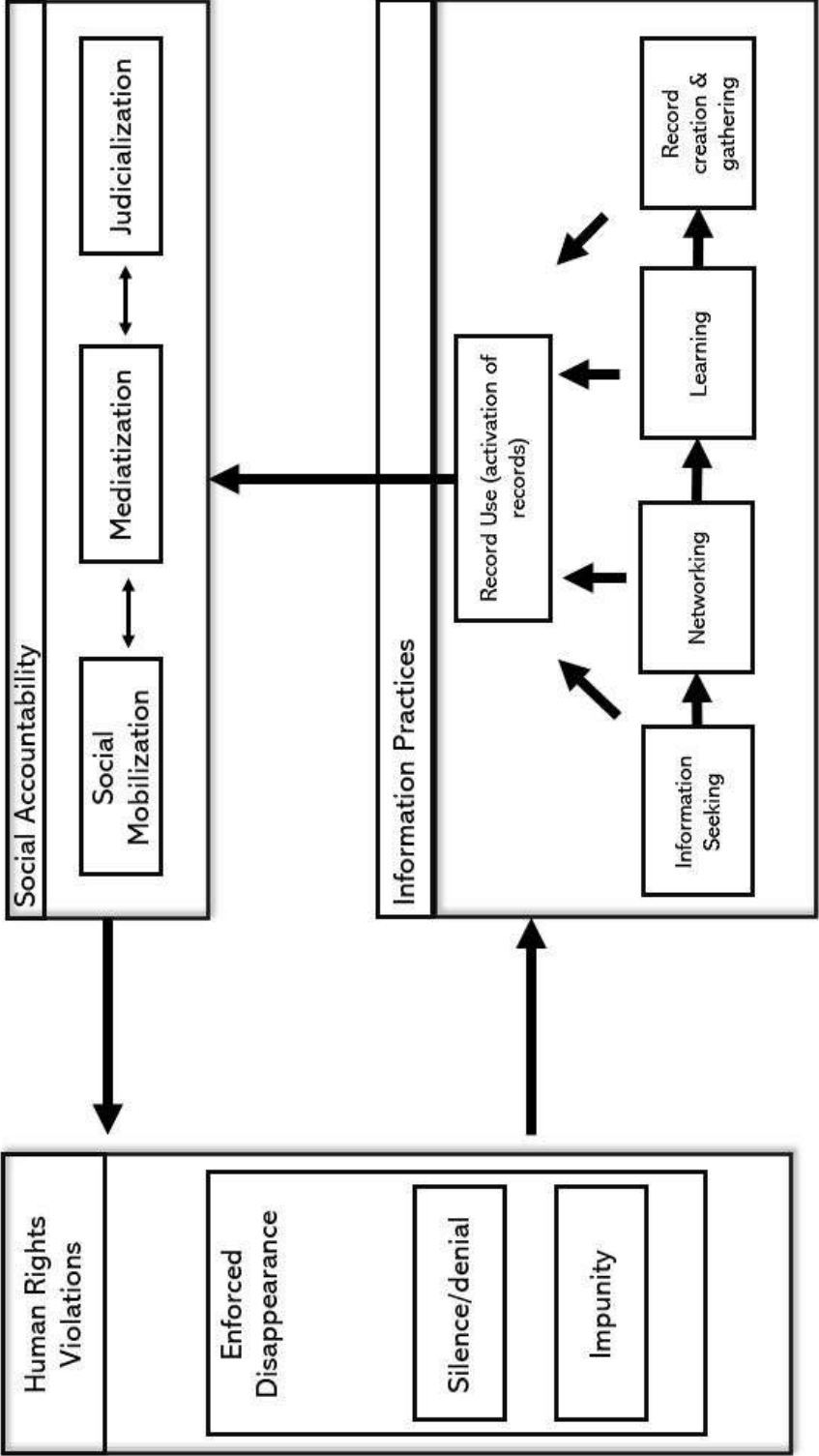
The study highlights the material role of documents for human rights practices in their use and performative functions; the practices that produce documents and then the practices that in turn are produced around the documents. Information-seeking in this context proves to be not a material-free practice, but very much engaged and entwined with material practices, both bureaucratic and in response to the bureaucratic. The study reveals the blurriness of boundaries between information-as-thing and information-as-process. The two go together here, interacting and feeding off each other as part and parcel of the work *records do* (Douglas et al., 2019). When information is requested by the families, material practices are demanded by the state which families must mimic in order to engage with the state. If those documentation practices cannot be reproduced following specific bureaucratic customs, or a person fails to engage an intermediary (an NGO or FO) to assist them, the requests for information and access can be easily denied.

This study has also revealed how the teaching of recordkeeping plays a central role to make all this possible, including the creation of communities of practices. The activism of the

communities and individuals and the various information practices highlighted here, interrelate for the purposes of social accountability.

Figure 12 is the further development of figure 3, which provided a visual of the conceptual framework used in this research. Figure 12 provides an overview and adds the implications of how, in this context, information is sought and a networking and learning process takes place; to collect, create, and preserve records. The networking where the learning takes place, the record creation and their uses are tools at work for the three components of social accountability, pushing back against the impunity that often comes with enforced disappearance.

Figure 12. Building on the conceptual framework model.



7.1 Contributions of this research

The research from this study contributes to **information studies**, **archival studies**, and **human rights practice**. It adds to previous research showing how the history of enforced disappearance in Latin America is being documented by social movements, civil society organisations, transitional justice mechanisms, and private individuals (Bickford, 1999), as opposed to official or state archives. Within this, it highlights the centrality of information-seeking.

The study contributes to a reframing of **information-seeking** as a more complicated practice than has been presented in the **LIS literature**; a practice that can be a site of struggle between political and social interests, and as a consequence, it is a pathway that is constantly reshaped and renegotiated by the seeker. Seen in this way, information-seeking when taken out of its LIS contextual and institutional assumptions, can be also considered as a grassroots social practice prevailing under mass human rights violations.

The growing practice of teaching recordkeeping by NGOs and FOs, as well as the shift from collecting as a non-intentional act to an intentional one, confirms previous statements in **archival literature** that see recordkeeping as a preservation instinct. Enforced disappearance, as a context of denial, shows this and adds to the resonance of this statement. The families play a critical, yet until now rather unrecognized role at the front line of record and knowledge creation. The cases of Maria, Karla, Maria Fernanda, and Martha are not unique in their overall experiences due to the social and political structures that have determined much of their trajectories. Data given by the NGOs supports this. NGOs gave account of other families' similar experiences and trajectories. The practices that constitute their information-seeking process, which have been laid out in chapter 6 and in the articles, can point to how this phenomenon could potentially arise elsewhere. Furthermore, this work contributes to expanding the link between archives and accountability by showing how personal archives can also contribute to accountability.

There is currently a scattering of these personal records, stories, and collections at different levels in society, owned by different bodies (NGOs, private individuals, TJ mechanisms, historical archives), unsystematically collected and many in danger. Transitional justice archives which are state owned can be at the mercy of political winds, as they have been recently in the case of Colombia (Uprimny Yepes, 2020b). NGOs have access to a limited number of

families, they are constrained in what they can collect, are not usually experts in recordkeeping and preservation, and are unaccountable to the people they serve (Kamat, 2004). For **human rights practice**, in particular for NGOs, the knowledge of archival concepts such as *record*, *provenance*, *creatorship*, and *description* would enhance their documentation practices. Archival theory and research are about the processes of how records are created, gathered, described, and categorised. The growing focus in gathering documentation and creating archives, particularly in NGOs and FOs means that greater engagement with archival practice would offer a wealth of knowledge about records and their preservation.

The creation and gathering of records as a grassroots practice of resistance and memory work despite extreme violence is a contribution to debates in **archival studies** increasingly focused on the personal and the affective in records as well as the search for and recognition of *other* forms of recordkeeping – in this case non-institutional.

There is an opportunity here for **archival practitioners and scholars** to find ways to assist and participate in a process in which they are currently not central players: teaching recordkeeping in this context and providing a supporting role in digitalising records. Even though the materiality is central to the value of the records for the families, their digitalisation would mean protecting the records in the face of the forced displacement of the families (the reason Martha had to leave documents behind), theft, environmental hazards, and other dangers. However, this raises questions about *who* should be doing the digitalising and *how*, including cyber-security.

7.2 Implications of this research

The findings presented here provide lessons for families of the disappeared in other parts of the world and the organisations that represent them: the value and outcome of the families keeping their own private documents and mobilising them in the public sphere. As children are being disappeared from Ukraine and transferred to Russia for adoption under false documentation (Chernykh and Lessa, 2022), records collected by Ukrainian families, for example, could prove crucial in future courts of law. However, if legal justice is not possible, circulating their records and their stories will provide families, not only in Ukraine but in other places, the possibility that their disappeared will remain in the public consciousness, as is currently occurring with the disappeared in China or Iran. As political dissent is stifled and the families of the disappeared are silenced or forced into social isolation, any records that the families manage to preserve and

gather which document the disappeared, have the possibility to become touchstones for future generations or activists abroad.

This leads to another implication: the political contestation and social accountability that archives of the disappeared help to provide may work not only within countries but among countries. Due to the reach that the media and activism have today, the global networking of families means more information about enforced disappearance for the families, the public, and practitioners worldwide, creating greater pressure for individual states, as the state shaming and ‘memory-making’ are on a global level. Social mobilisation and mediatization on a global level create a better chance for social accountability than when the voices of the families are only local, and therefore easily ignored or stifled. But international scrutiny is dependent on the information available about these cases, and as this dissertation has shown, that burden often lies with the families. The implication here is the importance of passing on best practices in recordkeeping to the families.

Civil society’s insistence in engaging in a dialogue with the state enacted partly through documents – products of a request and answer dynamic, has implications for the way in which many human rights practitioners talk about ‘the absence of the state,’ when in fact, the state is very present in the lives of victims of state crimes as found here in the case of enforced disappearance. The state is present through the materiality of bureaucracy (written requirements), and the state determines the cultural and symbolic capital with which the documents become acceptable or unacceptable.

This has consequences for information-seeking, proving the intertwined and dependent nature of information-seeking to political dynamics. It raises questions about the scope to which information-seeking has been studied until now and suggests that the concept could also be applied for the study of fact-finding missions of other mass atrocities. Information studies has been slow to look into extreme contexts of violence and upheaval. Redirecting the conceptual tools of information-seeking and information practices to a context of mass violations away from the Global North, reveals a variety of new issues (grassroots level recordkeeping, liberatory memory work) and a reframing of old ones (information needs, information barriers). Violence and the threat of violence have been shown here to be very real information barriers in their capacity to, not only prevent and discourage information-seeking, but also have the long-term effects of supporting impunity structures through the silencing within societies.

Identifying the concept of *archives of the disappeared* implies expanding our horizon of *human rights archives*, in order to find records that are closer to their provenance, closer to experiences of war and enforced disappearance before they are absorbed by institutional archives. As materials, they allow researchers to analyse these experiences without having to retraumatise the victims by having them retell their stories repeatedly. Looking at non-institutional records and their movements at the grassroots level in cases of mass atrocities may help further archival knowledge and theories surrounding the links between records and accountability.

7.3 Future research

The intersection between the fields of enforced disappearance (human rights), archives, and information studies, opens a number of possibilities for future research that would enhance the three distinct fields. The questions regarding the *archives of the disappeared* moving forward should be how to protect and preserve these collections. If they are to be institutionalised, more research is needed to understand best practices of archiving personal collections which are not only sensitive, but of national and international interest, taking into account the best interests of the families and their goals for justice, and making sure we respect the dignity and integrity of these collections. How do we protect the collections from changing political winds that may affect institutional independence and accountability, and make sure they can never be used against the people searching?

The question then arises whether there could be, or should be, a large international system or alliance for collecting important family records about enforced disappearances for future generations that the families could use to secure their records, protecting them from national upheavals that affect national institutional workings or the private interests and passing ideological trends that NGOs can have? It could safeguard the historical record of enforced disappearances in many countries, helping to overcome distortion and denial, overcome obstacles to access whilst protecting important data of families and the victims, and provide a site for education, research, and policymaking in a similar manner to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance³⁸.

Another area for further research is building knowledge around the link between the concept of *information needs* and the *right to know*. Considering that the *right to truth* falls upon the

³⁸ <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/>

threshold between a legal norm and a narrative device (Naqvi: 273), the term *information need* provides an additional conceptual background to current debates on the *right to truth*. The same could be said for the other way around. The concept of the *right to truth* could help develop the concept of *information needs* by providing a socio-legal understanding of why there has been a development of international norms that aim to create the political obligation for access to knowledge. It could also help shine a light on the way the term *needs* is currently being used in information studies to analyse whether there is a misalignment with other fields as Toyama (2018) shows is currently happening within the field of information technology. He argues that the technology sector's concept of *needs* makes implicit assumptions that are not fitted to projects in international development, because in the development sector, like in the human rights sector, the term *needs* is more drastically linked to survival and moral quality of life. The term *information needs* should be explored from this intersection of human rights violations and information studies so that nuances can be discerned, and its implications better considered.

Information studies should widen its social scope of study to include contexts of armed conflict, social and political violence, or the aftermath of mass atrocities. Violence is a highly complex and overarching barrier to information, one that intersects with and exacerbates other barriers, yet, has seldom been seen as a barrier to information in itself. In Savolainen's review of socio-cultural barriers to information, the only mention of violence is of battered women (Savolainen, 2016).

The communities that the families create, whether these are FOs or communities of practice, should be studied to better understand their dynamics, practices, and how they are contributing to the production of knowledge on enforced disappearance.

Questions arising from the research project:

- How to protect and preserve *archives of the disappeared*?
- How are individual records pertaining to families absorbed into institutional archives, how can both the documents and the families be protected from changing political forces?
- How can documents on enforced disappearance be gathered and kept together for wider access, use, and understanding?
- Who should digitalise the families' documents and how?

- What are the best practices families have created to gather documentation in contexts of conflict or war?
- What are best practices for teaching recordkeeping to families?
- How do FOs and NGOs engage with families for documentation purposes?
- How is social media being used by the families to disseminate their stories and activism?
How is their documentation being used in this context?

There is a pressing need to understand how people seek information in situations of conflict and authoritarianism - enforced disappearance offers an analytical lesson - not only to respond to their needs and develop theories and concepts that resonate in these contexts, but also to recognise how knowledge and meaning are created and preserved by people as a practice of resistance.

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Appendix A: Interview guide for NGOs assisting the victims of enforced disappearance in Colombia.

These interviews are semi-structured which means they are just a guide. The NGO representative knows the questions before-hand, but I allow them to lead the conversation. The questions guide the conversation.

The aim with these questions is to answer the main questions:

What is the information-seeking process of the families of the disappeared? How and where do families of victims of enforced disappearance in Colombia obtain documentation about the disappeared?

- Where are the records and information that is most needed about the cases of enforced disappearance your organisation is assisting?
- Where do you go to for answers?
- To what extent is the information you need accessible in state archives?
- What are the barriers to these records and how do you overcome them?
- What have been the difficulties in obtaining information? What has been the support?
- Has any information or documentation been obtained? How was it obtained and where?
- To what extent do the families participate in this process and how were the families led or guided through this process?

Appendix B: Interview guide for the families.

These interviews are conversational and semi-structured which means they are just a guide. The family member knows the questions before-hand, but I want to allow them to feel free and speak in their own terms. The questions guide the conversation.

The aim with these interviews is to answer the research questions:

1. What characterises the information-seeking process of the families?
2. Which options are available to the families for discovering information in the face of the challenges the crime of enforced disappearance presents?
3. What outputs are being developed in this information-seeking process?

I explain that I would like as much as it is possible a chronology of their information-seeking process:

- 1 - Please describe from the beginning of your search for the disappeared, to what extent have you been able to obtain information you want about the disappearance, and how have you been able to obtain it? Who (which authorities or organisations) have you visited or applied for information to?
- 2- What barriers/ challenges did you face and what did you do when faced with these challenges?
- 3 - What information do you currently hold about the disappeared? (please include any materials that you have relating to the disappeared that you feel represent them or say something about them) How did you obtain this material?
- 4- Ask if it is possible to see the materials.

Appendix C: NSD Assessment form

12/28/21, 11:44 AM

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger



Assessment

Reference number

370158

Project title

Searching for information about the forcefully disappeared in Colombia and role of archives

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet / Fakultet for samfunnsvitenskap / Institutt for arkiv, bibliotek- og informasjonsfag

Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)

Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup, nataliab@oslomet.no, tlf: 98413876

Type of project

Research Project

Project period

01.11.2020 - 18.03.2022

Assessment (3)

22.12.2021 - Assessed

The following assessment replaces the former assessments given 26.11.2020 and 19.05.2021.

BACKGROUND

Appendix D: Letter of Consent for NGOs (English)

Are you interested in taking part in the research project?

The role of archives in the search for the disappeared in Colombia: access and information barriers.

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to discover how families of the disappeared obtain information they need about the disappeared and the extent to which archives play a role in providing this information or supporting the search.

In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

This project is a doctoral dissertation for Oslo Metropolitan University, which will only use the personal data collected for the purpose of this dissertation.

The question arises as to the extent to which archives contribute or obfuscate justice for the disappeared at a time when the archival profession professes greater international concern with human rights and social injustice. The recent history of Latin America depicts perfectly the role that archives can have in both accentuating repression and supporting justice. This case, I hope, can highlight what Colombian public archives are doing in this context, how they are responding to the information needs of victims of enforced disappearance?

The aims of this study are to; First, describe the information environment surrounding families of victims of enforced disappearance and their experiences in trying to obtain information or more precisely documentation, and explain the physical, intellectual and social barriers they face. Secondly, to explore the current behaviour of archives in Colombia regarding human rights documentation in general, but documentation about enforced disappearances in particular. On the whole, the aim is to understand how to make archives more accountable to the survivors and victims of systematic human rights abuses and inspire further research in this field.

The research questions are:

Overall question: How do families of victims of enforced disappearance in Colombia obtain information and documentation about the disappeared, and what role do archives play in this information-seeking process with regards to access?

Research questions.

- Where are the records and information that is most needed about the cases of enforced disappearance your organisation is assisting?
- Where do you go to for answers?
- To what extent is the information you need accessible in state archives?
- What are the barriers to these records and how do you overcome them?
- What have been the difficulties in obtaining information? What has been the support?
- Has any information or documentation been obtained? How was it obtained and where?
- To what extent do the families participate in this process and how were the families led or guided through this process?

Who is responsible for the research project?

The department of Archivistics, Library and Information Science of Oslo Metropolitan University together with the doctoral student Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup are the responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

The participants of the project are:

-Victim groups and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that assist the families of the victims of enforced disappearance in their search for information and thus documentation.

Your organization will be one of about 10 NGOs that have been asked to participate. I've received your contact details from:_____

What does participation involve for you?

- If you choose to participate in the project, it means that you are participating in an individual interview of approximately one hour with me. The talk will focus on topics and questions about the search for the disappeared by the families and the barriers they encounter in obtaining information about the missing. Also, I would like to ask about the search process for the disappeared from your organisation's point of view, the interactions that your organisation has had with people or institutions that have information that you need and the barriers you encounter.

- I would like the conversation to be recorded if this is possible and you consent. If not, written notes would be taken during the interview. The interview is anonymous, so no personal details are recorded. I would like to name the organization if this is permissible with you. But that decision is entirely up to you and your organization. Your responses will be stored electronically on an encrypted computer after we finish the interview. If you consent to have the interview recorded, I will delete the interview immediately after I have transcribed the interview on paper.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

I will delete your name and contact information as soon as the interview is over. If consent is given to have the interview recorded, this is also deleted as soon as the interview is transcribed onto paper, immediately after the interview.

Before this the list of names and contact details are stored separately from the rest of the collected data. The data will be stored on a research server, which is locked away/encrypted.

As a person you will be totally anonymous. If we both agree that you will not be able to be identified, and that it is entirely safe, then with your consent I will publish: The name of the organization you are representing in the interview.

Otherwise, I will make the organisation anonymous as well.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end in March 2022. All the data will be deleted after the investigation is over.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and

- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the Institute of Archivistics, Library and Information Science at Oslo Metropolitan University, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- The Oslo Metropolitan University in Oslo via Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup nataliab@oslomet.no.
- The Data Protection Officer: Ingrid Jacobsen ingrid.jacobsen@oslomet.no
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Profesora Anneli Sundqvist (Supervisor)
(Researcher)

Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project *The role of archives in the search for the disappeared in Colombia: access and information barriers* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview
- for the name of my organisation to be named in the publication
- for my personal data to be stored until the end of the project

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, March 18th 2022

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix E. Letter of consent for Martha (English)

Research project

‘Information practices of families of the disappeared in Colombia and the role of archives’

This research is about the documentation processes of the families of the disappeared in Colombia. It will be used by Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup in Norway and Marta Lucía Giraldo in Colombia for a joint investigation. From here an article will be written for an international journal and it will also be part of a doctorate that Natalia undertakes in Norway.

Natalia's Doctorate is a study of the Information practices of the families of the disappeared in Colombia and the role of archives. The article by Natalia and Marta Lucia will be a special focus on one archive of a relative, in this case yours.

Could you participate in the project?

For my doctorate I have interviewed other family members and family and human rights organizations. Although they have participated anonymously.

If you choose to participate in the project, it means we will have an informal talk with you in person, if it is with Marta Lucia only, or if you accept that I can participate digitally from Norway, I would love to participate as well. You will decide and at any time you can change your mind. It will last about an hour.

Points to discuss in the talk

How and why do you collect documents related to the disappearance? What does it mean to you?

What has been the process and the context of this documentation that you share with us?

What have been the barriers that you have encountered in this process and how have you tried to overcome them?

- If it is possible and you give your consent, we could record the conversation so that we can later write up all the information that you have given us accurately. Otherwise, written notes will be taken during the talk.

Participation is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason. It will not have negative consequences for you if you do not wish to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your privacy: how we store and use your information

We will only use your information for the purposes that we have indicated in this document. Those who will have access to the information are Natalia, Marta Lucia and Natalia's supervisors, Anneli Sundqvist from the Metropolitan University of Oslo and Jemima García-Godos, from ISS, University of Oslo.

The recording will be erased as soon as we write the text.

What happens to your information when we finish the research project?

Natalia's PhD project will be concluded on March 18, 2022. The material may be used in connection with other investigations by Marta Lucia or Natalia in the future.

Your rights

- access information about what personal data is recorded about you,
- correct your personal information,
- have personal information deleted,
- obtain a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- lodge a complaint with the Privacy Ombudsman (of the Oslo Metropolitan University) or the Data Directorate (official Norwegian portal) regarding the processing of your personal data.

We process information about you based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the Department of Archivistics, Library Science and Information Sciences of the Metropolitan University of Oslo, the Norwegian Center for Research Data AS (NSD), has considered that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with privacy rules.

Responsible for the project: The Department of Archivistics, Library Science and Information Sciences of the Metropolitan University of Oslo together with the doctoral researcher Natalia

Bermúdez Qvortrup and the supervisors Anneli Sundqvist of the Metropolitan University of Oslo and Jemima García-Godos of the University of Oslo and Professor Marta Lucía Giraldo.

Where can you find more information?

If you have questions about the project or wish to exercise your rights, please contact:

- The Metropolitan University of Oslo via Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup nataliab@oslomet.no.
- Or with Marta Lucia Giraldo from The Inter-American School of Library Science marta.giraldo@udea.edu.co

We thank you in advance for your support of this research project.

Sincerely,

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- *La Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo via Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup nataliab@oslomet.no.*
- *O con Marta Lucia Giraldo de La Escuela Interamericana de Bibliotecología marta.giraldo@udea.edu.co*

Yours sincerely,

Supervisora del proyecto
Profesora Anneli Sundqvist

Investigadora de doctorado
Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup

Marta Lucía Giraldo
Profesora Titular

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project *The Information practices of families of the disappeared in Colombia and the role of archives* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in *an interview*

- for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognised*
- for my personal data to be stored until the end of the project 18 March 2022*

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. March 18 2022

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix F Letter of consent for Martha (Spanish – signed version)

Sobre el proyecto

Esta investigación estudia los procesos de documentación de las familias de los desaparecidos en Colombia. Será usada por Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup en Noruega y Marta Lucía Giraldo en Colombia para una investigación conjunta. De aquí se sacará un artículo para una revista internacional y también será parte de un doctorado que Natalia emprende en Noruega.

El Doctorado de Natalia es un enfoque a las prácticas informáticas de los familiares de los desaparecidos en Colombia y el papel de los archivos. El artículo de Natalia y Marta Lucia será un enfoque especial en un archivo de un familiar, en este caso el tuyo.

¿Podrías participar en el proyecto?

Para mi doctorado he entrevistado a otros familiares y organizaciones de familiares y de derechos humanos.

¿Qué involucra participar?

- Si eliges participar en el proyecto, significa unas charlas informales y en persona, ya sea con Marta Lucia, y si aceptas yo puedo participar digitalmente desde Noruega. Tu decides, y en cualquier momento puedes cambiar de parecer. Durará aproximadamente una hora.

Puntos para tratar en la charla

¿Cómo y por qué coleccionas documentos relacionados con la desaparición? ¿Qué significa para ti?

¿Cuál ha sido el proceso y el contexto de esta documentación que compartes con nosotros?

¿Cuáles han sido las barreras que has encontrado en este proceso y como las has tratado de sobrepasar?

- Si es posible y das tu consentimiento podríamos grabar la conversación para poder luego escribir toda la información que nos has dado verídicamente. De lo contrario, se tomarán notas escritas durante la charla.

La participación es voluntaria. Puedes retirar tu consentimiento en cualquier momento sin dar ninguna razón. No tendrá consecuencias negativas para ti si no deseas participar o luego decides retirarte.

Tu privacidad: cómo almacenamos y usamos tu información

Solamente usaremos tu información para los fines que hemos indicado en este documento. La información se maneja de manera confidencial y de acuerdo con la política de privacidad de Noruega.

• Natalia, Marta Lucia y mis supervisoras, Anneli Sundqvist de la Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo y Jemima García-Godos, de ISS, Universidad de Oslo tendremos acceso a la información que das. Pero la grabación se borrará apenas escribamos el texto.

¿Qué sucede con su información cuando finalizamos el proyecto de investigación?

El proyecto será concluido en marzo 18 del 2022. El material podrá ser utilizado en relación con otras investigaciones de Marta Lucia o de Natalia en el futuro.

Tus derechos

- acceder información sobre qué datos personales se registran sobre ti,
- corregir tu información personal,
- tener información personal eliminada,
- obtener una copia de tus datos personales (portabilidad de datos), y
- presentar una queja al Defensor de la privacidad (de la Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo) o la Dirección de datos (portal oficial de Noruega) con respecto al procesamiento de sus datos personales.

Procesamos información sobre ti basada en tu consentimiento.

Basado en un acuerdo con el Departamento de Archivología, Bibliotecología y Ciencias de la Información de la Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo, el Centro Noruego de Datos de Investigación AS (NSD), ha considerado que el procesamiento de datos personales en este proyecto está de acuerdo con las normas de privacidad.

Responsables del proyecto: El Departamento de Archivología, Bibliotecología y Ciencias de la Información de la Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo junto con la investigadora de doctorado Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup y las supervisoras Anneli Sundqvist de la Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo y Jemima García-Godos de la Universidad de Oslo y la Profesora Marta Lucía Giraldo.

¿Dónde puedes encontrar más información?

Si tienes preguntas sobre el proyecto o deseas ejercer tus derechos, comunícate con:

- *La Universidad Metropolitana de Oslo via Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup
nataliab@oslomet.no.*
- *O con Marta Lucia Giraldo de La Escuela Interamericana de Bibliotecología
marta.giraldo@udea.edu.co*

Agradecemos de antemano tu apoyo a este proyecto de investigación.
Atentamente,

Supervisora del proyecto
Profesora Anneli Sundqvist

Investigadora de doctorado
Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup



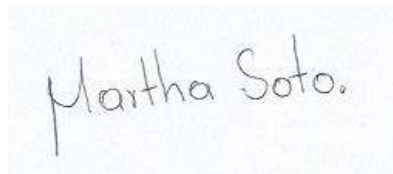
Marta Lucía Giraldo
Profesora Titular Universidad de Antioquia

Declaración de consentimiento

He recibido y entendido la información sobre el proyecto "“El acceso que tienen los familiares de las víctimas de desaparición forzada a documentación sobre la desaparición y el rol de archivos en dar o limitar el acceso a esa información” y he tenido la oportunidad de hacer preguntas. Estoy de acuerdo con:

- participar en una entrevista
- para que el nombre aparezca en la publicación
- para que mis datos personales se almacenen hasta el final del proyecto 18 marzo 2022

Acepto que mi información se procesará hasta que se complete el proyecto, aprox. marzo 2022.



Enero 18 de 2.022

Appendix G Articles

Article 1

Bermúdez Qvortrup, N. (2022). "Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualizing the Personal Collections of Families of Disappeared Persons." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 14(2): 582-599.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huac003>

Article

Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualizing the Personal Collections of Families of Disappeared Persons

Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup  *

Abstract

In the search for their loved ones, the families of the disappeared create, gather, and share records. The Colombian 2016 peace agreement opened spaces for memory practices that help promote a record-keeping culture at the grassroots among families. These personal collections are private spaces of struggle for memory, resistance, and justice. This article aims to make visible this documentation process undertaken by families, by giving these collections a name—*archives of the disappeared*—contextualizing their creation, purposes, and uses. By focusing on the case of Colombia, I follow a general chronology of a search for the disappeared to understand who the creators are, and trace the creation, accumulation, and uses of these archives based on existing literature, testimonies and interviews with family members, family organizations and NGOs. I argue that these archives are foundational to societies that have undergone human rights violations as they eventually form the basis of much of the NGO and transitional justice documentation, and provide counter narratives that offer an insight into the search process. The concept I propose, *archives of the disappeared*, is a starting concept to open up reflection and engagement regarding these archives, which although written about in the literature have yet to be conceptualized separately from NGO archives, transitional justice archives or human rights archives in general.

Keywords: Colombia; documentation; enforced disappearance; families of the disappeared; personal archives; record-keeping

* The author (nataliab@oslomet.no)

Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup is a PhD candidate at Oslo Metropolitan University at the department of Archivistcs, Library and Information Science, Postboks 4, St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo. Tel: 67 23 50 00. She researches the information practices of families of disappeared persons and the role of archives in Colombia.

Background

When researching enforced disappearances, one recurring theme is the relationship of the families of the disappeared (from here on, the families) with records. The families do an enormous amount of documentation work, usually at great risk to their own lives, collecting and preserving records about the disappeared and the trajectory of their search (Bermúdez Qvortrup, 2022). These tangible and intangible records have been ‘often reduced to mere records, private fonds and fragmented ephemera’ (Halilovich 2016: 79). Traditional archival theory highlights the role of the creator of an archive, but has ‘sidelined’ personal archives, emphasizing those created by public bodies (Douglas and Mills 2018; Hobbs 2001).

If one of the main dilemmas of a post-conflict or transitioning society that has seen widespread and systematic enforced disappearance is how to gather, manage and protect the masses of records that can shed light on the past (Baumgartner and Ott 2017), then I argue that greater academic engagement with the personal archives of these families is necessary. The concept of *personal archives* in the context of enforced disappearance is largely underdeveloped and under-researched, which poses a problem for those of us who research the information practices of the families:¹ a lack of a common concept to refer to them by; the lack of acknowledgment of the documentation work the families do and the foundational significance of these collections to the entire framework of human rights archives. Yet, without them, truth commissions, NGOs, forensic teams, and victims’ organizations would not have the basic information they need to undergo the search. They offer a multiplicity of narratives about the complexity of a political and social crisis, helping to counter the ‘master narrative(s) of the nation’ (Jelin 2003: 27).

Taking a cue from Viebach’s (2021) paper on *transitional archives*, this paper seeks to open up a space of reflection and engagement regarding a concept, which although written about in the literature has yet to be conceptualized separately from NGO archives, transitional justice (TJ) archives or human rights records in general. These are the *personal* archives of people searching for a loved one (a family member) who has been forcibly disappeared. They are conceptualized as *archives of the disappeared*, defined briefly here as the records created, gathered and stewarded by the families of disappeared persons, created *due to*, and *about* a disappearance, primarily *for* the person who disappeared, either for their justice or memorialization. They are private and personal collections that open sporadically to the public sphere, often becoming the front line of documentation for NGOs and TJ mechanisms. This article aims to make visible this existing documentation process undertaken by families in different capacities, by giving these collections a name, contextualizing their creation, purposes and uses.

This paper is the result of a three-year doctoral project researching the information practices of families in Colombia and the role of archives. I found that archives were being created by the families in response to their search process. By introducing the concept *archives of the disappeared*, I hope to inspire more knowledge and research in this field. I believe it also contributes to Viebach’s (2021) discussion about *transitional archives*, offering one way in which human rights records make their way into the public sphere and into a

1 At the time of writing, crucial literature - Giraldo and Tobón (2021) and Cronin-Furman and Krystalli (2021) - was published, helping the conceptualization and theory-building. This points to the centrality of these archives for human rights practice.

transitional justice process from the bottom up, thus opening up a conversation about ‘non-orthodox perspectives’ in human rights and transitional archives.

By focusing on the case of Colombia, I follow a general chronology of a search for the disappeared to understand who the creators are, and trace the creation, accumulation, stewardship and uses of these archives based on existing literature, previously documented testimonies,² and interviews with family members, family organizations (hereon FOs) and NGOs. This chronology coincides with the archiving process. Three family members were interviewed (‘Maria’, ‘Karla’ and ‘Maria Fernanda’),³ and representatives of four NGOs. Both ‘Karla’ and ‘Maria Fernanda’ lead FOs. The NGOs chosen consisted of: two well-known national NGOs that have been working exclusively with the issue of enforced disappearance, focusing mainly on the disappearances at the hands of State entities for more than 20 years (NGOs 1 & 3); two newer NGOs focusing on enforced disappearances by all the armed groups (NGOs 2 & 4). The interview data was supplemented with the NGO’s documentation.

The personal documentation of disappearance: the case of Colombia

Colombia signed a peace agreement in 2016, implementing a TJ system that seeks to deal with nearly six decades of systematic human rights violations. Although numbers differ depending on the source, the latest numbers from the Memory and Conflict Observatory as of March 2022 indicate 80,733⁴ disappeared persons in the context of the armed conflict (OMC 2022). This number continues to grow as the current government fails to live up to the peace agreement. Enforced disappearance is defined by the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance as,

The arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the date or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law. (UN General Assembly 2010: ICPPED, Art.2)⁵

In Colombia, many of the disappearances have occurred at the hands of the State, paramilitary groups with the acquiescence of the State, guerrilla groups or armed gangs (Courtney 2010). Prosecution has been difficult, even when the perpetrators are identified, meaning impunity is rife (Haugaard and Bouvier 2016: 1). Based on a long history of social movements and civic engagement in Colombia (Hernandez-Wolfe 2011), families have mobilized to become protagonists of the transition in exercising truth-seeking, truth-telling, and

2 Stories about the search for the disappeared have been documented and collected by the Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas (UBPD), *Verdad Abierta* or national newspapers such as *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*. These stories corroborate the interviews that I undertook with family members, FOs and NGOs.

3 All interviews were conducted over the phone due to the Corona-pandemic. The names of participants have been changed for anonymization purposes.

4 At the time of writing the UN asked Colombia to clarify its numbers of enforced disappearances. See *Colombia en Transición* (2021).

5 For a more detailed account of the extent of the violation under international law see Londoño and Ortiz Signoret (2017)

memorialization (Mendez 2016). The Unit of Search for the Disappeared (UBPD),⁶ created due to the lobbying efforts of families and FOs, testifies to this engagement.

Amid this grassroots activism, there has been grassroots documentation practices as ‘victims of the conflict find ways to make the unintelligible, intelligible through the mechanisms they have at hand, languages, media, or references’ (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2013: 18). The work the victims have done to tell their stories has been understood as memory practices from below (Briceño-Donn et al. 2009). As Reátegui shows, there has been an explosion of studies on memory practices in Colombia related to the violence, which have not occurred in a vacuum but as a grassroots response to various initiatives by successive governments to deactivate, through political means, different parties to the conflict (Reátegui Carrillo, 2009 19). There is one particular aspect of the memory work victims do that interests me here: their record-keeping process and personal archives. These archives are made up of *pre*-institutionalized records, *before* they are transposed onto a wider historical perspective of the nation-state which necessarily transforms their character and use (Briceño-Donn et al. 2009).

I use the term ‘archive’ within the postmodern shift of archival science that integrates new frameworks of knowing and cultural theoretical movements (Gilliland and Mckemmish 2018). As Caswell explains, ‘Pluralist and deconstructionist archival theorists have challenged these dominant evidence-based definitions of records’ (2016: 5). She gives the example of Indigenous Australian scholar Shannon Faulkhead’s pluralist view of records as, ‘any account, regardless of form, that preserves memory or knowledge of facts and events’ (Caswell 2016: 5). There has been a shift in archival science’s view of records from static objects of human and administrative activity to dynamic concepts (Cook 2001: 29);

(a) shift from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from records to contexts of recording, from “natural” residues or passive by-products of administrative activity to a consciously constructed and actively mediated “archivalisation” of social memory. (Cook 2001: 29)

I use a pluralist view of records to allow for the different forms of ‘traces’ to be represented, in what has been a society historically dominated by orality (Uribe 2009). *Archives of the disappeared* allow for a wide interpretation of what is encoded in personal collections. The concept therefore attaches itself to the individual and their representations.

Families as creators

The archival notion of creator, in the traditional sense, is complicated in the case of enforced disappearance, as the families are creators, accumulators, stewards and users (Douglas 2018). This documentation work has been taken up by the families, as they are the dominant group of searchers.⁷ There are archives created by non-family members that also support the search for disappeared people, such as the archive of Mario Agudelo, a former member of the Colombian Communist Party and military member of the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), as well as a government official and political activist (Giraldo and Tobón 2021).

6 The UBPD is one of three TJ mechanisms in Colombia, along with the *Special Jurisdiction for Peace* (JEP) and the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (CEV).

7 The term *searcher* ‘buscadores y buscadoras’ is also used in Colombia (Verdad Abierta 2019).

However, there is an intimate affectation embedded in the purpose of creating *archives of the disappeared* that marks them from other archives that are simply *about* a disappeared case, precisely because they are created by the families, who are the ‘guardians of memory’ of the disappeared (da Silva Catela 2008). Those two lives, that of the subject in the record and that of the creator, are indelibly intertwined both in real life and on paper. Documenting the one documents the other. They have the intimate knowledge of the biography and body of the disappeared, which is necessary to move the search forward. The concept *archives of pain* which has been used to refer to these collections in the literature (Alberti 2004; Castillejo-Cuéllar 2013) highlights the ‘extreme anguish’ that can only come from the families in search of their loved ones (Adams 2019). The blood bond to the disappeared has been a central point to the appeals for truth and justice and is an element of cohesion of the searchers from where they generate the complaints (da Silva Catela 2008: 13).

It is not a coincidence that so many of the FOs that focus on the crime of disappearance include the word ‘Mothers’ in their name (Madres de Soacha, Madres de la Candelaria, Madres por la Vida de Buenaventura, Madres y Familiares de Desaparecidas del Meta y Guaviare all inspired by the iconic Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina). Other FOs focus on the children who search (Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio); others refer to the families in general (Asociación de familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, Asociación de Familiares de Víctimas de Trujillo).⁸ There is a gendered dimension to this recordkeeping due to the role that mothers, sisters and wives have had at the forefront of the struggle for truth and reparations in Latin America (Dulitzky 2019), which is also visible in Colombia, the consequences of which could merit further investigation. The fact that an entire sector of civil society in Colombia has organized under the name *family associations* or *organizations*, testifies to the central role of *families* as the searchers for the disappeared, being thereby creators and gatherers of records as well as those who activate them for memory and accountability.

The terms *family* and *community* are reciprocally related to each other with the viability of families being dependent on communities and communities depending of the engagement of families (Millar 2001: 26). ‘Communities are the context where families prosper and flourish or flounder and fail’ (Millar 2001: 26). Although there is this interdependent relationship between the two, families constitute a smaller and separate unit. So even though there may be some fluidity between personal and community archives (Douglas 2018), the properties of personal archives laid out here are sufficiently inherent to merit a boundary between the communal and the private, and thus need to be conceptualized separately.

‘Maria Fernanda’ is the leader of one of Colombia’s most prominent FOs focused on enforced disappearances at the hand of the State. She ‘borrows’ records from the mothers ‘las mamitas’ for the FO cause and their events, but certain items are so ‘indispensable’ to the mothers they can never leave the home. She respects the fact that some records are ‘too sacred’ to be included in the FO archive (Maria Fernanda, interview with the author, 24 May 2021).

Conceptually, we should allow for personal archives of the families to belong to their own category away from the institutional and national, although archival science has written about the artificiality of the demarcation between the personal and institutional in

8 For a complete list of family organizations and NGOs working in the field of enforced disappearance in Colombia see ICMP (2020).

archives (Douglas and Mills 2018). The personal can of course be found in institutional archives and vice versa, and the fluidity may even be more prevalent between personal and community archives. Yet, just as communities have their own documentation practices, so do individuals who have their own ways of remembering and forgetting violence (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). By focusing on personal archives in a survivor-centred perspective, ethical and affective responsibilities to record creators, subjects and users are highlighted (Douglas and Mills 2018: 274). This way we can engage *directly* with individual experiences and ‘the symbolic and social worlds they occupy’ (Robins 2012: 84).

Learning to keep traces: the creation of the records

When a person disappears, the family often embarks on an informal search (without institutional assistance) within the local area where the disappeared was last seen or frequented (NGO 1 interview with author 26 November 2020; UBPD 2019; ASFADDES 1993). They make personal enquiries with both strangers and acquaintances with the aid of one or more photographs of the victim, preferably the most recent. In the well-known case of Fabiola Lalinde’s extensive archive, the black and white photograph of her son was the first record in her collection (Giraldo and Tobón 2021). The photographs in the *archives of the disappeared* have become symbolic of enforced disappearances everywhere (Uribe 2009), and are usually the beginning of these personal archives that grow as the search continues and as families interact with different institutions (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021). The photographs are often taken from a family album, a wallet, or a frame. They are sometimes replicated with the production of homemade pamphlets or posters that some families make to ‘wallpaper the city’ in search of their loved one (UBPD 2019). In these leaflets they ask for information, whilst offering the name, age and some brief description of the victim and where they were last seen.

Although many families do start the search by themselves, the first official step in Colombia is reporting the disappearance to the *Fiscalía* (the Attorney General’s office or a Federal Attorney), the *Personería municipal* (the regional ombudsman), or the *Defensoría del Pueblo* or *la Procuraduría* (the Office of the Inspector General). If the family does not want to approach a government office, some NGOs, such as the International Red Cross, can assist by making the report on their behalf (Equitas 2015). Alternatively, the UBPD takes on cases, although their mandate is extrajudicial and limited to disappearances within the context of the armed conflict.

The reporting of the disappearance requires the families to give as much information as they can regarding the disappeared person in the form of medical records, dental records, descriptions about what they were wearing, where they were last seen, who they were last with and more. If obtained, the papers are often photocopied to be added to this ‘folder’ of documents. As the UBPD mentions, the more information the families have the easier it is for the supportive agencies in charge of searching (UBPD 2020). However, enforced disappearance is one of the most under reported violations in the world as families fear that reporting will harm the disappeared person (Congram 2016). If and when a report is made with the authorities or an NGO, a file ‘el expediente’ is produced, which the families have a right to access and have copies of. Most families do not know that they have this right (interview with Maria Fernanda 24 May 2021).

Most families struggle with the paperwork that is produced, what it means, distinguishing what is important from what is not, what to do with different papers and

how to keep track of it all. One of the mothers I interviewed, ‘Maria’, found the burden of paperwork so overwhelming that she could not continue with her search. She never understood the process, nor the documentation needed. She knew it meant travelling to the city to obtain papers (dental records, medical records, certificates for each disappeared—she has three children disappeared). Her limited reading abilities has meant difficulties understanding what the papers say and what they are for. Abuse from the authorities means she has not been able to claim her son’s body. She was informed by telephone that she could claim the body of one of her sons at the local military base some years ago. When she visited, she suffered verbal and physical abuse and they refused to hand over ‘the papers’ of his death. ‘They stole them (the documents) from me. I didn’t know until later that I needed those papers. Those papers are very important’ (‘Maria’ interview with the author, 22 September 2020). She left the military base without seeing her son’s body, and without any papers.

The revictimization encountered by both ‘Maria’, ‘Karla’ and other victims whilst trying to obtain information and documents in government offices, as documented by UBPD and NGOs around the country (NGO 1 interview with author 16 November 2020; NGO 3 interview with author 26 November 2020; ASFADDES 1993; García Franco 2019) means families become reluctant to deal with the authorities all together. This revictimization in turn leads to further consequences; a lack of papers necessary for searching, lack of institutional support and thus further difficulties for future compensation. Even though there are NGOs assisting families, it is not easy for marginalized, semi-literate rural dwellers to know where to go to obtain that support or who to trust. The result is that not all families document, ensuring a cycle of revictimization, where the poorest and most marginalized are the least equipped to find information, capture it and share it, thus remaining more hidden than those who can activate their records in society.

There are exceptional cases such as the fonds of Fabiola Lalinde,⁹ mother to Luis Fernando Lalinde, disappeared in 1984, whose archive is the result of meticulous documentation gathered over 30 years. It is the result of the struggle in dealing with ‘a complex bureaucratic system that led her to develop strategies for documenting and controlling information’ (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 535). From her first document, her son’s black and white photograph, she added all the documents pertaining to her search such as bureaucratic records, reports, correspondence, letters of solidarity, messages from officials, press cuttings, descriptions of harassment, forensic records and much more (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 535). Yet, the story of Fabiola Lalinde and the creation of her archive has become ground-breaking because of its exhaustive record of the search process, which eventually led to the inclusion of her archive in UNESCO’s *Memory of the World Register for Latin America and the Caribbean* (Giraldo and Tobón 2021; Giraldo Lopera 2021: 10). Lalinde knew how to document having already built a personal archive that dated from her childhood (Giraldo and Tobón 2021). ‘Maria Fernanda’, who also went to college mentioned that whilst she has been able to build an archive and help build that of her FO, ‘most “mamitas” need a lot of help’ (‘Maria Fernanda’ interview with the author, 24 May 2021).

9 The term ‘fonds’ is an archival term referring to ‘the entire body of records of an organization, family, or individual that have been created and accumulated as the result of an organic process reflecting the functions of the creator’ Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology See: <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/fonds.html>

Lalinde, using her own archiving experience, developed pedagogical materials to teach others how to document cases of enforced disappearances; ‘Her work thus became a form of archival activism in favour of human rights’ influenced by the work of *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 536).

Nora Cortiñas, the co-founder of *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, noted that,

Many of my *compañeras* have kept even the smallest, most seemingly insignificant piece of paper that can show to our children’s children and future generations, that period of cowardly and thieving State terrorism; These fellow fighters have not only kept their papers and their stories reflected in these documents, they have also kept the papers of those mothers who died, but who also accompany us every day, in every act, in every interview, in every activity we undertake (...) It goes without saying that we all keep the papers, documents, objects, things that our children used during their freedom and that for us, they have the double value of keeping their presence alive and reminding us of our commitments to the struggle. (Cortiñas 2004: 70—present author’s translation)

‘Karla’, realized only too late that she should have kept a diary of her search. It didn’t occur to her at the time. ‘I tell others to keep a diary with all the details, dates of meetings, names of people, places, everything. But I didn’t and I have forgotten’ (‘Karla’ interview with the author, 18 September 2020). Whilst ‘Karla’ continues her work as an FO leader, ‘Maria’s’ search has stagnated (she still wants to know what happened to her son whose body is at the military base and her other two sons who are also missing) and has given up all hope.

Different NGOs have different perspectives on the record-keeping of the families. Whilst NGO 1 told me that most families can’t do the record-keeping and depend on NGOs or FOs to help them, NGO 2 told me, ‘Nowadays, the families document everything. They know how to document and are the ones with all the information’ (NGO 2 interview with author 11 December 2020). This latter view of the families as record-keepers coincides with statements by the UBPD, who position the families as the source of most information and the experts in the search (UBPD 2020; see also Ramirez Zapata’s 2020 analysis). Nevertheless, the cases studied here show that although families are the source of much of the information, the families are not necessarily the experts that the UBPD and some NGOs claim they are. They simply carry the burden of documenting, both because they are forced to document the disappearance due to the official route of the search which demands information from them, and because they learn how important documents are to prove their victimhood status, for any prospect of reparation and to get their voices heard in the political debate to demand answers.

As these lessons have been collectively learnt, NGOs and FOs have put together courses and workshops to teach families to document and archive (interviews with NGO 1, 16 November 2020; NGO 2, 11 December 2020; NGO 3, 26 November 2020; ASFADDES 1993).

We are a country of orality, and the people who have suffered most from this crime are people who use orality more than written records. So we are teaching people how to document. (NGO 1 with the author, 16 Nov. 2020)

NGO 3 explained how older victims will teach the new ones how to document and keep folders, ‘so that they learn from past mistakes. We are teaching the next generation how to search and how to deal with the authorities, so they will know what we learnt’ (26 November 2020).

The four NGOs I studied train families to understand how to keep records. ‘They already know the importance of papers’ (NGO 1 interview with the author, 16 November 2020). They teach them *how* they must keep and safeguard documents, that they must keep the originals, make copies, that the copies are their own and nobody else’s and that they get to decide who they share the papers with. They are also teaching them to read and write. The ‘professionalisation of documentation’ that characterizes the human rights field as described by Tate (2007) is part of the training the families receive.

Yet, being ‘fluent in multiple genres of production of knowledge about violence,’ NGOs also assist in the building of memory by helping families project their experiences or perspectives onto a record of some sort, by drawing maps of the locations involved with the disappearances, composing poems or songs, weaving textiles or painting about past experiences (Uribe 2009; Tate 2007: 145). These initiatives of teaching families how to document are more than the creation of records for evidentiary purposes, they are performances of pain and grief, resistance and remembrance. They are the initiatives of communities, networks, FOs and NGOs as they assist, accompany and support families, where families play a role both in teaching and learning.

‘Chasing papers’: gathering and custody

The accumulative growth of documentation by the families means that these collections are archives in the traditional sense:

Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator. (Pearce-Moses 2005: 31)

Yet they are maintained using their own principles, categories and order. The records may be kept in recycled folders with children’s stickers on them (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021), in draws, under beds or carried around in plastic bags (Uribe 2009: 47). Under repressive regimes they are kept in secret (Villalta Luna 2014). They may be organized chronologically based on the life of the person who searches, they may be embedded in their home with records placed or hung in specifically assigned places for meaning, remembrance or display (Halilovich 2016). The gathering is not always straightforward, tidy, nor the same for families in different situations or stages in the search process.

As the search of a family continues through the bureaucratic maze of Colombia, the collections grow to include proof of their interactions with each government office, NGO, civil society group or transitional justice mechanism. Regardless of whether bureaucratic papers are obtained, the families will try to gather the evidence that is available to them also in the form of newspaper articles about military or police operations in the area at the time of the disappearance, copies of letters they sent to the authorities, maps of locations, and a pluralistic and multifaced trove of items and mnemonic aids that can help build their case (Reátegui 2009; Giraldo Lopera 2021). These types of records are the evidence they can manage to obtain when the barriers to official records are insurmountable.

Hope of finding a trace that can lead them to advance their searches means many families seek private meetings with former combatants, military personnel, or former hostages. The FO *Madres de la Candelaria* visited local jails in the region of Antioquia to speak to perpetrators who had controlled their area during different periods in the past. They asked about possible locations of graves so they could try and find remains. The women took with them the photographs of their loved ones and obtained oral information which was later recorded, leading to

the finding of 95 graves (Palacio 2016). Cases of individual mothers visiting jails or combatants on their own to obtain information have also been documented by UBPD (2019), such as the case of ‘Rosy’ or ‘Maria Carmen’ (López Morales 2020). These methods of obtaining information produce documentation such as hand-drawn maps, or notes taken by the jailed insurgents or the family member interviewing. These visits involve a high level of risk, yet a risk that many women clearly feel is necessary due to the lack of alternative sources.

As the search is prolonged, the hope of finding a loved one becomes more desperate and items belonging to the disappeared take on a new significance,

‘If I find something belonging to XXXX I take it out and make sure to protect it’, ‘Maria’ says to me.

‘Like what?’, I ask.

‘Like everything, everything that I still have that remind me of them. Their clothes...’ She breaks off ‘...I don’t have that much but this I keep’ (‘Maria’ interview with the author 22 September 2020). The items, papers and documents become treasures these families store like sacred objects, next to religious images or prayers, some items are kept in exactly the same place where the disappeared person left them.

Fabiola’s archive was organized under a clear criteria, ‘labelled by activities such as “Search”, “Interviews”, “Testimonies”, “Exhumation Process” or instances such as “United Nations” or “Organization of American States”’ (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 535). However, there are vast differences between these collections, where the exception is Fabiola Lalinde’s, the norm consists in far humbler collections representing the journeys of stagnated searches. There are differences between those collections produced as a result of searches of the whereabouts of persons or remains, and those focused on justice as the remains of the victims have been found. Not all individuals who search know how to control the masses of information nor learn the legalistic grammar needed to navigate the bureaucratic maze. The exact extent to which families document is difficult to know. Most carry only a few documents, most iconically the photographs (Edkins 2011). The archives are painful to put together, not only because they require the victims to relive the trauma, but because ‘chasing the papers’ is time-consuming and expensive (Halilovich 2014: 238; Halilovich 2016: 79; Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021). It is at this point that many families are assisted by FOs or NGOs and the records produced at this stage become part of the institutional archive (NGO 1 interview with author, 16 November 2020).

The sharing and institutionalization of records. Records from Archives of the disappeared are often shared with human rights organizations or TJ mechanisms during fact-finding missions (Crenzel 2008; Crettol et al. 2017; Baumgartner and Ott 2017; Jones and Oliveira 2016). Records however must be ‘(re)-assembled, (re)purposed and (re)contextualised’ for the purposes of an institution (Viebach 2021: 2), whether that is being a part of a TJ system, a state, or community-documenting endeavour. There are institutional preconditions to what is included and what is left out as these are political and administrative negotiations.¹⁰ TJ archives depend on the personal records of survivors and NGO records to build their case material as they often face challenges accessing and using bureaucratic records because

10 A discussion of the way transitional justice institutions and NGOs absorb and capture records or silence voices is not part of the discussion of this paper. This has been comprehensively done by Viebach (2021) and Jones and Oliveira (2016).

of the realization by repressive sectors, when regime changes are in sight, of the incriminating potential of the records (Baumgartner and Ott 2017: 672).

NGO archives are collections of evidence from sources including the records and testimonies handed over by the survivors, families, eyewitnesses and individual perpetrators. NGOs must have mechanisms in place to make sure that the handling and management of sensitive information is done according to the best interests of victims and the families (Crettol et al. 2017: 612). They cannot acquire information, nor hold personal data, without a legitimate basis or informed consent and the information that is gathered must be used only for the purposes it was gathered for (Crettol et al. 2017: 613).

The procedures carried out using DNA and medical records depend on the information given by families to identify the individual and the identification of the items found with the victims (Wagner and Kesetovic 2016). Antemortem data consists of information about the individual's physical characteristics displayed on family photographs, biological profile such as previous trauma, or what clothes the person was wearing at the time of the disappearance (Wagner and Kesetovic 2016: 53). This information must be given by the families. The scientific process of identifying the missing, not only forensically, but the entire information-gathering process, depends on the families, on their consent and their identification of the victims (Wagner and Kesetovic 2016).

There is a strong fluidity between the *archives of the disappeared* and FOs' archives where families gather and institutionalize their own collections for a common cause. Nevertheless, not all personal records are shared with FOs. The FO led by 'Maria Fernanda' does not get involved with the personal items, such as the victim's clothes or items, that the mothers keep sacredly at home. Maria Fernanda's FO only makes copies of the papers or photographs. For the public events that the FO holds, the mothers choose what they want to display from their own private collections ('Maria Fernanda' interview 24 May 2021). As Taylor et al. have documented, FOs and other victim associations in Colombia have difficulty stewarding their collections; their archives can be fragmented, held by several people, or housed in unofficial spaces (Taylor et al. 2021: 18).

Other questions arise in this transition from the private to the institutional, such as what happens after an organization or institution stops working on a particular case or ceases to exist? What happens to the personal records? In Colombia, a change in the administration of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) saw the director replaced in August 2018 with a director who sides politically with the Duque government's discourse of denying the existence of a civil conflict in Colombia. This has somewhat delegitimized previous work the CNMH had done, particularly the main report itself *Basta Ya!* As a result the institution was removed from the *International Coalition of Sites of Conscience* and collections of both NGOs and victim organizations, originally donated to the CNMH, are being requested back by their original owners, as they do not trust the current CNMH administration (Uprimny Yepes 2020; Colombia2020 2020).

Institutional archives can potentially overrule or constrain the traumatic experiences of survivors. Once institutionalized, they become records *about* the disappeared and their families, but not necessarily always *for* them (Douglas and Mills 2018: 273). The totality of experiences of atrocities cannot be understood without the personal. *The archives of the disappeared* are a private safe space for families to collect and create, use and erase the story of their loss as they see fit, to establish a material connection with the disappeared in a context of denial.

Uses and activations: memorializing the remains of loved ones

As these individual documenting efforts come together through collective movements and organizations, the personal archives are shared and progressively take on a more public and institutional role, becoming social symbols of the search for all disappeared (Mazorra 2010). These records are released temporarily, duplicated and projected into society, not only or necessarily through institutions, but displayed in protests, digitalized, shared on social media or tattooed onto the skin. They are activated as evidence in court rooms to reconstruct ‘the victims’ life stories and the crimes suffered’ (Cugini in Lessa 2021: 190). In their work with community organizations they become the source of artwork, documentary films and museum exhibits (Briceño-Donn et al. 2009), as well as a source of research and contribution to the transitional narratives and institutions which search for reliable records that document structural and institutional failures of the country.

A few items gathered and guarded by ‘Maria’ and ‘Karla’ have been shared with a local house of memory. Although ‘Maria’ might be struggling in a labyrinth of papers and bureaucracy, she uses the items in her collection to recall her children and tell their stories. She might not have been able to obtain many official papers but those she has she activates with the help of a community of mothers. These records are activated for memory as well as denouncing the government, which in many cases is responsible for the disappearances. As seen above, these collections end up becoming the only material remains of their loved ones, the source of much of the legal evidence in courts and a source of historical accountability in the face of impunity. The activations of the records occur all through the life of the records from the moment they are created or chosen for preservation.

Archives of the disappeared cover primarily four dimensions, both in their creation and their activation, depending on the context. First, they are created and activated for legal and historical evidence of violations and structural injustices. Second, they are created and activated to memorialize the missing, not only for the singular victim disappeared but representing multiplicities of absences. Third, they are created and activated to denounce the perpetrators, mobilizing society and creating awareness—as political and social activism. Finally, there is a fourth dimension which cuts through all the three above—that of the intimate, which privileges the familial bond between the searcher and the disappeared. The relatedness of the relationship determines the archive created, so that an archive of a mother will carry different records and hold a different narrative to that of a sister. These four dimensions overlap and interact with each other.

Although not always as extensive as Lalinde’s record-keeping, archival activism takes place at different levels in Colombia, testifying to the impulse that humans have to save and bear witness (Cunningham 2015; Mckemmish 1996), even though the formats of how to save and bear witness may vary depending on the tools available to each society or group of people (Millar 2006).

Archives of the disappeared: spaces of struggle for memory and justice

Under competing and conflicting understandings and memories of the past in societies that are emerging from periods of political violence, there are ‘active political struggle(s) around meaning; the meaning of what went on and the meaning of memory itself (...) These struggles unfold on various institutional, symbolic and subjective levels’ (Jelin 2007: 140). They occur through different ‘vehicles of memory’ (photographs, the maps of possible graves,

diplomas, death certificates, clothes, places, bodies) but also vehicles of justice (NGOs, TJ institutions, State institutions, media, communities and FOs). The struggle of memory is a power struggle of meaning and interpretation on the legitimacy of ‘the proper forms of remembering’ and a power struggle over who has ‘the symbolic power to decide the contents of narrative to be conveyed’ (Jelin 2007: 155). Even though the influential power that social movements and victim groups have had means that they have been able to challenge the content of narratives, the socio-economic marginalization of many families, particularly those without the fully-fledged institutional support of organizations, means that not all families can participate in this struggle and thus remain outside the collective memory-building fold. In my research I have found that many families feel they cannot document because they do not know how. They feel overwhelmed by the meaning and content of official documents, and they don’t understand the micro-schemes of bureaucracy that produce ‘papers and papers’.

Nevertheless, families do preserve, sometimes formally, but most often informally through a process of emplaced practices and inscription that Riaño-Alcalá and Baines have described as a ‘living archive’:

Documentation is not simply inanimate storage, nor is the act of documentation solely one of collecting facts and evidence from official (or even unofficial) sources. Rather, it is historically situated action in which survivor-witnesses, individually and/or collectively, become living sites for storing knowledge about the past through their bodies, storytelling, performance and movement. (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011: 416)

Archives of the disappeared consist of both living and physical archives, written and embodied, that are private spaces of memory, resistance, evidence, and restoration of dignity, created as a way to ‘talk back’ to power. These archives demonstrate that Colombia has an archival culture at the grassroots that is influenced by unofficial and informal ways of documenting. The written tools required by modern bureaucracies are also being taught by NGOs and FOs so that families can interact with the state. Unintentionally, Colombian bureaucracy has had a role in fostering these archives through the production of paperwork which families must learn to understand, organize, and keep, because they learn that ‘writing is the prime modality of engaging with the state’ (Gupta 2012: 36). At the same time, the lack of political will in giving access to military records, the constant disinformation about military operations, the impunity and the distrust towards government, means families find alternative records to prove an event occurred, prove their loved one existed and prove the significance of that person (Ramírez et al. 2017). The 2016 peace agreement opened spaces for memory practices that help expose Colombia’s archival culture and the different ways families put information to use.

Hobbs states that individuals usually create records to serve their ‘needs or predilections or personality, not because some law, statute, regulation, or corporate policy says so’ (2001: 128). The literature and cases I have studied show that the families do both. Their documents respond to the legal and political demands for evidence whilst expressing the personal resistance, memories and pain of the families.

Final remarks

I have proposed in this paper the term *archives of the disappeared* as it recognizes the ownership, the provenance, and the subjects in the records. It also alludes to the issue of enforced disappearance which brings to the fore a particularly strong role for documentation as,

a stand-in for a continued connection to a lost loved one, which invests them with a weight that may not be present for other types of victims of human rights violations engaged in grassroots documentation. (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021: 85)

As seen here, these archives have both evidential and informational value for society, as well as a narrative value in (re)presenting and (re)asserting the self (Halilovich 2014, 2016; Hobbs 2001). The implications for human rights practice are that the concept can help think more systematically about the different types of archives that are categorized under the broad umbrella of human rights archives, what they do and who they are for. These archives help to understand the trajectory of search for the disappeared that the families undertake with overwhelming barriers. Recognizing these archives highlights the information practices of families and how these practices are human rights practices. Conceptualizing the personal collections of the families helps complete the ‘collecting universe’ by including ‘human phenomena and threads of influence’ at different social levels (Hobbs 2001: 135).

Just as the terms *archives of repression* or *terror* have been widely adopted to describe the bureaucratic records produced by the administration of human rights abuses, giving a snapshot of the administrative record-keeping of abuse, the term *archives of the disappeared* can offer similar usefulness. It presents a view of the human rights documentation process from below, that provides counternarratives from an intimate and ‘non-orthodox’ perspective. Regardless of the name we choose to give these collections, they exist in precarious conditions (physically and socially), yet are foundational to human rights archives and practices.

Recognizing the centrality of the *archives of the disappeared* has taken on a new layer of resonance in Colombia as, at the time of writing, there have been reports of widespread enforced disappearances in the context of nation-wide protests. With an ever-increasing focus by NGOs, TJ and FOs on the significance of creating archives and safeguarding documents, particularly at a time of information overflow from digital media, *archives of the disappeared* are multiplying both physically and online. There is a need for further empirical research to explore the record-keeping practices of the families in different contexts, the consequences of families having the burden to document, the process by which their collections become institutionalized and the relationships the families have with official archives that take on their collections. This can only be done by naming these collections, born out of a disappearance and created by the families.

As with the recent wave of disappearances in Colombia, both families and their organizations have taken to social media to denounce and shame the government and seek information. It is therefore imperative we understand the life of these collections in the digital sphere as well.

The case of *archives of the disappeared* attests to the statement that documenting human rights abuses has been shouldered primarily by non-archivists in non-archival institutions (Piggott and Mckemmish 2002). Considering how central to NGO and transitional archives these collections are, they are part of the ‘front line’ of the documentation of resistance (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011: 416), and should be taking a more prominent place in the literature. Ethical concerns about prioritizing the needs of victims of human rights violations means not only finding better mechanisms to gather, manage and protect information, but recognizing that some information processes are already in place *because* of these families. This allows for the possibility to build upon existing documentation efforts.

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Article 2

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Article 3

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Evidence of Jorge

Documentary Traces of a Forced Disappearance in Colombia

NATALIA BERMÚDEZ QVORTRUP
AND MARTA LUCÍA GIRALDO

ABSTRACT Jorge Soto Gallo disappeared on July 15, 1985, during a trip from Medellín to Bogotá in Colombia. Jorge is one of the thousands of disappeared people in Colombia whose families are still searching for answers, yet Jorge's life and disappearance have been memorialized and recorded through his sister's work of preserving, cultivating, and activating his personal archive. During recent decades, families of disappeared persons have begun to assemble folders that carry the evidence of disappearances. This article explores the personal archive of Jorge Soto Gallo with the aim of understanding a recordkeeping practice carried out by families and communities, which focuses on disappeared persons and often leads to a broad repertoire of political activism in defence of human rights. We ask, Which records are included, how are they brought together during these periods of upheaval, what do they mean, and what role do they play? We argue that creating and preserving these archives of enforced disappearance act as liberatory memory work (LMW) and as instincts of the families against forces of impunity and oblivion. We show that LMW is a living reality in Colombia that operates on a person-centred level, going beyond transitional justice frameworks, and turning victims into recordkeepers providing the possibility of historical accountability for future generations.

RÉSUMÉ Jorge Soto Gallo est disparu le 15 juillet 1985 lors d'un voyage entre Medellín et Bogotá, en Colombie. Jorge est l'un des milliers de personnes disparues en Colombie dont les familles cherchent toujours des réponses. Toutefois, la vie et la disparition de Jorge ont été commémorées et documentées par le travail de préservation, d'engagement et d'activisme de sa sœur. Au cours des dernières décennies, les familles de disparu.e.s ont commencé à regrouper des dossiers qui portent l'évidence de disparitions. Cet article explore les archives personnelles de Jorge Soto Gallo avec comme objectif de comprendre une pratique de collection d'archives entreprise par les familles et communautés, qui met l'accent sur les personnes disparues. Cette pratique conduit souvent à un activisme politique se portant à la défense des droits de la personne. Nous demandons alors: Quels documents sont inclus? Comment sont-ils regroupés dans ces périodes de bouleversements? Que signifient-ils et quel rôle jouent-ils? Nous soutenons que l'action de créer et de préserver ces archives de disparition par la force agit comme un travail de mémoire libérateur et se produit instinctivement pour les familles se trouvant en opposition face aux forces d'impunité et de l'oubli. Nous démontrons que le travail de mémoire libérateur centré sur les personnes est une réalité vivante en Colombie. Ce travail va ainsi plus loin que le cadre de justice transitionnelle. La transformation des victimes en archivistes offre des possibilités de responsabilité historique pour les générations futures.

Introduction¹

Jorge Soto Gallo disappeared on July 15, 1985, during a trip from Medellín to Bogotá. He was travelling with a friend to participate in a congress of the recently created Unión Patriótica (UP) party. They never arrived at their destination, nor have they been seen to this day. Between 1985 and 1993, the UP was swiftly exterminated in a systematic exercise of massacres, disappearances, and persecution.² Jorge is one of the thousands of disappeared people in Colombia whose families are still searching for answers.³ Yet, Jorge's life and disappearance have been memorialized and recorded through his sister's work of preserving, cultivating, and activating his personal archive.

During recent decades, families of disappeared persons ("the families") have begun to assemble folders of papers that carry the evidence of disappearances. There is a difference between the crime of enforced disappearance and other crimes. Due to government denial and the absence of bodies, families must prove that crimes were committed in the first place. These folders, created to prove each disappearance, hold personal tales of stagnated searches, trauma, depression, and anger – but also hope, love, care, and resistance.

This article explores the personal archive of Jorge Soto Gallo with the aim of highlighting a recordkeeping practice driven by families and communities, which focuses on disappeared persons and often ends up as part of a broad repertoire of political activism in favour of the defence of human rights – a practice of evidentiating absences and demanding truth and justice despite ongoing threats, which ends up materializing in personal human rights archives. We ask, *Which records are included, how are they brought together during these periods of upheaval, what do they mean, and what role do they play?*

- 1 We would like to thank Anneli Sundqvist, Jemima García-Godos, and Daniel Jerónimo Tobón for their very helpful feedback, insights, and proofreading. We are enormously grateful to Martha Soto Gallo for her time, patience, and kindness in sharing not only her story and words but also her personal documentation.
- 2 Andrei Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks: Con-Textualising the Destruction of the Unión Patriótica in Colombia* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315765020>.
- 3 Around 100,000 people have been forcibly disappeared in Colombia in the last 50 years, in the context of the internal armed conflict. A lack of clear and reliable data, divergent figures, and little progress in the investigations are evident in the inactive cases and absence of convictions. See Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas, "Así avanza la búsqueda de las personas desaparecidas en Colombia," UBPD, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://ubpdbusquedadesaparecidos.co/actualidad/cifras-busqueda-desaparecidos-colombia/>.

We begin by looking into the background of Jorge's disappearance. We provide an overview of the literature on personal archives in cases of mass violations and then give a brief description of the archive's holdings. We then analyze these personal documents in relation to their creator, their subject matter, and their relationships to each other and a broader community. The creator of this archive is Jorge's sister, Martha Soto Gallo. The conversational interviews to which Martha graciously agreed,⁴ along with the study of her records, are the basis of our inductive research. Martha herself is a registered victim of forced displacement due to death threats and persecution. Despite this, when asked about anonymization for the interview, Martha said it was crucial for her to name and "make visible" her brother and his case. She told us, "What isn't named, doesn't exist" (Lo que no se nombra no existe).⁵

We are inspired by the work of Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas⁶ to approach our work generously and respectfully. We centre the voices and experiences of Martha, Jorge, and their family in this article to show *the work a record can do* in a context of oblivion and to highlight the work of the recordkeeper.⁷ Relevant here is not only the archive itself but also, above all, the documentation practices behind its creation and the meanings attributed to them, the contexts of production, and the use of the archive. We argue that creating and preserving these archives of enforced disappearance act as *liberatory memory work* (LMW) – an instinct of the families against forces of impunity and oblivion. We take up this concept from Chandre Gould and Verne Harris, who in a 2014 report for the Nelson Mandela Foundation proposed the concept of LMW to allude to practices that work with the past, insist on accountability, acknowledge and attempt to address pain and trauma, and reveal the hidden dimensions of human rights violations.⁸ We show LMW as a living reality in Colombia that operates on

4 Martha signed an informed consent form, and the research for this paper was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data and Oslo Metropolitan University in Norway.

5 Martha Soto Gallo, interview with authors, January 18, 2022.

6 Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas, "It Feels Like a Life's Work': Recordkeeping as an Act of Love," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 6–37.

7 Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120.

8 Chandre Gould and Verne Harris, *Memory for Justice* (Johannesburg: Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2014), 4, https://www.nelsonmandela.org/uploads/files/MEMORY_FOR_JUSTICE_2014v2.pdf. Since then, several other authors have developed and expanded the concept of liberatory memory work, e.g., Michelle Caswell,

a person-centred level, going beyond transitional justice frameworks, turning victims into recordkeepers, and providing the possibility of historical accountability for future generations.

The Context of Jorge's Case

Enforced disappearance has been categorized as a crime by the 1998 *Rome Statute*, the 1992 *Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, and the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, where it is defined as

the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.⁹

Officially, Colombia's history of enforced disappearance goes back to the 1970s, although unofficially, the practice was already taking place for some time before.¹⁰ The practice intensified during the 1980s as the Colombian state

Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work (London: Routledge, 2021); Michelle Caswell, "Feeling Liberatory Memory Work: On the Archival Uses of Joy and Anger," *Archivaria* 90 (Fall 2020): 148–64; Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, "Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 38–73, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078465ar>; Gabriel Solis, "Documenting State Violence: (Symbolic) Annihilation & Archives of Survival," *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–11.

- 9 UN Human Rights Commission, "International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, December 23, 2010, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced>. See also UN General Assembly, *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, A/RES/61/177 (January 12, 2007), https://treaties.un.org/doc/source/docs/A_RES_61_177-E.pdf; UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, A/RES/47/133 (February 12, 1993), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dd911e64.html>.
- 10 Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, *Libro negro de la represión: Frente Nacional 1958–1974* (Bogotá: Gráficas Mundo Nuevo, 1974).

embraced a policy of “dirty war,” like so many other states in the region.¹¹ Cold War macro-narratives against communism legitimized violence against political movements that were framed as “subversive elements.”¹²

In 1985, the Unión Patriótica (UP) was born out of a peace agreement between the guerrilla group FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and the government. It soon became a popular political party that integrated a variety of individuals from different backgrounds, including members of the Communist Party and unions, workers, peasants, intellectuals, teachers, students, and demobilized guerrilla fighters.¹³ From 1988 to 1990, however, the party was weakened by systematic targeted assassinations, raids on UP offices, illegal detentions, massacres, and threats against not only activists but also their relatives, which led to forced displacement. The systematic violence perpetrated against this new leftist political party left a clear message in the regions where it took place: that “the UP had to disappear, or the people would suffer.”¹⁴ Between 1985 and 2002, the UP was exterminated as a political party.¹⁵

The attorney general’s office reported 1,620 fatalities related to the UP during this period. However, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Corporación Reiniciar identified 6,613 victims of 9,359 violations between 1984 and 2002 (one victim may have suffered more than one victimizing act).¹⁶ The Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica identified 6,201 victims, 544 of whom were victims of enforced disappearance. Jorge Soto Gallo, who joined the UP in 1984, was one of the first party members subjected to enforced disappearance.¹⁷

11 Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Huellas y rostros de la desaparición forzada (1970–2010)*, vol. Tomo II (Bogotá: CNMH, 2013).

12 Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks*.

13 Andrei Gomez-Suarez, “Perpetrator Blocs, Genocidal Mentalities and Geographies: The Destruction of the Union Patriótica in Colombia and Its Lessons for Genocide Studies,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, no. 4 (2007): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520701644440>.

14 Gomez-Suarez, 640.

15 Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks*.

16 Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, “Victimización de miembros de la Unión Patriótica,” No. AUTO No. 27 de 2019 (Bogotá: Sala de Reconocimiento de Verdad, de Responsabilidad y de Determinación de los Hechos y Conductas, February 26, 2019).

17 Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Todo pasó frente a nuestros ojos. El genocidio de la Unión Patriótica 1984–2002* (Bogotá: CNMH, 2018).

The case of the UP has been overlooked in overall research on Colombia and considered to be only another episode of the armed conflict. But the destruction of the UP went further than the destruction of a political party, due to the targeting of families and their social networks.¹⁸ Researchers such as Gomez-Suarez and Carroll have analyzed this destruction as genocide.¹⁹ Whether it was a genocide or not is not the focus of this study, but raising this point helps to contextualize the impact of this destruction on Colombian society and individuals. In contrast to its objective importance, its victims have received rather little sympathy in Colombia due to their image as subversive elements.²⁰

The work of the families and organizations through the years led to a case against the government at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2018, and in February 2019, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP in Spanish), a Colombian transitional justice (TJ) mechanism, opened a case on violations against UP members, case no. 6. The case qualified for prioritization due to the systematic violence unleashed on the UP's members and community, which violated several human rights and international humanitarian law. This means the case will now be investigated as one of the main incidents of the Colombian armed conflict.²¹ For the relatives of the UP victims, this action opens the possibility that the crimes their loved ones were subjected to will not go unpunished and, to the extent possible, reparations will be made.

Literature on Personal Archives in Contexts of Mass Human Rights Violations

With the postmodern turn in archival studies, there has been a rise in interest in personal archives, defined as collections generated by individuals during their lifetimes.²² They record

¹⁸ Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks*.

¹⁹ Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks*; Leah Carroll, *Violent Democratization: Social Movements, Elites, and Politics in Colombia's Rural War Zones, 1984–2008* (Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

²⁰ Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks*, 1–2.

²¹ Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, "Victimización de miembros de la Unión Patriótica," 30.

²² Caroline Williams, quoted in Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, "From the Sidelines to the Center:

the personal, the idiosyncratic, the singular views of people as they go about doing the things that they do and commenting on them. Personal archives, then, are not only about transactions of “official” personal business and formal activity, but are also a most prevalent source of commentary on daily and personal life and relationships, almost by their very nature.²³

In “Evidence of Me,” McKemmish states that “recordkeeping is a ‘kind of witnessing’. On a personal level it is a way of evidencing and memorialising our lives – our existence, our activities and experiences, our relationships with others, our identity, our ‘place’ in the world.”²⁴ According to McKemmish, the personal archive’s capacity to witness relies on the systematic way in which the creator preserves and organizes the records.²⁵ Harris, however, questions this emphasis on the archive’s systematization and functionality, arguing that focusing on the functionality of a personal archive may privilege evidence over other dynamics in the archive.²⁶ This problematization of personal archives, and what they can or cannot be, is also raised by Douglas and Mills²⁷ and Hobbs,²⁸ who have considered in depth how personal archives have been defined and point out that they are often defined less by what they *are* than by what they *are not*. McKemmish and Piggott favour an expansive view and define personal archives as including

all forms, genres, and media of records relating to that person, whether captured in personal or corporate recordkeeping systems; remembered,

Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives,” *Archival Science* 18, no. 3 (2018): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9295-6>.

23 Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 127.

24 Sue McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” *Australian Library Journal* 45, no. 3 (1996): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.1996.10755757>.

25 McKemmish, 175.

26 Verne Harris, “On the Back of a Tiger: Deconstructive Possibilities in ‘Evidence of Me,’” *Archives and Manuscripts* 29, no. 1 (2001): 12.

27 Douglas and Mills, “From the Sidelines to the Center.”

28 Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives.”

transmitted orally, or performed; held in manuscript collections, archival and other cultural institutions, community archives, or other keeping places; or stored in shared digital spaces.²⁹

McKemmish's important work on personal recordkeeping as a form of witnessing intersects with recent work on victims and victimhood in contexts of mass atrocities, where documentation is often a site for negotiating power and an instrument for structuring relationships between citizens and the state.³⁰ This research shows how victims of atrocities carry papers to substantiate the crimes and demand accountability, but these papers of victimhood also serve as sites of memorialization and ritual. Personal collections restructure victims' relationships with their own histories and the state.³¹

Riaño-Alcalá and Baines examine multiple strategies of memory making where an individual or collective "creates a safe social space to give testimony and re-story past events of violence or resistance."³² Their work problematizes what we traditionally think of as evidence, documentation, or witnessing and considers instead the alternative ways in which groups adopt remembering practices in the forms of songs, poetry, dances and other performances, embodied practices, and places. Other practices that record atrocities and openly denounce the state are in the form of artwork such as woodcuttings or textiles. The best-known example of the latter is perhaps the *arpilleras* adopted around Latin America, from Chile to Mexico.³³

29 Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, "Toward the Archival Multiverse: Challenging the Binary Opposition of the Personal and Corporate Archive in Modern Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 76 (Fall 2013): 113.

30 Kate Cronin-Furman and Roxani Krystalli, "The Things They Carry: Victims' Documentation of Forced Disappearance in Colombia and Sri Lanka," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120946479>.

31 Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 4.

32 Pilar Riaño-Alcalá and Erin Baines, "The Archive in the Witness: Documentation in Settings of Chronic Insecurity," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5, no. 3 (2011): 412.

33 Dr. Marjorie Agosin, "Stitching Resistance: The History of Chilean Arpilleras" (presentation, National Hispanic Cultural Center Art Museum, Albuquerque, NM, October 19, 2012), https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/laii_events/19; Jhonny Pacheco, "Las arpilleras de Shuba: Bordado de arpilleras para tejer la memoria colectiva sobre los espacios," *Revista Cambios y Permanencias* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1009–28; Isabel González, "Repositorio digital para la documentación de textiles testimoniales del conflicto armado en Colombia" (Tesis de maestría, Universidad de Antioquia – Escuela Interamericana de Bibliotecología, Medellín, 2019).

Flinn and Alexander have defined this practice as activist archiving, relevant for people who might not identify first and foremost as archivists but who see archiving as an integral part of their activism.³⁴ These practices have given birth to community, organizational, and personal archives. Giraldo and Tobón analyze two personal archives, those of Fabiola Lalinde and Mario Agudelo, in the context of Colombia's internal conflict. They explore how these two personal human rights archives interact with TJ mechanisms, producing a virtuous cycle where both archives "preceded and prepared the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms in Colombia and have provided evidence for trials and reparation processes. In turn, transitional institutions have enhanced the public recognition of these archives as paradigmatic examples of memory initiatives of the civil society."³⁵

The important work of Ludmila Da Silva Catela on the material dimension of memory in cases of disappearances in the Southern Cone is relevant here and an important inspiration for our work, as she highlights how records such as photographs of the disappeared are registers of juridical and historical truth as well as tools for their search and memorialization. The powerful symbolism and legacy of the photographs of the disappeared have been analyzed by several authors.³⁶

However, the role of personal archives in contexts of enforced disappearances has been rather overlooked, despite its growing importance.³⁷ Personal archives play a particularly crucial role for the families of the disappeared, who have no sources of information about what happened to their loved ones except the documentation and knowledge they themselves hold, preserve, and share. Bermúdez Qvortrup has introduced the concept of *archives of the disappeared* to theorize and recognize the documentation practices of the families: the creation

34 Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander, "'Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft': Introduction to the Special Issue on *Archiving Activism and Activist Archiving*," *Archival Science* 15, no. 4 (2015): 329–35, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9260-6>.

35 Marta Lucía Giraldo and Daniel Jerónimo Tobón, "Personal Archives and Transitional Justice in Colombia: The Fonds of Fabiola Lalinde and Mario Agudelo," *International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 3 (2020): 529, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1811691>.

36 Ludmila Da Silva Catela, *No habrá flores en la tumba del pasado* (La Plata: Al Margen, 2001); Natalia Fortuny, "Memoria fotográfica. Restos de la desaparición, imágenes familiares y huellas del horror en la fotografía argentina posdictatorial," *Amerika. Mémoires, identités, territoires* 2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.4000/amerika.1108>; Deborah Poole and Isaías Rojas Pérez, "Memorias de la reconciliación: Fotografía y memoria en el Perú de la posguerra," *E-misférica – Revista del Instituto Hemisférico* 7.2, no. Detrás / Después de la Verdad (2010): 1–23.

37 Giraldo and Tobón, "Personal Archives and Transitional Justice in Colombia."

of evidence (legal and historical), memorialization, activism, and intimacy, all of which interact and depend on one another.³⁸

In this article, we present an in-depth look at one of these archives of the disappeared and consider the case as an example of LMW. As Gould and Harris explain, the term *memory work* is often used in the contexts of TJ to explore, engage, and use memory “in endeavours to reckon with past human rights violations, injustices, violent conflict or war.”³⁹ LMW responds as a call to justice that honours lost lives, problematizes power, strives to create a shared future for the descendants of victims and perpetrators, and makes “space for ‘other’ voices.”⁴⁰ LMW processes are initiated from below by civil society, are usually inter-generational, and do not depend on state intervention. In this context, LMW represents an instinct for survival, working against oblivion, but also an act of love. Douglas and Alisauskas’s work on *recordkeeping as an act of love* is poignantly relevant; they write about how the personal records of grieving families are not only evidence of what has happened but also proof of the lives lived – and proof that their loved ones were and still are deserving of love. They are proof of emotional and intimate relationships.⁴¹

As we will show, this becomes particularly relevant in a context in which enforced disappearances continue and mourning is impossible because the bodies are absent and, in their place, a void and uncertainty have been installed.

Exploring Jorge’s Archive

The folder that Martha shared with us in November 2021, and which she often carries with her, begins with Jorge’s photograph (figure 1), which Martha calls “photo one thousand” (la foto mil) because it is a copy of a copy, and so on. She wishes she had the original.⁴² Second comes his birth certificate, followed by a

³⁸ Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup, “Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualising the Personal Archives of the Families of Disappeared Persons,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, May 16, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huac003>.

³⁹ Gould and Harris, *Memory for Justice*, 2.

⁴⁰ Gould and Harris, *Memory for Justice*, 5.

⁴¹ Douglas and Alisauskas, “‘It Feels Like a Life’s Work,’” 24.

⁴² Soto Gallo, interview, January 18, 2022.

JORGE ENRIQUE SOTO GALLO
DETENIDO - DESAPARECIDO
BOGOTÁ
JULIO 15 DE 1985



MOVIMIENTO
NACIONAL de
VÍCTIMAS de
CRÍMENES de ESTADO

MOVICE
CAPÍTULO ANTIOQUIA

FIGURE 1 *Foto mil (Photo one thousand). The photograph is used to represent Jorge in public spaces. Source: Published with permission of Martha Soto Gallo.*

personal profile of Jorge. The creation of personal profiles has become a common practice for the families, informed by NGOs or family organizations (FOs), to lay out what they know about the events leading up to the disappearances, describe the disappeared people's physical appearance and other characteristics, and give short profiles of their lives. When asked by the Association of Disappeared Detained Relatives (Asociación de familiares de detenidos desaparecidos, or ASFADDES) to prepare a profile of Jorge, Martha decided to adopt Jorge's voice, to reincarnate him. Written in the first person, the profile reads as if Jorge were speaking to the reader from the unknown. The document begins, "From June 20, 1961, I have lived in my country (Colombia). I was born after two older brothers. I was always a serious child and a good student; since I was very young, I liked to sing."⁴³ In Martha's words, Jorge tells us about his childhood and teenage years, his coming of age and habits: "I loved Latin America and the Bolivarian dream, and therefore I participated in the Comité de Solidaridad con Nicaragua y El Salvador. I read Marx and Engels, but I never stopped being cheerful, a dancer, a bad drinker, a clown, a ladies' man and a good friend." The document describes how and why Jorge became interested in politics and his years of political activism, and it ends,

After the civic strike, the repression didn't wait; many were detained, the threats increased, but leaving was not an option: "They will never kick me out of my country." Enforced disappearance always horrified me because I knew what awaited me. . . .

The 15th of July, 1985, I left for Bogotá and never arrived. . . .

Today, my family (my brother, nephews, nieces, daughter, father, mother, and sister) rebuild my life, my short life of 24 years and the 14 years that my family, my political party, and my *pueblo* have been searching for me. Jorge Enrique Soto Gallo. Written by Martha Elizabeth Soto – proudly Jorge's sister.

Other records include Jorge's certificate of participation and membership in the Colombian Communist Youth (Juventud Comunista Colombiana, or JUCO)

⁴³ Translations of this profile are by Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup, November 11, 2021.

and Jorge's UP membership certificate. It states, "He was an outstanding young patriot. He disappeared 15th of July, 1985, the year in which the plan of extermination against the members of the UP was initiated."⁴⁴ These two documents were expedited in 2017, not only decades after the disappearance but also after the 2016 peace process.

A predominant section of the archive is communication between Martha and different state authorities from 1990 to 2021. The communication starts in the 1990s because, as Martha explains, during the 1980s, no documentation was given to the families who tried to report disappearances to the authorities.⁴⁵ The first letter with Jorge's name is sent by ASFADDES, the first association of families of disappeared persons in Colombia, to the procurator of human rights on behalf of 10 victims of disappearances. It enquires about any updates on the investigations and requests information from the state, as none had been given up to that date. These first documents are all attempts to register the disappearance with the state – to communicate with the state. It is only in 1996, more than 10 years after the disappearance, that Martha receives her first reply from the state: an official document declaring the registration of Jorge's case open with a case number. From then on, Martha writes directly to the prosecutor's office, the Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses (National Institute of Forensic Medicine), the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory), the Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas (Victim's Unit), and the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (National Registry Office) requesting information regarding the status of Jorge's case and inquiring whether an investigation has been opened or the body found. The answers are either negative or evasive or ask Martha to supply more information. In 1999, Martha receives a letter stating that she has to make another official missing person's report, this time with the prosecutor's office.

The correspondence is made up of 23 letters in total. They include a 2015 resolution by the Victim's Unit that registers Martha not only as a victim of forced disappearance (through her brother) but also as a victim of death threats and

⁴⁴ Translated by Natalia Bermudez Qvortrup, November 11, 2021.

⁴⁵ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición and Universidad Nacional de Colombia, *Guardianes de la memoria. Archivos y trayectorias en la construcción de memorias del conflicto en Medellín*, vol. 1, *Iniciativas para la Construcción de Paz: Memorias, resistencias y juventudes* (Medellín, 2021), in Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Económicas, "Primer Encuentro de Iniciativas para la Construcción de Paz," August 19, 2021, YouTube video, 3:43:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cJ7UifTYKs>.

forced displacement in 2000.

Toward the end of the folder is a certificate of Martha's blood sample, which could potentially identify Jorge's body (if found), a series of Martha's fingerprints, a photocopy of Jorge's Colombian identity card, and a series of photographs – of Jorge as a child with his family and as a youngster, as well as, more recently, of the family without Jorge.⁴⁶ The archive ends with Martha's drawing of her brother (figure 2).

There are many documents Martha wishes were in the archive, including some crucial items that she lent for exhibitions, which were lost, and a large selection she had to abandon back in Medellín when she was forced to move due to persecution.

Seeking Answers to Fill a Void

In cases of the disappeared, we are faced with absent bodies, impossible mourning, and continued terror. Faced with the tragedy of senseless absence, families find their histories penetrated by horror, and the search begins. In Jorge's case, as in most cases, the search for truth and justice has been in vain: the body has not been found and the perpetrators have not been identified, much less prosecuted. The act remains unpunished.

Bureaucratic Interactions and Performances

Families have learned to use the language of bureaucracy to demand attention from the state through its own formulas. This is how Martha's archive begins. As she states, she creates a memorandum, "like at work," to prove and evidenciate every action, interaction, reply, achievement, and failure of this search process – to register the real-life activity of her search. Martha points out that this was not a practice anyone taught her but that she and other family members "picked it up on their own," "learning from experience." This experience has involved a collective learning curve. Of the families, she says, "We got together and told

⁴⁶ Due to European law, we were not allowed to publish Martha and Jorge's family photographs where third persons are present, but a video commemorating 27 years of Jorge's disappearance includes many of the photographs in Martha's archive and can be found here: Redacción Medellín, "Jorge Soto . . . 27 años sin olvido !!!" [Jorge Soto . . . 27 years without forgetting], July 14, 2012, YouTube video, 4:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YalC2hql_9A&t=1s.

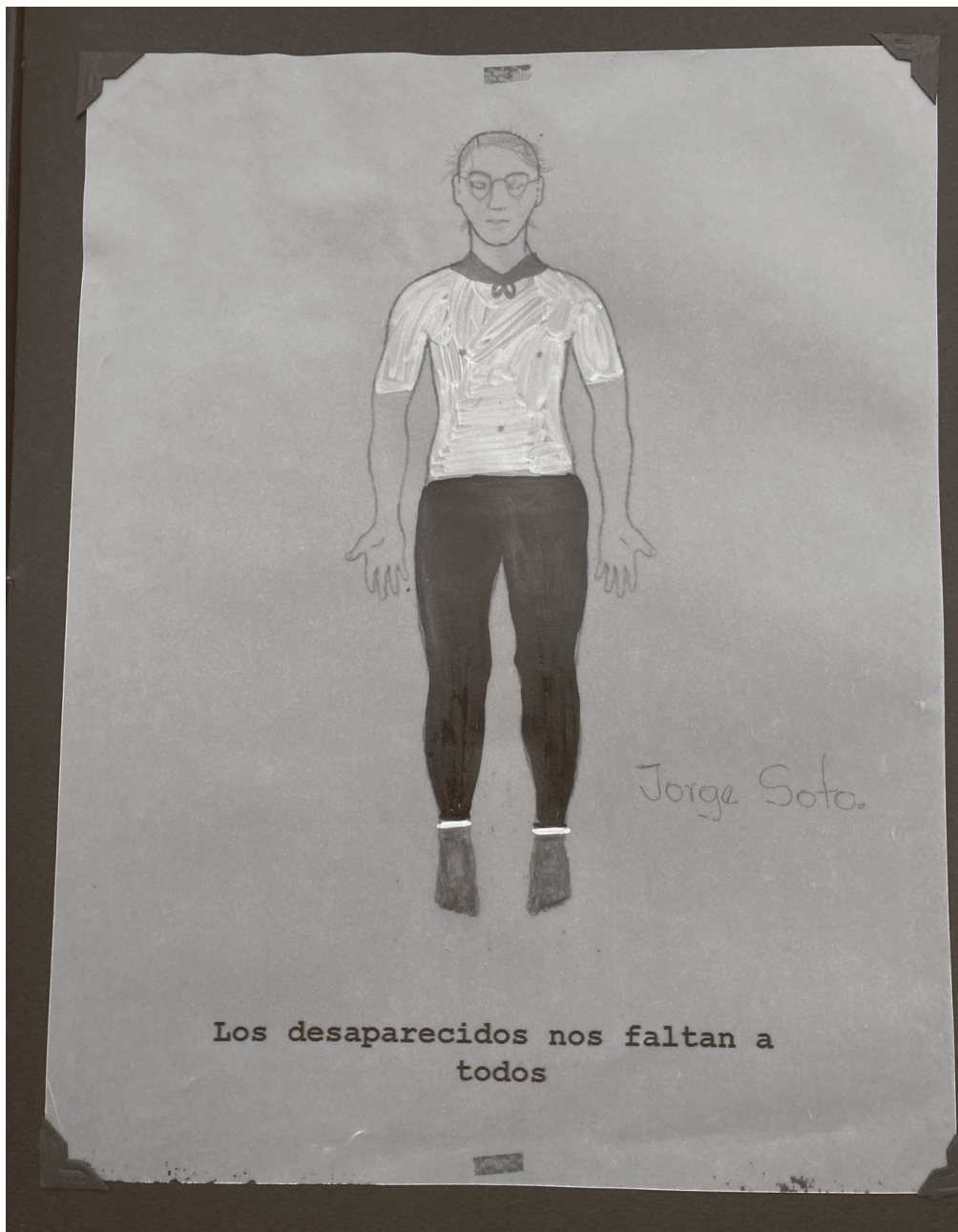


FIGURE 2 *Jorge, illustrated by Martha as part of Entre nombres sin cuerpo: La memoria como estrategia metodológica para la acción forense sin daño en casos de desaparición forzada, a research project by Andrea Romero, 2019. Source: Personal archive of Jorge Soto, published with permission from Martha Soto Gallo.*

each other we had to save everything, even the envelopes,” and laughs. “It is as if, if you have no folder, you have no disappeared.”⁴⁷

When she started, there were no central authorities that dealt with the crime of disappearances, so there was no way of registering the disappearance. The bureaucratic insistence on having things in writing has meant that the production of paperwork is about more than simply content but is also about the practices and actions of the state and their instrumentality.⁴⁸ The registration of a disappearance, which would have created evidence of the claim for Jorge’s disappearance, was not possible until the state created the required office. The first bureaucratic letter Martha received in 1996, after 10 years of silence, finally provided written proof of the presence of the state and its position regarding this crime – its refusal to investigate and decision to declare Jorge’s case closed.

In Colombia, the bureaucracy that has been created to attend to the victims is as complex as the internal armed conflict that has caused the damage. Since 2000, when forced disappearance was recognized in the country’s legislation as a crime, countless measures have been enacted, and from them have emerged procedures, formats, and records, which, rather than creating possibility, represent obstacles to accessing truth and justice. The government engages with its citizens by producing bureaucratic forms and papers, and thus, those seeking to interact with the state must mimic this process to a certain extent, in the form of petitions, letters, forms, and so on.⁴⁹ The families must run around in bureaucratic circles to comply while the government can carry out *incumplir cumpliendo* (complying incompliantly),⁵⁰ “the practice of not fulfilling the promises of public policy while generating a discourse (and bureaucratic apparatus) that performs fulfillment.”⁵¹

47 Soto Gallo, interview, January 18, 2022.

48 Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70925>.

49 Gupta, *Red Tape*; Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, “The Things They Carry.”

50 Valentina Pellegrino, “Cifras de papel: la rendición de cuentas del Gobierno colombiano ante la justicia como una manera de incumplir cumpliendo,” *Antipoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, no. 42 (2021): 3–27, <https://doi.org/10.7440/antipoda42.2021.01>.

51 Roxani Krystalli, “Attendance Sheets and Bureaucracies of Victimhood in Colombia,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, November 24, 2020, 3, <https://polarjournal.org/2020/11/24/attendance-sheets-and-bureaucracies-of-victimhood-in-colombia/>.

Jorge's archive is made up of the residue left by bureaucratic performances and the logic of questions and answers. Martha petitions a number of agencies for information: the attorney general, the Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses (National Institute of Forensic Medicine), the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory), the Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas (Victim's Unit), the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (National Registry Office), and the Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas (Search Unit for Disappeared Persons, UBPD). The petitions embody Martha's strenuous efforts to bring her brother out of the absolute horror of disappearance. They are made "due to the need of a sister," "on behalf of the family," and to obtain information on "the current state of the process."

The state answers in refusals and delays: "The delegate attorney for the defence of human rights decided to refrain from ordering the formal opening of a disciplinary investigation and therefore to file the aforementioned diligence"; "So far no positive results have been achieved"; "The investigation is suspended."⁵² For almost 40 years, Martha searches in vain for answers. Refusals, delays, take the place of meaning, of truth. Deep down, she senses that there are no answers, but she persists. She petitions them again: "Atentamente me dirijo a ustedes" (I address you cordially).

We see in these official replies to Martha's enquiries the "morass of governmental bureaucratic inaction":⁵³

empty gestures, with committees that never meet and offices that are never staffed, with zero budget allocations or no actual programs. In other cases, staff and budget are entirely absorbed in the production of bureaucratic procedures, protocols, and physical infrastructure, only to be dismantled and reassembled with changing political winds, a new president, minister, or director. Exemplified by the expanding thicket of redundant bureaucracies, initiatives, commissions, committees, decrees, and programs, with little coordination and less institutional

⁵² In order to protect Martha, these statements have been deidentified.

⁵³ Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 217, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520941175>.

memory, the production of impunity is the result of a shell game of shifting responsibilities.⁵⁴

The trauma of the disappearances, along with the actions that must be deployed in the search process, cause the collapse of the world the families knew before. Relatives often lose confidence in the state that denies, that is complicit in or guilty of the act, that leaves them alone in the search process. Paradoxically, it is precisely this bureaucratic world that constitutes the basis for designing the itinerary of actions, performative strategies, and tactics the relatives use to seek answers. Relatives appeal to the authorities, to the organs of the judiciary, to politicians, and to journalists. The archive, full of questions and petitions to the state and its officials, is created to officialize and communicate an information need, thereby evidentiating the crime.

Evidence of a Person and a Life

Public and personal meanings associated with the disappeared are displayed through relatives' appeals for the truth: the banners with photos, political slogans, and rituals express the absence of the body and insist on pointing out this absence. The agency of relatives, according to Veena Das, begins with "a descent into the ordinary world but as if in mourning for it. Recovery did not lie in enacting a revenge against the world, but in inhabiting it in a gesture of mourning for it."⁵⁵

Within the cracks among the bureaucratic forms, we find the sensitive remains of humanity. Jorge is at the centre of each document. Even the certificate of Martha's blood sample and fingerprints was created for the purpose of finding Jorge, who is revealed with each document, as with consecutive brushstrokes uncovering an archaeological dig, as more than a name. We find the place and name of the hospital he was born in, his parents and siblings' names. We learn about how he grew up, went to school, sang, had friends and lovers. In the photographs provided, he stares at us as a child among his siblings, his mother holding him in her arms. All these traces constitute a testimony of a family unit and of a loved member of a community. This life and absence, love and loss, are exhibited

⁵⁴ Tate, 216.

⁵⁵ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (London: University of California Press, 2007), 77.

in the archive as Martha places two photographs side by side: in one, her family is together and complete – two adults and four children – and in another photograph of the same family, taken years later, the absence of Jorge is visible. Martha visualizes his absence.

In her profile of Jorge, Martha appeals to the imagination to fill the void; she re-enacts Jorge to give him a voice beyond the unknown. She links Jorge to his own history and to the family of which he was a part. She makes sense of his life and signs the profile at the end, emphasizing her pride in being her brother's sister.

Jorge's photograph has been used to demand answers, to raise awareness about his case and memorialize his life, and to recognize his individuality in a mass of indicators and statistics. Martha has put Jorge's face in every space she has access to, in every exhibition she can participate in, in the press, and on websites. His images help to confront "the collective categories of 'disappeared', 'assassinated' or simply 'dead' (which encompasses all individualities without distinction of sex, age, temperament, path in life). They allow an individual existence, a biography, to be shown."⁵⁶ The photographs, as Cieplak explains, are both "pragmatic tools in the search . . . and . . . powerful symbols."⁵⁷

The persistence in Martha's correspondence, her family pictures, her incarnation of Jorge in the profile, and a pencil drawing of her brother not only provide evidentiary proof of her and her family's relationships to Jorge but also imbue the records with feelings that "are central to their meaning and ongoing significance." As "an act of love," the recordkeeping is Martha's way of staying connected to Jorge, continuing her relationship with him, and keeping him connected to the family.⁵⁸

Evidence of a loss becomes evidence of a life. This evidence reflects and articulates a particular context – a society and a culture that continues to criminalize expressions of alternative politics. Jorge's disappearance, the loss of another young person with political ideals and ambitions, was meant to send a message of terror to an entire generation of potential political leaders within the UP before exterminating it. Nevertheless, the traces of Jorge's political life and interests have not

56 Da Silva Catela quoted in Piotr Cieplak, "Private Archives, Public Deaths in Rwanda and Argentina: Conversations with Claver Irakoze and Ludmila da Silva Catela," *Wasafiri* 35, no. 4 (2020): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2020.1800232>.

57 Cieplak, 6.

58 Douglas and Alisauskas, "'It Feels Like a Life's Work,'" 30–31.

been hidden or shamefully forgotten but, on the contrary, have been petitioned for and certified, as Martha continues Jorge's social and political presence.⁵⁹ Martha is one of many family members who keep the UP's presence in the public sphere through performances, exhibitions, protests, and participation in the TJ process. They now use their knowledge and years of experience on the front line to memorialize and demonstrate the state's crimes and impunity.

The archive depicts the changes that have occurred in Colombia during Martha's search. Martha explains that the recent taking of blood samples and fingerprints to help identify Jorge for her was unprecedented and would not have happened some years ago. The fact that today there might be the possibility of identifying the body, *if* the body is ever found, gives Martha hope – the hope of knowing Jorge's fate.⁶⁰

The documents also show remnants of other searches by other families: the first letter to the state, with the names of nine more disappeared people alongside Jorge's; the work being done by different NGOs and FOs to assist families; and the newspaper articles and records from protests show that Martha is part of a larger community, with the same goals and expectations. Martha's collection, even on its own, gives us a picture of the social situation and demonstrates that she is not alone in Colombia in her *activist archiving*.

This is an unintentional archive, in that Martha's purpose was never to go out and create an archive, but rather, to collect every trace of her brother to give testimony of his life and his disappearance against the denial of the state. That intensive, existential, and instinctive collecting process became, in time, an "intentional archive,"⁶¹ as Martha realized that the process and its materiality filled a void by bringing back his memory and giving her something physical to hold on to.⁶²

⁵⁹ Douglas and Alisauskas, "It Feels Like a Life's Work."

⁶⁰ Soto Gallo, interview, January 18, 2022.

⁶¹ Andrew Flinn and Anna Sexton, "Activist Participatory Communities in Archival Contexts: Theoretical Perspectives," in *Participatory Archives: Theory and Practice*, ed. Edward Benoit III and Alexandra Eveleigh (London: Facet Publishing, 2019), 173–90.

⁶² Soto Gallo, interview, January 18, 2022.

Liberatory Memory Work

The peace agreement signed between the state and the FARC guerrillas in 2016, despite the deficiencies in its implementation, has meant hope for many victims. A comprehensive system of truth, justice, and reparation has been created, and there have been guarantees of non-repetition, including the JEP, the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition (CEV), and the UBPD. This new institutional framework creates a space in which “the public recognition of pain can allow the creation of new opportunities to resume daily life.”⁶³ Within this space and these new possibilities, families such as Martha’s have engaged in the public sphere of “dealing with the past” on their own terms.

The concept of LMW acknowledges the important recordkeeping practices that families have been doing for decades, of which Martha’s archive is an example. LMW includes teaching these practices to other families. This work of preserving and creating documents found nowhere else often occurs on the margins and in private and is subject to risk and undervalued. Families like Martha’s have made the long-term commitment to demand a transformation of society⁶⁴ out of their private pain. From the privacy of the home, records from Jorge’s archive have made their way into a “collective corpus belonging to all those concerned with the problem of disappearance.”⁶⁵ They are the foundation of Martha’s political action. They become part of the broad umbrella of human rights archives, quietly joining in from below. And yet, they may not always make it to the public sphere. Fear, intimidation, and a culture of violence and retribution can make families hesitant regarding the publicity of these records. Martha tells us that

People can be afraid of learning these information practices; they can fear how difficult it can be keeping papers. Some prefer to have them kept for them in an office or institution – professionally. But Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado [MOVICE,

⁶³ Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, Deepak Mehta, Fiona C. Ross, Komatra Chuengsatiansup, Margaret Lock, Maya Todeschini et al., *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 19.

⁶⁴ Gould and Harris, *Memory for Justice*.

⁶⁵ Da Silva Catela quoted in Cieplak, “Private Archives, Public Deaths in Rwanda and Argentina,” 12.

the organization she helps run] teaches the importance of keeping these documents at home as well as in an office or professionally – the importance of copies. Many organizations have experienced violence and threats, and some have been left without documentation. In terms of documentation, we are learning, and we are teaching.⁶⁶

Beyond TJ

One problem with TJ mechanisms, as described by Stockwell, is that they do not always bring about the reconciliation they promise. For example, after decades of mechanisms “dealing with” and “working through” the legacy of violence in that country, “Argentine memorial cultures appear beholden to the entrenched political and ideological divisions of old.”⁶⁷ Questions about the disappeared still prevail, with no answers from the security forces, and most families know nothing about their loved ones’ whereabouts. In Argentina, women’s testimonies demonstrate how memories of trauma persist despite public truth-telling and “the finality that the concepts of truth and justice are supposed to deliver.”⁶⁸ Stockwell explains how oral testimonies of violence can potentially contribute to the ongoing polarization of a society.⁶⁹ In societies such as Colombia’s, where atrocities have been perpetrated by different actors and social trauma persists in daily life, political polarization, social stigmatization, and divergent discourses often lead to an absence of empathy.

Personal archives such as Martha’s respond to injustice by “highlight[ing] the complexity . . . between violence, power and affect,”⁷⁰ and we would argue that personal archives such as Martha’s do this well, as they are not about “moving on” but about capturing their affect in a context – through a variety of records that evidenciate and memorialize lives lost. These archives help find “non-reductive ways of thinking about memory in a society recovering from violence

⁶⁶ Martha Soto in Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Económicas, “Primer Encuentro de Iniciativas para la Construcción de Paz.”

⁶⁷ Jill Stockwell, “‘The Country That Doesn’t Want to Heal Itself’: The Burden of History, Affect and Women’s Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina,” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 8, no. 1 (2014): 34, <https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-3043>.

⁶⁸ Stockwell, 35.

⁶⁹ Stockwell, 40.

⁷⁰ Stockwell, 43.

and trauma.”⁷¹

Humanizing Practices amid Inhuman Practices

Even though these personal collections have become a way for families to participate in healing processes in private and on their own terms, there are many silences in these archives. As Tate has described in *Counting the Dead*, much of the political work of families consists of “ephemeral encounters that rarely leave any written records.”⁷² *They are carried in memory or in the body but are not in the archive.*⁷³ However, as seen here, these archives did not start as ends in themselves but as means to an end: the demand for justice. In the process, spurred by hope and new ways of truth-telling, and influenced by TJ mechanisms, this recordkeeping culture has emerged as we have shown. Yet, the emergence of this culture is also due to recordkeepers’ gradual realization of the power of the artifactual and materiality. As Anneli Sundqvist reminds us, “Not the least is it the (once) bodily closeness to someone or something, or the physical presence in a situation at some moment in time (which as such are material phenomena), that evokes emotions and activity and mediates relations.”⁷⁴ In this context, the materiality of the records is enhanced not only by Martha and Jorge’s uses of the objects but also through the emotions they evoke and the symbolic representation they obtain⁷⁵ for both Jorge’s family and an entire community made up of other families of disappeared. As Sundqvist explains, objects affect people and “do so by merely being objects.”⁷⁶ This materiality is important to highlight as Martha tells us that more families in Colombia are keeping records digitally because they feel it is safer and because many official documents are sent digitally. Nevertheless, Martha believes these “younger families” are missing out on the therapeutic element of having a physical folder to hold and take with them to be immediately accessed and displayed. After all, this is how much of the political Tactivism

71 Stockwell, 43.

72 Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 122.

73 Adriana Lalinde in Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Económicas, “Primer Encuentro de Iniciativas para la Construcción de Paz.”

74 Anneli Sundqvist, “Things That Work: Meditations on Materiality in Archival Discourse,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 8 (2021): 12, <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/7>.

75 Sundqvist, “Things That Work.”

76 Sundqvist, “Things That Work,” 14.

and networking in Colombia still occurs: face-to face. Material records can be “a point of departure’ for production, that is, for action and agency and a course of events.”⁷⁷ Martha hopes her children will continue her work and add to the archive, as this is the only thing of value she is leaving them.⁷⁸

Seeing Martha’s archival practice as LMW identifies the personal and familial endeavour of this labour and its repercussions, which goes beyond a violation-specific focus.⁷⁹ It enables us to look at wider causes of suffering and their consequences, revealing how families like Martha’s are hardly passive, but are instead resilient, active liberatory memory workers for their communities, undertaking humanizing practices amid inhuman practices.⁸⁰ They are reincorporating the disappeared back into the social fabric so as to not condemn them to oblivion,⁸¹ while at the same time moving beyond “the uncritical assumption that testimony work is both healing and socially transformative.”⁸²

The families are not formal archivists, but by learning the trade, they are becoming grassroots recordkeepers out of an instinct of preservation and care for themselves and their loved ones. As Martha’s memory work shows, this instinct is also based on the impulse to preserve “other” narratives of alternative political inclinations, something Colombia lacks, and to make sense of that which has none.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We introduce this case to highlight a recordkeeping practice that, in the words of Scott’s book *Weapons of the Weak*, is one of many “forms of resistance that reflect

77 Sundqvist “Things That Work,” 12.

78 Soto Gallo, interview, January 18, 2022.

79 Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly, “Practice, Power and Inertia: Personal Narrative, Archives and Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 8, no. 1 (2016): 25–44, 28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huw001>.

80 María Victoria Uribe Alarcón, “Against Violence and Oblivion: The Case of Colombia’s Disappeared,” in *Meanings of Violence in Contemporary Latin America*, ed. Gabriela Polit Dueñas and María Helena Rueda (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 37–52.

81 Uribe Alarcón, 50.

82 Wiene cited in Hamber and Kelly, “Practice, Power and Inertia,” 28.

the conditions and constraints under which they are generated.”⁸³ It is also a humanizing process. These collections work as *direct* resistance – as legal papers in official investigations, recording the evidence that is later needed to identify bodies, publicly shaming the state – or as *indirect* resistance, through the memorializing, loving, and daily active remembering of the disappeared. It is precisely when focusing on the personal dimension that we begin to understand the importance of the materiality of these collections, which goes beyond evidence as an issue of justice to act also as an instinct against oblivion for people who, although missing, are still loved.

These collections live, like their creators, in a state of vulnerability and uncertainty and thus, by implication, the evidence and memory of the disappeared persons are also vulnerable and uncertain. This raises practical, ethical, emotional, and political questions⁸⁴ regarding who should store these collections, and how, if they are to be donated or shared in a country with low levels of trust, transparency, and stability. Hamber and Kelly have raised these questions in relation to Northern Ireland, where “story gathering has been limited as a result of the contested nature of politics and competing narratives.”⁸⁵ Yet these collections are more than just testimonies; they are collections of bureaucratic, emotional, personal, and historical traces that together bear witness to lives lost and all the social and personal reverberations of these events. These are questions that the archival profession can assist in answering only if and when there is a solid understanding of the social vulnerabilities of each victim’s specific society and case of enforced disappearance. Because the archival profession and archival studies are concerned with the long-term preservation of materials and their narratives in context, we have the capability of looking at these archives beyond transitional justice normativity – that is, of looking beyond “arbitrary time limits on memory”⁸⁶ imposed on them, to look at the life of the records, from archivalization to uses and preservation. More research is needed in archival studies on the role of archives in contexts of enforced disappearance. There is much this context can teach us about centring people, even when they are missing.

83 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 242.

84 Hamber and Kelly, “Practice, Power and Inertia,” 35.

85 Hamber and Kelly, 35.

86 Brison quoted in Stockwell, “‘The Country That Doesn’t Want to Heal Itself,’” 43.

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