

Working Paper

The Families of the Missing in Lebanon

On the Potentials of Participatory Art in
Transitional Justice

Sara Abdel Latif

Abstract

When the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, 17,415 persons were declared missing. Thirty years later, many families are still waiting for the government to support them in identifying the fates of their disappeared family members and in facilitating their return or the repatriation of their remains. Over the years, these families engaged in advocacy efforts to highlight their right to know what happened to their missing family members. This Working Paper aims at investigating the role of participatory art as a particular form of commemorative activity and advocacy, focusing on the potentials it has on the individual, group, and transitional justice levels in postwar Lebanon. To highlight these potentials, the article provides an overview of the civil war, transitional justice in Lebanon, and the specific socio-psychological situation of the families of the missing. Zooming in on their individual experiences with participatory art as a means to improve their mental health, the author draws on interviews with four family members who partook in the participatory art project organized by two organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Act for the Disappeared. Based on these interviews, the author argues that participatory art can elevate the families' capacity for dealing with ambiguous loss and contribute to their individual and social recovery. The paper also argues that the families' collective artistic engagement with their respective hardships makes a modest but important contribution to transitional justice in postwar Lebanon.

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swisspeace
Steinengraben 22
4051 Basel
Switzerland
www.swisspeace.ch
info@swisspeace.ch
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List of Acronyms

ACT	Act for the Disappeared
CFKDL	Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon
ICTJ	International Center for Transitional Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
MPs	Members of Parliament
SOLIDE	Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile
UN	United Nations

1 Introduction

Since the 1980s, the families of the missing in Lebanon have been invested in their search for their missing family members in an attempt to seek the truth about their disappearances. These families were actively searching for their missing relatives while also lobbying to secure the right to know what happened to them, and have the government's assistance in their search. Yet, even long after the end of the civil war, there was hardly any government support, and the families of the missing were largely left alone in dealing with feelings of loss and pain, and the constant challenge of coping with the ambiguities of hopefulness and despair.

In 2016 and 2017, the families of the missing residing in Lebanon were invited to participate in an artistic activity to commemorate their missing family members and keep their memory alive. In the framework of the "Memorialization Project," organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Act for the Disappeared (ACT), these families were asked to come together in groups in different districts to recall the traits of their missing family members and to produce artworks that represented them. The families' paintings and drawings were displayed on chairs that symbolized the empty space left behind by the disappeared.

This Working Paper inquires into the role of participatory art in supporting the families of the missing, and what effect it had on a personal, collective, and transitional justice level in Lebanon. To address these questions, the author provides an overview of the war, the political landscape of postwar Lebanon, and the "Memorialization Project." She then examines the literature on participatory art and the socio-psychological situation of families whose members disappeared during the war. Subsequently, the author introduces the case study and discusses the findings of interviews with four relatives of missing persons. Through this Working Paper, the author describes the role of disappearances during the war as a key issue of transitional justice while exploring how participatory art can empower the families that have to cope with these disappearances daily.

Given the modest sample size of four interviewees, this case study does not aim at being representative. Rather, it seeks to provide in-depth insights into how individuals and their families deal with the ambiguous loss of their missing family members, who are present in their memories and absent in person, and how they navigate feelings of hope and hopelessness.

2 Background

2.1 The Lebanese Civil War

In 1975, Lebanon entered a civil war that lasted for an overall period of fifteen years, giving rise to thousands of casualties, victims, and disappeared. The largely political and sectarian conflict was dominated by an interplay of local and regional factors, including opposing views on the neighboring Palestinian armed conflict (Sune 2011). In the context of rising tensions and numerous smaller episodes of violence, a key trigger event of the Lebanese Civil War was the “Bus Massacre” (Bostit Ain el Remmaneh) on April 13, 1975, when a shooting claimed the lives of the 27 Palestinian passengers (Picard 2002, 105). In the subsequent two-year war, the “Black Saturday” massacre took place, when around 60 civilians were killed and 300 were kidnapped and disappeared (ICTJ 2013a). This first phase of the war ended with the Syrian military intervention in late 1976 (Sune 2011).

After a short period of truce, fights erupted again in 1977 in various regions in Lebanon, among which were the Chouf district in the Mount Lebanon governorate, the Zahleh district in the Beqaa governorate, the South and the North governorates, and the capital Beirut. Along with targeted assassinations and car bombings, this period observed the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 (ICTJ 2013a). This phase was marked by the Sabra and Shatila massacre, during which many of the civilian residents of the Shatila refugee camp were killed (Sune 2011).

Between 1983 and 1988, brutal combats occurred in the so-called War of the Mountain (Harb al-Jabal), the War of the Camps (Harb al-mukhayimat), and wars in Tripoli. During the War of the Mountain, violent fights arose in the Aley, the Chouf, the Baabda, and the Saida districts. These battles included the Kfarmatta and Bhamdoun massacres of 1983. Violence was present in the South and the Beqaa, as well as in Beirut. During that time, disappearances, abductions, and assassinations were recurrent (ICTJ 2013a).

A year later, in 1989 — following the War of Liberation, inter-confessional fights, and Syrian assaults — the Lebanese Civil War was nearing its end. The Arab League began working on a reconciliation plan which led up to the Taef Agreement (ICTJ 2013a). This National Reconciliation Plan was agreed upon by the Lebanese parliament and ratified in November 1989 (Kingston and Ochsenwald 2020). Thus, with 17,000 disappeared, 700,000 internally displaced people, and 150,000 deaths, wartime ended (ICTJ 2013a).

The violence of that war still echoes today with nearly a third of the population in Lebanon reporting losing a member of their immediate family (ICRC 1999). Despite the termination of battles and fights, Lebanon remained under the military and political sovereignty of the Israeli and Syrian regimes until the years 2000 and 2005, respectively. Nonetheless, even after Lebanon regained its full sovereignty, the aftermath of the war was still present as thousands of missing individuals had not returned.

2.2 The Disappeared and their Families

After the end of the war, 17,415 people – a number that remains disputed – were estimated missing (HRW 2007, 492; ICRC 2013). The disappeared were children, adults, men, women, Lebanese, Palestinians, and many others whom one day did not make it back home. They were kidnapped, stopped at checkpoints based on their names or their religion (stated on their identification documents), killed in mass shootings, or taken away from their homes. While the majority of them were believed to have been kidnapped by militiamen and to have remained in Lebanon, some of the disappeared were kidnapped, detained, and later transferred to Syria or Israel (ACT n.d. a). Since the end of the war and over the past 30 years, many people have died not knowing the fate – dead or alive – of their disappeared members.

However, the families of the disappeared wanted to know what happened to their missing family members and were adamant about finding them. In 2013, the ICRC released a report where 324 families of the missing in Lebanon were interviewed about their first preferred course of action (ICRC 2013). The research findings revealed that 37% of them wanted to know the fate of the disappeared person, 31% wanted search procedures to find and return the disappeared family member, and 17% wanted to know the truth, with the remaining 15% selecting punishment, compensation, financial assistance, and others as their preferred course of action (ICRC 2013, 11). The disparities in these results can be explained by the fact that 75% of the interviewees disclosed being aware of the details surrounding the disappearance hence some families’ preference for search procedures as a primary course of action (ICRC 2013, 10). This report also highlighted that these families had psychological and emotional, financial, legal and administrative, and judicial needs (ICRC 2013). The disappearance of their family members caused numerous problems and challenges, with the greatest problem being the struggle with emotional distress (ICRC 2013).

These families whose members had disappeared and had been victims of battles and mass killings, abduction, detention, or murder, became victims themselves, deprived of having a healthy family life where all of the family’s members are present (ACT n.d. a). The families of the missing in Lebanon were also victims of empty promises, blackmail, and extortion (ICTJ 2015). In its report on the consequences of the disappearance on the wives of missing men in Lebanon, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) explained that many women would reach out to public officials and institutions and receive promises in the return of their husbands, to no avail; some wives also reported being asked for money in exchange for information – that was never delivered – on their missing family member’s whereabouts (ICTJ 2015). Lastly, the families of the missing were victims of consecutive governments that did not provide them with answers and disregarded their right to know for nearly three decades.

2.3 Support Initiatives and Civil Society Actors

Throughout the years, the families of the missing have organized themselves in committees. The earliest of those committees to be formed was the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon (CFKDL) which was founded during the war. This committee was established in 1982, by – among others – Wadad Halawani, a mother of two children and a wife who had witnessed her husband’s kidnapping. At that time, many men were being kidnapped and arrested so women assumed the responsibility of organizing, meeting, and demonstrating to find their missing family members (Civil Society Knowledge Center, n.d.). These women were active in their search initiating protests and lobbying efforts, reaching out to political figures (such as prime ministers, ministers, and religious leaders), and trying to have their voices heard.

A decade later, in 1990, a second committee was established under the acronym SOLIDE (Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile) (SOLIDE, n.d.). Founded at the end of the war by activist Ghazi Aad, SOLIDE aimed to support the families whose missing family members were detained in Syria (SOLIDE, n.d.). Together, the two committees worked to support the families of the missing in their searches and demands. In November 2016, Ghazi Aad passed away, but other civil society organizations started supporting the families of the missing, namely Act for the Disappeared and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

ACT was established in 2010 to support these families in their quest for their right to know. Since its creation, it has held many events and awareness campaigns. It has also set up a database under the name “Fushat Amal” (Space for Hope) where the missing’s profiles and stories are kept in an online memorial. With this bottom-up initiative, families of the missing were able to create profiles for their missing family members on this platform, and store them. Moreover, ACT has launched an investigative project calling for the protection of gravesites and developing a database about the missing. In partnership with the ICRC, this project focuses on collecting information from key informants (witnesses and combatants) about disappearances and gravesites (ACT n.d. c).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also been an active organization supporting the families of the missing. Since 2012, the ICRC has been gathering “ante disappearance data” and DNA samples (“Biological Reference Samples”) from the families of the missing. These samples were necessary to identify the remains of the disappeared when mass graves would eventually be exhumed (ACT n.d. b). The ICRC and ACT also partnered in launching an artistic commemorative initiative, referred to as the “Memorialization Project.”

2.4 The “Memorialization Project”

Starting in October 2016, groups of families of the missing were invited by ACT and the ICRC to the “Memorialization Project,” a participatory art-centered group support activity (ICRC 2017). This activity had ten to fifteen attendees in each group and spanned between eight and ten sessions. These group activities were supervised by a Lebanese art therapist from Artichoke Studio, an art therapy center, and by representatives from both organizations. The geographic scope of the project covered districts from various Lebanese governorates in the hopes of reaching out to the families of the missing all over the country. To date, the project has taken place in the districts of Aley, Baabda, Nabatiyeh, Saida, and Tripoli.

The targeted areas of intervention for the first three groups were– by order of intervention – the Baabda (from October to November 2016), the Saida (from December 2016 to January 2017), and the Aley (from February to March 2017) districts. These districts were located in three out of the eight Lebanese governorates, and each one of those districts had its history, factions, sects, battles, and respective victims. The trigger of the Lebanese Civil War commonly known as the “Bus Massacre” took place in the Baabda district (ICTJ 2013a). As for Saida, it was invaded by the Israelis in 1982 who occupied the city until 1985 (ICTJ 2013a). It also witnessed various fights on its outskirts. In Aley, gruesome fights and massacres occurred during the War of the Mountain; mass evictions and displacements of predominantly Christian villagers happened in this district too (ICTJ 2013a).

Despite this violent past, these families were willing to partake in this activity which brought them together to share their experiences and commemorate their missing family members (Prospero 2018). The artistic activity consisted of painting on a chair representing the missing, whose seat was left empty, as can be seen in the examples in section 5. These identical chairs were the families’ blank canvases as they were asked to remember their missing’s traits and characteristics, ponder on which were most representative of them, design the chairs’ paintings or collages accordingly, and produce their artistic works. The families were encouraged to be creative and to execute the artistic ideas that they had conceived (Prospero 2018).

This participatory art activity focused on commemorating the missing family members and easing the families’ processing of the loss (Prospero 2018). The project intended to assist the families with their emotional distress while also supporting them in their fight for the right to know. To date, 213 chairs have been designed and painted.

3 Methodology and Case Selection

This Working Paper presents an original case study on the families of the missing in Lebanon. It examines the empirical qualitative data gathered through personal interviews. With the support of ACT and the ICRC, four families of the missing were identified for the interview process. Then, one member of each of these families was contacted and interviewed. All of the selected family members had taken part in the “Memorialization Project.” The choice of interviewees was conducted by ACT and the ICRC increasing the risk of selection bias in the collected data. However, upon reading testimonies on the project’s media coverages, it became apparent that these interviewees’ experiences resemble that of their colleagues who were equally engaged in the activity and dedicated to the project, yet the selected interviewees were potentially more eloquent and outspoken.

The four interviewees participated precisely in the first three artistic memorialization groups. One interviewee was selected from each district: Michel Sekkar, a missing person’s relative from the Baabda district group, Jamileh Agha a family member from the Saida district group, and Nouhad El Jurdi a disappeared person’s mother from the Aley district group. The fourth interviewee was Wadad Halawani (the head of the CFKDL) who had joined the Aley group despite being from Beirut.

This original data was collected through interviews that were scheduled between the months of August and September 2018. These semi-structured, open-ended, and in-depth interviews were conducted in Arabic at these families’ homes nearly a year and a half after they participated in the artistic memorialization activity.

Having been formerly engaged in ACT, one of the civil society organizations that support the families of the missing and that facilitated the “Memorialization Project,” the author was well acquainted with the interviewees and had numerous previous group and individual interactions with each one of them. Given their familiarity with the author, the interviewees’ responses were marked by honesty for there was a previously established rapport between both parties. The author’s positionality as a supporter of the cause of the missing created ease and openness among the families leading them to freely discuss their stories. This was apparent throughout the interactions as all of the interviewees answered every question despite the sensitive nature of the interview. The interviewees spoke in detail about the incidence of the disappearance although it is a painful and often traumatic memory. They also talked about the subsequent emotional, legal, and financial struggles which are delicate matters.

Nonetheless, the author’s familiarity with the interviewees could have caused them to speak highly of this activity. However, the interviews were conducted more than a year after the author stopped working at that organization so the chance of positivity bias was controlled for.

Despite the limited number of interviewees, these study participants contributed to having more detailed and more profound discussions and explorations of the issue. They especially helped acquire a clearer understanding of the

individuality of each family’s experience, and a grasp of the singularity of their stories in its entirety; knowing that a greater number of interviews does not necessarily entail a deeper qualitative understanding. Lastly, these interviews gave these families space to talk and express themselves freely and to have their thoughts and opinions stated and registered as spoken.

In this present case study, the author draws observations based on the experiences that these four family members had within their respective artistic memorialization groups and on their reflections on the artistic activity. The author also presents an overview of these families’ artistic creations and complements it with pictures of those chairs. The author then investigates the families’ artistic works because they are representative of the families’ feelings and thoughts, and provides insight into the interviewees’ emotional state, their relationship with the missing, and the event of the disappearance. Lastly, the author discusses the role of participatory art in improving the families’ group and individual wellbeing, and its contribution to the transitional justice process.

4 Context and Conceptual Frameworks

4.1 Transitional Justice in Postwar Lebanon

Transitional justice refers to the “full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” (UN 2010). It is frequently conceptualized in terms of four pillars, whereby transitional justice seeks to secure a) the right to truth, b) the right to justice, c) the right for reparation, and d) the guarantee of non-recurrence in states emerging from conflict (UN 2010). This paper is particularly concerned with the right to truth, which assumes the right of victims and citizens to know the truth about human rights violations that were committed during armed conflict (ICTJ 2013b). For the families of the missing, this aspect of transitional justice is crucial as it concerns their right to know the fate of their disappeared family members. However, in Lebanon, only a few steps have been taken to ensure transitional justice in this regard, compromising the prospects for justice and national reconciliation. In addition to the absence of truth-seeking and prosecution, this country underwent mismanaged reparations and incomplete institutional reform (ICTJ 2014).

The Taef Agreement of 1989 that ended the civil war stipulated that every militia on Lebanese territory must be disbanded, that the internal security and armed forces should be strengthened, that the former are to assume the latter’s security tasks, and that judiciary’s independence is to be enhanced (ICTJ 2014). Nonetheless, these reforms were unaccomplished because the judiciary system did not manage to acquire its independence, and the postwar disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program was selective and partial; alienating transitional justice’s guarantees of non-recurrence (ICTJ 2014).

Meanwhile, although 90% of surveyed Lebanese believed that wrongdoers should be tried in the aftermath of the war, this did not occur (ICRC 1999). Instead, after the end of the war, the Lebanese Parliament voted on a General Amnesty Law on August 26, 1991. This amnesty pardoned all political crimes that occurred before March 26, 1991 (Law Number 84), except for continuing crimes and crimes targeting political and religious figures.

The adoption of the General Amnesty Law negatively affected the possibility for the Lebanese public to have the truth about past atrocities revealed. In the absence of trials and prosecutions, collecting further information about the whereabouts of disappeared people became challenging. Thus, the enactment of the amnesty law allowed for an absence of accountability, further defying transitional justice’s guarantees of non-recurrence. The latter was challenged as well given that the truth about the war and its conflicts, deaths, and disappeared was never acknowledged in schools and history books. This obstructed the creation of a shared public memory and concealed from the Lebanese youth a significant episode of the country’s history which was marked by war and its ravages.

Nonetheless, there were modest reparation efforts. In 1993, a ministry of displaced was established to ensure the return of all of the estimated 700,000 internally displaced (IDPs) Lebanese people (Law 190). This ministry had the

authority to finance the reconstruction of these citizens’ houses. As per this ministry’s Law number 361, all internally displaced people should have returned to their original place of living (cities and villages) by 2002. However, only 79,500 people had returned by that date (Global IDP Database 2004). Therefore, on October 20, 2003, a new law was issued providing an extension to these IDPs until December 31, 2005 (Law 548).

Assisting the displaced was one of the forms of reparation that the government opted for, along with its selective compensation schemes to IDPs and Lebanese detainees in Israeli and Syrian prisons, and its rehabilitation efforts to physically disabled persons from the war (ICTJ 2014). Although the reparation pillar of transitional justice entails financial and symbolic reparations as well. The latter refers to reparation forms such as building a memorial for the families to sense that their missing members are remembered. According to research, symbolic and financial reparations alike contribute to dealing with the trauma and ritualizing symbolic closure (Hamber and Wilson 2002). Therefore, having both types of reparations is valuable and strongly needed (Hamber and Wilson 2002). Yet in Lebanon, the postwar transition was marked by the marginalization of victims, the absence of truth-seeking efforts, the modest reparation actions, and the unexecuted institutional reforms.

Nevertheless, the greatest political breakthrough for the Lebanese families of the missing happened in November 2018 with the adoption of law 105 or the Law on Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons. This law stipulated the establishment of an independent national commission, and recognized the families’ right to know the fate of their missing members and their whereabouts (where they are detained or buried), the right to receive information and their disappeared relatives’ remains (Lebanon UPR 2018), as well as the urgency of excavating mass graves to return the remains to the disappeared’s family (Lebanon UPR 2018). The law consisted of 38 articles and provided the commission with a mandate to exhume mass graves (Lebanon UPR 2018) and protect the DNA samples of the missing persons’ relatives (Amnesty International 2018).

4.2 Participatory Art

Participatory art is a form of art centered around a participatory process where the public is engaged in the artistic creation (Kelly 2014). This form of art focuses on the artistic process rather than on the final product (Shefik 2018). Among its categories of motivation, is the socially engaged, interventionist, and activist participatory art (Kelly 2014). Thus, participatory art’s bottom-up approach can be a form of activism, and carry a political purpose to it.

Research suggests that art is important and valuable for transitional justice (Garnsey 2016). Art is believed to be a form of transitional justice intervention in addition to its role as a means to support survivors of conflict and violence (Rush and Simic 2014 cited in Cole 2014). Researchers have also found that participatory art can be a means for transitional justice because of art’s ability to mobilize the participants within a transitional justice context, and to provide symbolic (memorials) reparation (Shefik 2018).

Unlike memorials that are solicited by the government in a top-down approach, participatory art can create a visual representation of a socially invisible matter like the issue of the missing by the participants themselves (Shefik 2018). Art can also allow for the visualization of the participants' experiences and the provocation of the viewers (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2013, xxxi). Through engaging the latter, participatory art can be employed when the public opinion needs to be mobilized in support of a cause.

Moreover, participatory art affects the group, the social situation, the vigor of the participants, and their consciousness (Shefik 2018). This multifaceted targeted approach creates an environment for growth, and self and group engagement. Participatory art activities produce a space for dialogue and conversation which potentially grows into a space for understanding and empathy (Shefik 2018). As such, participatory art can contribute to social cohesion and reconciliation among the participants (Shefik 2018). These contributions are welcomed in countries where only a few transitional justice measures were implemented such as Lebanon. By doing so, participatory art can extend social responsibility to the public, contribute to restoring collective memory and mending the sense of community, and lastly, attempt to reclaim the truth around the survivors' lived experiences (Shefik 2018).

Participatory art can be a source of emotional reparation and have psychological benefits as well. It can contribute to both individual and collective healing through the production of artistic work (Shefik 2018). It can alleviate the pain of the survivors of the war and ease their experience of loss and grief (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2013, xxxi). Note that the families of the missing are both survivors and victims of the war as they have survived the war yet they have lost a family member: the disappeared. Research suggests that participating in artistic activities can help reduce chronic pain and encourage positive meaning-making (Hass-Cohen and Clyde 2009). Art produces catharsis as well (Garnsey 2016). Lastly, art has the power to be both a "witness" and a "memorial to the past" (Garnsey 2016). Thus, having artistic activities be present when working with a population that is transitioning away from a violent past can support these victims, and in recent years, such activities have been taking place.

An initiative was established by Amnesty International in Sri Lanka where a poetry competition was launched to assist the families of the disappeared with their emotional struggles (Cheran 2015). This activity provided these families with a space to be creative and reflect on the experienced challenges (Amnesty International 2017). A similar activity took place in Afghanistan where the theatre was employed as a tool to restore a collective memory of the conflict, reclaim the truth about past atrocities, and induce social change among the viewers (Siddiqui 2010).

Although it remains a novel and limited practice, participatory art has been increasingly used with victims of violence, conflict, and war since the turn of the century. It has been adopted in Lebanon to work with the families of the missing. However, given these families' unique struggles, understanding how participatory art was adapted to their emotional and social specificities requires knowledge about 'ambiguous loss.'

4.3 Ambiguous Loss and the Families' Mental Health

Coined in the 1970s by Pauline Boss, the concept of 'ambiguous loss' has been used since to describe "when a loved one disappears in body or mind" (Boss and Carnes 2012). This concept represents the situation of the families of the missing, whose family member's body is missing but their psychological presence remains. The ambiguity between presence and absence constitutes a cognitive and socio-emotional burden for the remaining family members (Boss 2017). Left with unanswered questions and uncertainty about the fate of their missing relative, they often struggle to move on and live in the present. Moreover, the ambiguity hinders these families' attempts to find meaning in their pain and experiences.

Believed to be the "most stressful" kind of loss, ambiguous loss presents difficulties on various levels (Boss 2017). Along with leaving family members in a hard state, it also affects the family structure and the roles of its members. The confusion and ambiguity are experienced both individually and within the overall family. The family structure becomes fragile and vulnerable to the stressors and difficulties caused by the disappearance (Boss 2017). Questions emerge: Is the missing person dead or alive? Who will be the new breadwinner of the family? Is the mother to play the father's role or is it a role that will remain vacant? With the focus now centered around the missing, what happens to the rest of the family?

The difficulty of this particular situation is often reinforced by the community. With no funeral and no bodies to bury, the families regularly struggle with accepting the loss and with being understood by their surroundings (Boss 2017). This grief is worsened by the lack of religious rituals and the absence of the support of the community. These families find themselves in isolation; left to grief by themselves as their community withholds its support and understanding, fails to recognize their grief, and gradually withdraws itself (Boss 2017). Therefore, the families of the missing end up living with grief and sadness, experiencing confusion and trouble within the family, and feeling abandoned by their communities. The exposure to these stress factors eventually weakens their wellbeing.

Usually, burials and their accompanying rituals allow for the family to have closure, yet they do not occur for the families of the missing. The story of the missing person remains open-ended, as does the grief and the pain of their families. Additionally, ambiguous loss makes the families' experienced grief a complicated one. Their grief which is centered around doubt alienates the possibility of closure (Boss and Carnes 2012). Thus, the families of the missing have to adapt to living with the grief and in the absence of closure (Boss and Carnes 2012).

But how can someone learn to live with grief when confusion and uncertainty about the loss have not ceased? It begins with addressing the ambiguity. Once

the family acknowledges that the ambiguity is an external circumstance, some relief can be found (Boss 2017). Indeed, this helps mitigate the ongoing guilt and self-blame that they often experience. Generally, to assist these families in their emotional hardships, working with them must be focused on increasing their tolerance for ambiguity to give them hope and resilience (Boss and Carnes 2012).

Pauline Boss's intervention model includes six guidelines to be referred to when working with the families of the missing. The interventions are to be within a group, and the guidelines are: Finding meaning, developing mastery, reconstructing identity, processing the ambivalence, revising attachment, and finding new hope (Boss 2017). The six guidelines contribute to gradually improving the missing person's family's wellbeing. When trying to find meaning, the work is focused on identifying and externalizing the cause to relieve oneself from guilt (Boss 2017). Once the problem is pinpointed, named, and externalized, processing the grief becomes a little easier. This helps step into change. It drives the person towards adjusting mastery and taking control over one's life. Having mastery is needed for the families of the missing. It contributes to managing problems better and dealing with distress and pain (Boss 2017). Acquiring mastery helps shift the focus to one's sense of self.

Another guideline is the reconstruction of identity; however, identity is sometimes blurred when the family is dealing with the disappearance and ambiguous loss. Who am I? What is my role? Recreating one's self to fill the role left empty, and considering these questions can contribute to increasing the family member's resilience (Boss 2017). Similarly, normalizing ambivalence eases the processing. The guilt and anxiety produced by the confusion, the conflicting emotions, and the ambiguity become less once the family members can accept ambivalence as a normal condition (Boss 2017).

Likewise, when the families of the missing reexamine and reevaluate their attachment to the missing person, their approach to this relationship becomes different. This essential exercise is necessary for finding a balance between remembering and moving forward. This helps in sustaining a relationship with the missing family member while also putting emotional energy into establishing novel relationships and connections (Boss 2006). Lastly, one of the key guidelines is finding new hope. A quest and discovery process that leads to moving forward and finding new hopes to aim for.

These guidelines are integrated into the approaches and support group interventions that Boss advocates for. Community-based interventions are deemed most effective when the truth is absent and the families are facing ambiguous loss. Sharing their experience and the knowledge that they are not alone eases these families' hardships. Talking to others who have had a similar past helps when dealing with the pain and the ambiguity. Hence their displayed preference for human interactions including social and group activities (Boss 2017). Within the groups, there are some that talk and others that listen, and both of these roles are important (Boss 2017). Such interactions create a space for constructive communication and dialogue about the past.

In the absence of religious rituals and community support, participatory art can present the families of the missing with an alternative ritual to remember their disappeared and commemorate them. Along with its communal dimension, participatory art has the potential to address the emotional and mental health difficulties that survivors of war face, such as the families of the missing's struggle with ambiguous loss. By allowing the families to regain their mastery and be creative, art can help these families find meaning in their experience and new hope. The case study of the "Memorialization Project" showcases this potential of participatory art as will be elaborated in the following section.

5 Case Study Findings

5.1 Circumstances and Consequences of the Disappearances

Each one of the four interviewees had a different loss and overcame different experiences. Michel Sekkar lost his brother Mtanios Elias Bassil in Zalka (Beirut's outskirts), on May 29, 1991. He reckons that his brother was sleeping at their sister's house on that day when he did not make it back home. This man who "hated politics" disappeared along with his car (M. Sekkar, personal communication, August 10, 2018). Jamileh's husband, Nazih Mohammad el Agha disappeared while on the road. This Palestinian fisherman who "had all the good qualities" was on his way to Abra (Saida's outskirts) to sell what he had gathered, when he went missing, back in 1982 (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018).

On September 24, 1982, Wadad Halawani's husband disappeared. Adnan Halawani was taken from his home in Beirut by men who requested his attendance for a brief investigation regarding a car accident, but he never came back. Suddenly, Wadad lost the man who was "a lover, a husband, a father, a partner and an activist," and was left to raise her two sons alone (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). On Monday, June 28, 1982, as Nouhad El Jurdi's 21-year old son Ayman was making his way back home to the village of Azounieh, he disappeared along the way in Bhamdoun (Aley district). Yet he was not alone, as two of his neighbors from the village were riding in the car with him, and all three of them went missing. Up until this day, Nouhad still misses her "fun, polite, educated, loved, and generous boy" (N. el Jurdi, personal communication, July 17, 2018).

The families of the missing in Lebanon experienced years of emotional, legal, and financial distress. Michel spoke about wanting to protect his five nieces and three nephews, and shelter them from the harsh reality following their father's disappearance. Meanwhile, Nouhad explained that her disappeared son was the eldest and that he had been the family's breadwinner. His disappearance generated financial stressors for his families, and today Nouhad goes around houses selling undergarments to make a living.

As for Jamileh, she described the consequences of the disappearance as "injustice," and said that the police was providing her with misleading information about her husband's whereabouts with officers saying he was in Syria and others saying he was in Israel (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018). She also recalls being brought body remains and clothing items such as sandals and watches from acquaintances to identify her husband. She stated that, in the absence of her husband, her children had to support the family at a young age. She explained that many of them did not complete their education, instead, they learned certain skills – like barbering and fixing cars – and began working.

Similarly, Wadad described experiencing financial and emotional stressors, as she had to reconstruct herself and her identity to fill up the vacated role. On the economical level, she explained that "I wanted to find extra jobs but I also wanted to be present at home with the children" (W. Halawani, personal

communication, July 4, 2018). On the emotional level, she felt like the ambiguity created an unspoken fear between her and her children. They were scared of discussing their reality and of facing the truth. She explained that she wanted to protect her two sons from people's "pity" but also shelter them from the reality that their father disappeared (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018).

However, Wadad's greatest contribution to finding her husband was her activism. After losing Adnan, she issued a call to other women who also have missing family members on a radio station. Expecting to meet other mothers and wives of the disappeared to advocate and lobby with, Wadad described arriving at that meeting and finding hundreds of women and children. These women instantly decided to march to the then prime minister's house and managed to meet with him. Since then the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon (CFKDL) was founded and is till this day headed by Wadad.

All of these interviewees reported struggling to obtain a status of 'disappeared' for their missing family member from the government and failing to acquire this status. Therefore, they had to make a difficult choice: Either face challenges every time they sought official documents and certificates that required the presence of the disappeared for their issuance, or declare the missing person dead. Due to legal reasons, some families had to declare their missing family members dead although they did not know whether the missing was dead or alive. Yet, declaring a missing family member dead was in and of itself another major life stressor.

Additionally, for many women like Wadad whose husbands had disappeared, these legal difficulties meant that they had their children's guardianship in the hands of their fathers-in-law. Thus, amid the disappearances, the families of the missing had turbulent legal and custodial struggles. The hardship of the situation was summed up by Jamileh, a mother of five, in the following statement: "We have endured so much pain that there is nothing that scares us anymore" (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018). On the other hand, all of these interviewees' lives were affected by their engagement in the participatory art activity where they painted on chairs to commemorate their missing. This activity impacted the participants on the individual, the group, and the transitional justice levels.

5.2 The Chairs Produced

The artworks that these families produced varied as they represented the individuality of each family and their missing members. They were a source of insight into the artists' and creators' suffering, and into the disappeared's characters and personalities. Among the interviewees, two of them decided to illustrate the traits of the missing person's character and personality.



Figure 1: Chair designed by Michel Sekkar to represent his missing brother Mtanios (ACT and ICRC 2020c)

Michel drew the mountains his brother used to go to for hunting, and he added musical notes along with the mijwiz – a traditional Levantine clarinet – he used to play as can be seen in Figure 1. He also introduced his brother's picture on that chair. He portrayed his brother's hobbies and reminisced on his easygoing spirit. Michel expressed missing the beauty and serenity of his disappeared family member and of having him around, as did Nouhad.



Figure 2: Chair designed by Nouhad El Jurdi to represent her missing son Ayman (ACT and ICRC 2020b)

Nouhad, whose son had disappeared, put a picture of a painting that he liked which represented what she described as “a mother and her son,” explaining that she added this picture to honor him (N. el Jurdi, personal communication, July 17, 2018). She chose to paint the chair blue – her son's favorite color – and put a photo of him along with a letter that he had written to her on the back of that photo as illustrated in Figure 2. The letter read “I send you this picture as a souvenir and to reassure you that we are doing well here” (ACT and ICRC 2020b).



Figure 3: Chair designed by Jamileh Agha to represent her missing husband Nazih (ACT and ICRC 2020d)

Meanwhile, Jamileh decided to recreate the last scene of her husband's life before his disappearance as represented in Figure 3. Given that he was a fisherman, she painted a sea scene from her husband's routine with fishnets, fish, and the motorcycle he would commute on to sell the collected goods. It was a colorful and lively image of her husband's peaceful daily life before the traumatic incident. Jamileh who had her children and grandchildren join her in this artistic activity used it as an opportunity to tell her family the story of her husband and reflect on the bright, peaceful, and modest life that they used to lead together.



Figure 4: Chair designed by Wadad Halawani to represent her missing husband Adnan (ACT and ICRC 2020a)

Lastly, Wadad, as a wife of a missing man and the head of the CFKDL, represented the work she and other families have done to find the disappeared as seen in the figure below. “I put a chair on his chair to say: ‘if you could sit down here, I would tell you about what we – the families – did to find your fate.’ I tried to represent 35 years [of struggle and activism] on a chair. I chose the most outstanding events, but there is a lot more to tell him about” (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). She expressed having been through many challenges in her fight to find him and wishing she could tell him about that. Thus, her chair was representative of her attempt to find her husband, and of her wish to have him back to tell him about the events of her life after his disappearance.

5.3 Impact of Participatory Art on the Individual

This participatory art activity offered the families a chance to share what happened in the past and artistically illustrate certain parts of their experiences for personal artifacts based on testimonies give the viewers insight into the war and the survivors' experiences. When producing art about past atrocities, testimonies are crucial because they contribute to creating more individualized and relatable representations (Cole 2014).

Additionally, producing artworks that revolve around memories necessitates a selection process of the latter (Garnsey 2016). During this activity, the families reflected on memories, pictures, and images they wanted to share and portray. This chance to reflect allowed the families to find meaning in their suffering and process their pain. Wadad declared that she was invested, focused, and engaged in this selection effort. Furthermore, through the recollection of memories, the families had the chance to adjust their attachment and reexamine their relationship with the missing.

This was particularly true for families where various members participated in designing the chair for the missing family member like in Jamileh's case. In such families, members had the chance to reexamine their relationships with the missing and contrast them with the lively and dynamic relationships that they currently share with each other. This was an opportunity to understand and embrace the paradox that their missing family member is simultaneously here and away, while also investing in establishing new relationships with other people, including their present family members (Boss 2017).

Moreover, working on the chairs gave the families a cathartic experience. The act of painting and producing an artistic work in memory of the missing was described by some interviewees as relieving. Referring to his missing brother, Michel said "I saw him before me" (M. Sekkar, personal communication, August 10, 2018). Other interviewees explained that they often felt pain when thinking about their missing, with Jamileh stating that she felt distressed at the onset of the activity. However, she also revealed that this activity transformed the memory of her missing husband into a more beautiful one, as she had the opportunity and space to recall "the good memories" shared with him (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018).

The families had a hard time building trust and engaging with the activity at first due to their past experiences. The four family members interviewed explained that they were unable to rely on the Lebanese state, and unanimously expressed a lack of trust in it. "There is no government," said Michel whose brother disappeared after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, condemning the lack of actions (M. Sekkar, personal communication, August 10, 2018). Meanwhile, Jamileh blamed the state for her struggles and pain. The successive Lebanese governments were inactive and unreliable, and "in denying knowledge or responsibility for the disappearances, the state created a system in which their victims seemed to have never existed at all" (Malin 1994). This had caused frustration among the families of the missing.

Nevertheless, the interviewed families expressed that they found comfort in the company of the team members from ACT and the ICRC who were running the project and that they were able to trust them. They stated that they felt less lonely in their fight for their right to know in the presence of these two NGOs. When talking about them, Jamileh said: "I found people that cared about us" (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018). Along with the emotional support, Wadad saw in these organizations partners in the families' advocacy and lobbying efforts. Michel pointed out to the role that the ICRC and ACT played in shedding media attention on the cause and in raising public awareness. In addition to reestablishing trust despite a violent and lonely past, these interviewees still held onto hope.

Although they lost their missing family member decades ago, these four family members were still hopeful. Some hoped for the return of their missing family members stating that "I did not see him dead" (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018). While others had hope in their work, believed that their message could be heard, and wished that the authorities and the general public would respond. Yet claiming that they were driven by hope, these interviewees also acknowledged the downside of being hopeful.

Wadad referred to hope as a "double-edged sword" for it was both the families' curse and the families' gift (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). Research on the families of the missing found that greater hope was associated with more psychopathological and complicated grief symptoms (Lenferink et al. 2019). Hence, on one hand, hope kept the families waiting for a reunion with their missing family member, yet on the other, it hurt them to hope for something highly unlikely. After all, since the end of the civil war, only a few missing people returned home.

However, those low odds of return did not stop some of these families from handing their fight to their children and grandchildren. Given their growing age, some of the interviewed family members wanted to entrust their children with this cause and to ensure that the search for the fate of the missing went on. Jamileh, a wife, mother, and grandmother declared that "as long as we have a soul and a heart that beats, the truth will appear. If we will not be around to see it, then our children will" (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018). This wife had her daughter and grandchildren participate in painting on her disappeared husband's chair. She insisted on the importance of having her children and grandchildren know who their father and grandfather was, what his personality was like, and what had happened to him. These grandchildren were interested in knowing more about their missing grandfather and participated in every session of the project in their efforts to do so.

Similarly, Wadad expressed that "it was very important to me to tell my grandchildren the truth because it gave them an opinion about the war" (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). She added that "I don't think my children and grandchildren will ever participate in a war because they had a taste of its monstrosity" (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). The grandchildren of all four interviewees were born in postwar Lebanon and did not have the chance to learn about the war in schools, let alone about the

families of the missing. Despite being born after the occurrence of the traumatic event, research has revealed that children and grandchildren of survivors experience trauma-related stress (Giladi and Bell 2013). Second and third-generation children are thus likely to inherit and carry the burden of their family's trauma although they neither lived through the war nor learned about it.

The "Memorialization Project" reignited the families of the missing's hope in having their stories heard (ACT and ICRC 2017). The artistic nature of the activity was novel to these families who had previously opted for protests, awareness-raising campaigns, and lobbying to fight for their cause. Wadad stated that participatory art was a new form of protesting while Jamileh described it as a new way to have their voices heard after years of unsuccessful attempts. Through having the support of the two organizations hosting these activities, the interviewed family members' said that they had greater hope in gathering attention around their cause and in potentially getting answers.

This hope also grew because the families had faith in the work they were doing. These four interviewees explained that they were gradually becoming prouder of their work, and more certain that it would have the outreach and response that they sought. They were mobilized for their cause and regained their strength which had faded after long years of waiting. Thus, the families recovered their hope in raising awareness about the issue of the missing.

On the individual level, the memorialization activity allowed the families to regain trust through establishing trusting relationships with the activity hosts and with the other participants. They also reacquired hope in their cause and in being heard. Moreover, this activity was an opportunity for the participants to engage their families' younger generations in the missing's cause and to discuss with them the war and the family history.

When partaking in such an activity, the families were able to address the ambiguity surrounding the disappearance, and gain mastery and control of what was being presented and displayed. Designing, creating, and executing their artwork assisted them in reacquiring their sense of mastery, gave them the chance to take some control over their lives, and provided them with new hope. Art also offered these families autonomy and freedom instead of limiting them and binding them to the work of a given artist. Lastly, this artistic activity gave the participants a space to express themselves and decide, but also a space to come together.

5.4 Impact of Participatory Art on the Group

When this group activity became a weekly commitment, the interviewed family members found themselves among other missing persons' families. All of the interviewees highlighted that they learned about other families' suffering when they were brought together in a group. Each one of them explained that they were able to identify with each other, and stated that their pain was that of other families as well. "We are all alike" expressed Nouhad (N. el Jurdi, personal communication, July 17, 2018). Furthermore, research revealed that

interpersonal similarities generated empathy which the interviewees reported feeling for one another despite their religious and political differences (Jacob 2011). They all had experienced the same feelings, had undertaken similar extended searches to find their missing, and were willing to participate in the artistic activity for the same reason: To continue fighting for their right to know.

These four family members felt comfort in having other families of the missing hear them out and understand their suffering. The interviewees felt like they were no longer alone in their struggle. They began finding meaning in their experience, as they voiced the ambiguity that they had lived, and found others with whom they could identify and share their experiences with. During the sessions, they were able to talk and a safe space was created for them to share their experiences and freely recall stories about their missing. As put by Nouhad, "I was ready to talk from the first visit. No one ever talked to us about them so when I had the chance, I did" (N. el Jurdi, personal communication, July 17, 2018). This opportunity helped the participating families speak with others who have been through a similar experience.

Along with showing flexibility and willingness to venture with new approaches to raise awareness about the issue of the missing, the families who participated in this activity were willing to unite. These families, who have been searching and waiting for decades for news about their missing, were ready to come together despite the uniqueness of each of their experiences. Wadad pointed out that by bringing together participants with opposing views, this activity allowed for the emergence of an "acquired conscience of the shared pain and suffering" (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). She believed that this conscience helped participants in the group perceive that "not every 'other' is an 'enemy'" (W. Halawani, personal communication, July 4, 2018). This new perception of the other was a leap forward, given the sectarian and communal tension which remained in the wake of the Lebanese Civil War.

Participating in the artistic activity in groups was also a chance for many to foster friendships and establish a network for social support. Nouhad from Aley mentioned that "we [the families of the missing] are close. They became a priority in my life" (N. el Jurdi, personal communication, July 17, 2018). The regular meetings required to complete the artistic activity was a chance for the families to create bonds among each other, centered around their mutual experiences and the mutual desire to know the fate of their missing family members.

5.5 Impact of Participatory Art for Transitional Justice

The interviewees reported that at the onset of the artistic activity, recalling the memories and reflecting on the past that was shared with the missing person was difficult. Michel stated that at the beginning of the activity, every participant was preoccupied with their own worries and concerns. Engaging in remembering the missing was a challenging exercise for some. Jamileh expressed that this activity brought back traumatic memories of her husband's

disappearance and explained that it “reopened [her] wounds” as it felt like the “tragedy was repeating itself” (J. Agha, personal communication, July 16, 2018). Meanwhile, Nouhad explained that the organizers and the activity participants were “strangers” to whom she had to get accustomed to and establish trustful relationships with.

Yet, this participatory art activity had various positive repercussions on the families, given that “artwork might return something to survivors” (Garnsey 2016). The participation of these families’ younger generations provided the latter with knowledge about the past and the war, an education that has been linked to peacebuilding and conflict prevention (Ramírez-Barat and Duthie 2015). Moreover, the engagement of the families of the missing in the artistic activity and as a group and the production of artworks provided them with a form of emotional reparation. This participatory art activity also resulted in symbolic reparation through the creation of a memorial which helps keep the memory of the missing alive as expressed by one of the interviewees: “This chair means that my son now has a place” (N. el Jurdi, personal communication, July 17, 2018). Thus, through producing their own memorials, these families became active participants in the transitional justice process (Shefik 2018). Using art, these families leaped into a more peaceful postwar nation.

The unique chairs produced by the families with different components, stories, and colors helped the public understand who the missing person was, and what the family had experienced (ACT and ICRC 2017). When these chairs were exhibited, they helped build a memory of the past and a narrative on the war. These artworks represented an “alternative archive” in which stories about the war and its disappeared can be learned and transmitted to future generations (Garnsey 2016).

The chairs produced were exhibited to the public in Beit Beirut, in Lebanon’s capital, on April 13, 2017. The exhibition was entitled “Empty chairs, waiting families,” representing the reality of the families of the missing in Lebanon. Attending this one-day-long exhibition was rewarding for these interviewees who were present and proud of their work. According to them, Beit Beirut’s visitors were moved by the stories of these chairs. Likewise, local and international media outlets displayed great interest in the event, interviewing the participating families, and posting articles and pictures about the exhibition. All of the interviewees emphasized on the visibility that the exhibition provided for the issue of the missing in Lebanon. According to them, the exhibition was the ultimate moment where their hope of being heard was realized, and where their efforts through the participatory art activity were being used as a tool to advocate for their right to know and to inform the public about their cause.

6 Conclusion

After the end of the Lebanese Civil War, 150,000 families were left to grieve, while thousands of others were left to search for their missing family members with the Lebanese government taking only a few measures to assist them. These search efforts went on for decades, putting these families' members under stress and sorrow and pushing them to reconstruct their identities and their family roles.

In this Working Paper, the author found that the "Memorialization Project," which was centered on participatory art, had a threefold contribution. It impacted the interviewed participating families on the personal, the group, and the transitional justice levels. The project assisted the families of the missing in coping with ambiguous loss and the pain of their family members' disappearance as it supported them in developing their mastery and processing the ambivalence surrounding the disappearances. The project was also a chance for the families to self-reflect, find meaning in their loss and their struggles, remember their missing, commemorate them, and create a physical memory of them. In addition to that, this project allowed for the families of the missing to trust again and find new hope – a hope of calling attention to the issue of the missing and of potentially acquiring the needed support. In families where members of multiple generations were involved in the production of the chairs, the youth were provided with an opportunity to learn about the war and to reconnect with their families as they all reexamined their attachment to the missing person.

This activity impacted the group as it granted the families of the missing the chance to come together and unite as well. It helped the families realize that they were not alone and provided them with a safe space to open up and share their experiences. Additionally, participatory art enabled the interviewed families' to voice their cause and raise awareness about it in a novel and creative way. The interviewees moreover explained that through this group activity they overcame their political and religious differences and decades-long separations. This shows that participatory art can potentially be employed for reconciliation in recovering postwar nations, particularly in countries where governments remained inactive in the postwar eras. Further research covering a larger number of case studies is needed, however, to fully grasp the relationship between participatory art and reconciliation for the families of the missing and survivors of war.

Along with participatory art's personal and group dimensions, this project also played a role in engaging the public in transitional justice. The interviews revealed that art supported the families by shedding light on the issue of the missing. It namely provided them with emotional and symbolic reparation through the creation of personalized memorials which helped in easing the trauma. This project also mobilized these families and supported them in rallying the public for their right to truth: their right to know. Furthermore, the engagement of younger generations allowed them to learn about the war and its consequences. Lastly, the artifacts produced by the families represented their modest attempt at building a memorial and a site of conscience, and at establishing a collective and shared memory of the issue of the missing and the Lebanese Civil War.

Even after the group activities and the exhibition ended, the interviewed family members explained that the empty chairs will remain as physical representations of the memory of their missing family members and as legacies that they will leave behind. They also stated that they will keep holding onto the hope that their stories will resonate, and that in the future, even after they are gone, the truth about their missing family members will be uncovered. Consequently, all of these contributions of participatory art showed the impact and potentials that such projects have for transitional justice, and brought Lebanon a step closer to closing the Civil War chapter.

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About the author(s) and swisspeace

Sara Abdel Latif worked as a project manager at Act for the Disappeared between 2016 and 2017, after which she joined Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) on their mission in Northeast Lebanon. She also worked as a research assistant in the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) before moving to London where she recently completed an MSc in Mental Health: Psychological Therapies at Queen Mary University of London.

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