“Just Filling Out Paperwork”: ethnographic notes on police records of missing persons in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract: Despite public concern about people going missing in international conflicts or critical episodes of internal violence, thousands of people are reported missing each year in the cities of different countries, under what one would describe as peaceful circumstances. Agglomerated under the single category missing persons, unidentified victims of different crimes, adults who intentionally go missing and young runaways, amongst others, represent a significant portion of the dramas challenging police officers and social workers on a daily basis. The paper analyses police records on missing persons filed within police stations of Rio de Janeiro. Drawing from fieldwork in a police station, it argues that police reports on missing persons are not only material traces of the facts therein registered, but also driving forces for two main processes through which missing persons cases are managed by public agencies in contemporary Brazil. The first process is the statement of position towards the cases by police officers, out of the pair of opposites family issues and police issues. The second, which makes sense in relation to the first, is the delegation of responsibilities to the families of the missing, who ultimately manage and even solve the cases by means of commitments, obligations and affections.

Keywords: ethnography; missing persons; police records; documents; anthropology of the state
On March 9, 2009, the nurse Clara da Silva went to a police station (local acronym DP) in the city Rio de Janeiro to report that her nephew Domingos, 36, single and unemployed, had left home on the afternoon of February 15 and never returned. At the DP, Clara told what happened to a police officer and handed him a portrait of Domingos. The portrait was then attached to a case record produced by that same police officer, giving rise to one of the thousands of missing persons cases that take place annually in Rio.

Three months later, Clara attended the “Missing Persons Sector” (local acronym SDP) of the Homicide Division in Rio de Janeiro, to where the case had been forwarded. The SDP is a section of the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro specialized in investigating missing persons cases. The Sector receives and investigates cases reported to the various DPs of Rio. At the SDP, Clara reported that she had already discovered the whereabouts of Domingos. On March 27th, she had received a phone call from a relative reporting that Domingos had been admitted to a psychiatric center and she was finally able to visit him.

When reporting the fact at the SDP, Clara explained to the police officers of the Sector that her nephew had disappeared while in an aimless and uncertain state, after having been dismissed from the university where he had worked for about ten years. Before leaving the SDP, the nurse signed some papers before the police officers and finally asked for the return of Domingos' portrait which was attached to the records of the case. In her words, the picture "belongs in a family album" (SDP 018/08).1

I. Introduction

Domingos is the main character in one of the thousands of missing persons cases reported annually in Brazilian police stations. Elderly persons with temporary or permanent loss of memory, teenage runaways, and victims of fatal accidents or crimes whose corpses are not identified comprise, along with Domingos, the multiple universe of subjects classified by police, policymakers, activists from social movements and social scientists as missing persons. Despite their heterogeneity, their experiences are regarded by all those agents as particular manifestations of a single phenomenon: the disappearance of persons, also called civil disappearance.2
Within the daily life of a police station, a *missing person case* is a type of occurrence classified as an *atypical fact*, since it does not match any criminal matter provided by Brazilian law. It is not a crime, and therefore it cannot generate a criminal investigation. Notwithstanding, and like many other non-criminal incidents, it is reported, recorded and investigated at police departments on a regular basis. At a DP, every *missing person case* result in forms, letters and documents produced by police officers that accumulate over time. Commonly, other papers and documents left in police stations by relatives and acquaintances of the *missing persons*, such as the portrait of Domingos, are also included in the case files, being attached to those produced by the police officers.

This paper examines documentary records of *missing persons cases* produced in different police stations of Rio de Janeiro between 2005 and 2009. The records analyzed are currently archived in the SDP - the sector of the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro where Clara da Silva went to pick up the portrait of her nephew Domingos. Between March 2008 and December 2009, I conducted an ethnographic research in SDP and followed the daily routine of the five police officers who used to work there. In the scope of this paper, I argue that documentary records on *missing persons cases* are not only material traces of the facts therein registered, but also driving forces for two main processes through which *missing persons* cases are managed by the Civil Police in contemporary Brazil. The first process is the statement of position towards the cases by police officers, out of the pair of opposites *family issues* and *police issues*. The second, which makes sense in relation to the first, is the delegation of responsibilities to the families of the missing, who ultimately manage and even solve the cases by means of commitments, obligations and affections.

I depart from the assumption that the specific documentary records analyzed throughout the paper, all of which are currently archived in binders and storage cabinets at the SDP, must be regarded as part of the broader universe of official documents. Official documents occupy a central place in the regimes of authority, authentication, and production of truths in the modern states, and therefore play a critical role in the chain of acts, authorities and authorizations that structure the bureaucratic field (Bourdieu, 1996). In this sense, they are key pieces on the production of both categories and procedures throughout which agents, offices and public administration sectors intervene in the social world, as well as on the construction of the very need for public intervention. It is in this
sense that the ability to create and maintain files can be seen as the greatest emblems of modern bureaucracy (Riles, 2002: 5).

As Souza Lima (2002) states, in legal-normative categories, public policy and bureaucratic procedures, among which we may highlight the very creation and maintenance of files, there is more than just the application of pre-determined rules and regulations to supposedly given realities. Categories, policies, and procedures are linked to the social issues they seek to circumscribe (and often transform) through processes that are more complex and intricate than the ideals of objectivity, formality and impersonality associated with bureaucracy may make us assume (Weber, 1963). It is departing from this premise that, in this paper, I examine the processes involved in the production and circulation of documentary records of missing persons cases.

Furthermore, from the analytical perspective adopted here official documents can be seen as artifacts that carry more than a merely referential function of recording or graphically representing something that would exist in the world in spite of them. The production, circulation, and filing of documents have consequences in the social world, not only because of their purpose and function, in certain contexts, as criteria of respectability, eligibility, and access to benefits and rights (Santos 1979; Peirano 1986, 2006a, 2006b, 2009), but also because they produce and rearrange relations, in addition to being able to transport, contain or incite affections of various orders. In short, they do not work as sterile and self-contained artifacts, but as material objects of law, administration, and governance that are able to produce different effects and engender multiple emotional links and relations (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 95). It is appropriate, therefore, to investigate the effects caused by documentary records produced, handled and archived in particular contexts.3

II. “A police work that just informs”

Antônio

Maria and Antônio, a retired police officer, have been officially married on paper for over thirty years, although they have been separated for about twenty of them. Maria even has a new partner, named Jeferson, but since 2007, due to financial reasons, Maria, Antônio (and Jefferson) have been living together in the same house.
One morning in March 2008, the three of them left the house together, each with different destinations, and agreed to meet at home in the late afternoon. Maria and Jefereson returned at the appointed time, but Antônio did not. Wondering about his long absence, Maria searched for him on the streets of the neighborhood where they lived, called some of his relatives and went to the bank branch where he would have gone to in the morning, but did not find him. Finally, she decided to go to the police.

This decision took Maria to three divisions: the 29th DP, the 6th DP and the “Missing Persons Sector” (SDP) of the Homicide Division of Rio de Janeiro (local acronym DH). In the 29th DP, she was informed that the case could only be registered 48 hours after Antônio had left home. Frustrated with the information, Maria went on to the 6th DP, where she also did not manage to have the case registered. On the grounds that it was a case involving a retired police officer, something that would differentiate the disappearance of Antônio from other missing persons cases therein recorded, an officer at that police station advised Maria to go in person to the DH and seek the services of the SDP.

The SDP is a sector of the Homicide Division specializing in missing persons cases. As defined by the only legal instrument that regulates its activity, missing persons cases registered in police stations of Rio de Janeiro that have not been resolved in those offices should be forwarded to the Sector. The DPs have a statutory period of fifteen days to investigate and resolve cases. If they are not successful, the investigation becomes the charge of a team of five police officers that compose the active squad of the SDP (Rio de Janeiro, 1991). So, according to those rules, the Sector should only receive cases through shipments of documents made among police departments, and not by taking assignments from direct complaints made by the so called communicant persons – i.e., acquaintances, relatives and family members of missing persons who go to police stations and report the cases. “Cases”, as suggested above, are irreducible material entities (Hull 2012a: 116), which consist of sets of papers produced and/or assembled by police officers.

At the SDP, the first step taken for each case is usually a phone call to its respective communicant person. If the information obtained in this call is considered final and provides the outcome of the disappearance, the papers are archived shortly thereafter. Otherwise, other provisions, titled generically as diligences, are taken. The most regular diligences are, in the first place, sending letters and other documents from the Sector to
institutions and government agencies, of both a law enforcement nature and otherwise, asking for information that might elucidate the case. Secondly, consultations on computer information systems such as INFOSEG Network (Network of National Integration of Public Security, Justice and Surveillance Information)\(^6\) and databases such as the one held by DETRAN-RJ - an organization that, among other documents, issues those ones related to civil identification in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

The role of institutions consulted via official letter and information systems varies for each disappearance, according to the addresses registered in the case - address of the communicating person, address of the missing person, and what police officers call *place of the fact*, referring to where the missing person would have last been seen. The most commonly consulted institutions are public hospitals, the Instituto Médico-Legal (IML), the Instituto de Identificação Félix Pacheco, the Santa Casa de Misericordia (specifically the files that record names of people buried in the 13 cemeteries it manages in Rio de Janeiro), the Leão XIII Foundation, which coordinates shelters and welfare projects, and finally, the Secretaria de Estado de Administração Penitenciária (prison administration). This range of institutions indicates the thinking regularly assumed by police on cases: disappearances, from their point of view, would lead to hospitalizations, deaths under the charge of public agencies, assistance by social services and/or arrests. On the other hand, it also indicates that the investigations conducted by them are directed almost exclusively to government agencies that act as *checkpoints*. These agencies, as Jeganathan (2004) shows, consist on official enterprises that seek, through the verification and recording of personal identities, to map, to locate and to anticipate flows, movements and processes that could threaten the social order in the context of a State.

If any of these *diligences* solves the disappearance or if the *communicant* informs the police that *the missing person* has been found, the papers produced and assembled at police stations are stored in the SDP, as a “solved case”. Otherwise, the case is maintained for varying periods of time “in progress”, and is only archived when the officer in charge decides on no further procedures, no waiting for further information, nor undertaking of further *diligences*. These are considered “suspended cases”. The archiving of “solved” and “suspended cases” depends on the authorization of a delegate from the Homicide Division.
These processes, as mentioned before, are only carried out if the DPs, which have the prerogative of registering the cases, fail to solve them within fifteen days. However, that was not what happened in the disappearance of Antônio. Contrary to the norm, the SDP officer who received Maria saw fit to attend to her and create a missing person case in the name of Antônio. He justified the exception in the body of the first form he filled in, claiming to have registered the case to mitigate the suffering of Maria - suffering not only for having a missing relative, but also for moving through different police stations without receiving adequate service.

The statements made by the police officer in the form point to the potential efficacy of statements about another person’s suffering (Boltanski, 1993) specifically in relation to missing persons cases. Noteworthy, in this sense, was the runaround Maria received due to refusal to immediately record the case at the first DP she went to, and then, the suggestion that the case would be treated with distinction and recorded directly at the SDP because Antônio was a retired police officer. Indeed, this is what happened: the case was exceptionally registered at the Sector. Nevertheless, the reasons for this were triggered not by the professional identity of the missing person, but the suffering of the communicant before the Civil Police:

Regardless of the “peregrinations” suffered by many families of missing persons, it is increasingly apparent the lack of information within the organization of the Civil Police itself, either with regard to the registration of the disappearance, either about the area of its assignment. In an attempt to mitigate the need for physical movements of the communicant and better define a solution to initiate the search of the whereabouts of the missing citizen, the statements presented herein were taken for information and appropriate action. (SDP/DH 061/08)

As I mentioned earlier, the disappearance of persons is ranked in Brazilian police stations as an atypical fact, a category that encompasses occurrences for which there is no correspondence in Brazilian criminal law, but which are in fact recorded daily by police officers. Because it does not constitute a crime, it does not generate criminal investigations. The set of documents about each disappearance, unlike criminal investigations, maintains the permanent status of a Preliminary Information Check (local acronym, VPI), also called Information Provenance Check, while it remains in the DP where the communication of the case took place. The term communication, as well
communicant, is used in missing persons cases precisely because, as it is not crime, police officers believe it is not appropriate to speak of (and write) complaint, denunciation, and/or denouncer. People considered missing, in that same sense, are not named victims, but missing persons, which very often leads police officers to cross out the term ‘victim’ printed on some standard forms filled out at police stations.

In the SDP, every VPI of disappearance gains the status of Inquest (sindicância, in Portuguese). In the perception of the police officers of the Sector, Inquests are “only administrative procedures”, ineffective and unimportant when compared to police investigations that have the status of Inquiry (inquérito policial, in Portuguese). This relative irrelevance and poor efficiency of the Inquests are part of a wider perception shared by police officers: the idea that both the missing persons cases are unimportant occurrences compared with cases of criminal type, and that agents dedicated exclusively to them, such as officers of the SDP, are devalued when compared to colleagues who deal with criminal activities.

This understanding would be among the causes, on the one hand, of a general lack of knowledge about missing person cases among police officers, denounced on paper in the case of Antônio, and, on the other hand, of the frustration of those who regularly deal with such occurrences. The most apparent part of that lack of awareness would appear in what police officers call the “48 hours myth”, also present in the case of Antônio: the quite widespread misunderstanding, devoid of legal support, that missing persons cases can only be registered after two days of the date of disappearance. If the imposition of waiting is a key aspect of bureaucratic structures (Hoag, 2011: 86), it gains precise contours (48 hours) and is a regular mode of operation in the way police officers deal with missing persons cases. This mode of operation is not only a cause for frustration among officers of the SDP, but it also justifies exceptions adopted by those agents, as indicated in the case of the Antônio, recorded directly in the Sector.

A second motive of frustration in the SDP is the classification itself of the missing persons cases as atypical facts. Given the lack of a criminal classification that establishes what a missing person case is, police officers state that they feel devoid of clear guidelines regarding the cases. This lack would explain, from the point of view of the police officers, something that my fieldwork in the Sector allowed me to comprehend: that these agents
define and redefine, in their daily dealings with documents that they record and archive, what is (and what is not) a missing person case. Police officers who deal with this type of occurrence establish the empirical boundaries of their work not according to predetermined milestones prescribed by laws and regulations, as would be expected in bureaucracies (idem, ibidem, 83), but departing from an informal rating and position taking produced and reproduced throughout their own routine of production, circulation and archiving of the papers.

The most fundamental classification guiding this constant definition of what is a missing person case forms a pair of opposites that appears abundantly in conversations, documents, and attendances at the SDP: family issues X police issues. This pair seems to organize satisfactorily, from the point of view of the police officers, the heterogeneity of the dramas recorded in police stations as missing person cases, which includes teenage runaways, cases of elderly who temporarily or permanently lose their senses, adults who choose to leave their homes, jobs and routines, and fatal victims of crimes whose bodies found by vagrants, beggars, and those who rely handouts, among many others. Resorting to this pair of categories, police officers manage to not only define what is a missing person case, thus establishing the limits of their performance, but also explain their understanding of the relevance and effectiveness of their work on the multiple cases they deal with.

From the perspective of the police officers, missing persons cases are family issues, as opposed to police issues. They are not “urban violence” or “crime issues”, in their words, and this would be reinforced by the absence of an accompanying criminal classification. For this reason, the officers say, dealing with missing persons cases clash with what would be the proper assignments and responsibilities of the police.11 In this sense, resorting to this dichotomy police officers counter possible broader definitions of what can be considered “police work”, and state that they should not be held responsible for investigating non-criminal occurrences.12 Therefore, they claim, record and emphasize in different ways, in different moments, that missing persons cases consist of facts entailed by non-criminal conflicts whose causes, consequences, and solutions are exclusively family issues.13

Among many others, the case of Antônio would endorse this understanding, having purposely been cited as an example of what is a missing person case by the SDP police officer with whom I first spoke during fieldwork. The outcome of the disappearance of the
A retired police officer was due to Maria herself, who decided to look for him in a city in Minas Gerais where they had traveled on holiday in the past. Maria went alone to that city in search of Antônio, and found him there, staying "in a hotel, claiming that he was there to rest" (SPD/DH 061/08). The day after the meeting, Maria went personally to the SDP and reported that the case was solved. She took Antônio's ID, which would prove, from her point of view, that the retired police officer was no longer a missing person.

The fact that Maria took this document as a proof that the case was solved met one of the practices currently employed by the SDP officers to deal with missing persons cases. From their point of view, civil identification papers and IDs have the ability to prove that an individual is no longer a missing person, as assumed by Maria regarding Antônio's case. In the SDP, at least in some cases, obtaining an ID means that the person cannot be considered missing, confirming that a particular document, in a particular context, "legalizes and formalizes the citizen and makes him or her visible, subject to control and legitimate for the State; the document makes the citizen in both performative and binding terms." (Peirano, 2006a: 27)

I will later return to this issue and introduce other nuances and meanings attributed to identity documents in the SDP. Before, however, it is important to shed light on the concepts surrounding missing persons cases in effect among police officers at the Sector.

Daniela

As with the conversations I had within the SDP, and with cases like Antônio's, the disappearance of Daniela is one of the many occasions in which police officers of the Sector make, remake and emphasize statements that missing persons cases are family issues. The records of the case, in this sense, not only refer to the disappearance of Daniela and the diligences by the police regarding it, but rather allow those agents to position themselves regarding what a missing person case is and what responsibilities it entails. Daniela, a 22-year-old secretary, left her two young daughters in the care of their grandmother, went home to work and did not return. The case was archived at the SDP one year and three months after having been registered in a DP under the following rationale:

some family issue must have happened that made DANIELA leave the house, since according to the communicant (Daniela’s mother) her
daughter called during carnival of this year saying she would appear, but unfortunately to date she has not been to visit her mother. Thus, I send to you Sir the analysis and resolution since this inquiry is resolved in this service of whereabouts discovery. This I what I have the mission of informing. (SDP/DH 030/07)

This record was signed in the final report on Daniela’s case, in which the police officer of the SDP requested authorization to archive documents related to it. The authorization was required not because Daniela’s whereabouts had been discovered, nor because she had obtained an ID or identification document after the disappearance, but because it is not for the police to deal with family issues. Seeing the disappearance of the secretary as related to her family relationships, police officers removed its exceptionality and thus made police action on the case not only unnecessary, but also unfounded. This course of action is similar to what Enne, Carrara, and Vianna (2002) reveal about the legal management of cases of violence against women in Rio de Janeiro.

From the perspective of police officers, when faced with this kind of issue the police have neither obligations nor appropriate means of action to resort. With their delicate sequences of events, that generate suffering and require skills and procedures different from those required by police issues, missing persons cases "are not our service, but we end up doing it", as a policewoman who headed the SDP once said to me during my fieldwork. When dealing with these cases, police officers believe that everything they do and can do boils down to “just filling out paper”, and argue that the search for missing persons and the effective investigation of cases should not be conducted at police stations. For this reason, according to them, they end up dealing exclusively with the production of unimportant documents (“just administrative procedures”, as they say) and doing nothing more. In short, more than a language of self-exoneration, such as the ones often triggered in public departments (Herzfeld 1992: 135-156), "to end up dealing with documents" means, in the SDP and other police departments that deal with missing persons cases, filling and recording forms, reports, and other papers about dramas that mistakenly crossed the invisible boundary that should separate family issues of police issues.

Amid the heterogeneity of dramas recorded as missing persons cases, however, there are those in which stories about possible crimes such as murder, kidnapping, destruction of the corpse, and forced disappearance of people, among others abound. Such
cases would be comprised in the universe of *police issues*, they would give sense to the categories “urban violence” and “criminality” and would justify, at first, the establishment of criminal investigations. They would be, at last, able to give importance to the *missing persons cases*, to the work done for that kind of occurrence and hence to the police officers who perform it. As we will see in the case of Elói, however, this is not what happens.

**Elói**

Born in Saquarema, the young Elói, 20, lived alone in the neighborhood of Vila Isabel, in a flat owned by his mother. One night, in August 2005, three friends visited him at that home. The four left the next morning for the city of Saquarema, where they would spend a few days at Elói’s parents’ house. By 11 pm, however, Elói went to buy drugs in Morro São João and never returned.

Gilson, father of Elói, went to Rio de Janeiro to search for him, and went several times to the IML and to public hospitals of the city. Without success in these pursuits and carrying with him a portrait of his son, he finally went to a DP. It was then that he reported, without citing sources, that his son may have had a falling out with drug dealers and then been killed, but his body had not been found. Gilson had received two conflicting reports about the fate of the corpse: it may have been left inside a vehicle set alight in the neighborhood of Madureira, but it could also have been dumped on the border between Morro São João and Morro dos Macacos. Two military police battalions have conducted searches for the body across the two areas without success.

The officer who met with Gilson at the DP recorded the case and then requested information about Elói to institutions that might have hospitalized, arrested or even buried him. None of the institutions consulted provided any information on the young man. Four months later, the case was referred to the SDP, where the first *diligence* taken was to convene Gilson.

In the SDP, Gilson reported facts that he had learned shortly after Elói’s disappearance and that would be part of the trajectory of the young man across what his father called "the world of lawlessness" (SDP/DH 394/05). Elói appears to have been part of a scheme to steal fire hoses from residential buildings, as well as being a frequent buyer of drugs in a crack house (*boca de fumo*, in Portuguese) that was a rival to the one he may
have gone to the night he was killed. Regarding the death of the young man, he said the murder may have been confirmed "by residents of the community, which made the communicant really believe that his son had been killed by traffickers of that 'crack house'" (SDP/DH 394/05).

Faced with Gilson's new statements and with the documents first produced on the case in the DP, the police officer of the SDP made one more and definitive diligence: he produced a report on the case and requested authorization to archive it. Although of the case was full of suspected crime, the touchy and, at the same time, resigned and self-exonerating narrative of the police officer sets up a space to take a position before missing persons cases, classifying them as family issues regarding to which the police fatally can “just fill out paperwork”. The characters highlighted in the narrative are father and son, and not traffickers, and the facts emphasized are those indicating deviations in the life of an ungrateful son, and not a murder. Enrolled in Elói’s everyday deviant life, the events are presented as memories of a "family album", to recall Domingos' case, and not as police issues. Consequently, the police work appears in the narrative as a set of “solely administrative procedures” that do nothing more, or could do nothing more, than producing documents:

Unemployed, and living alone the young Elói took advantage of the support that his father gave to feed his addiction; his father maintained him not only financially, and even giving him physical and geographical space, as he moved with his wife to Saquarema to provide greater freedom for the son, in the best of intentions. However, after the disappearance he found a trail of problems. From there emerged numerous comments and morbid details of what would have been his son execution by the traffickers, not knowing why or even whether they were true or false. What remains is the disappearance record, the anticipation of an imaginary death. There is a police work left that indicates little, and just informs that there are no records on behalf of the missing person. Unfortunately. Nothing found. No record. No hope of life. Thus exposed, considering the time elapsed since its first register; considering the lack of evidence or facts; considering the negative responses to questioning conducted, I request of you Sir the SUSPENSION of the Inquiry, until further notice, except in the case of better judgment. This is my duty to inform. (SDP/DH 394/05)
Records simultaneously emotional and resigned as the ones that constitute Elói's case, as well as statements about "end up dealing with documents" and phrases such as “just filling out paper” and “just administrative procedures”, point to three dimensions of the management of missing people cases in police departments: (1) they indicate that police officers perceive their work towards missing persons cases as something not pertinent, nor effective, and they write that in the very papers they produce, put into circulation and/or archive every day; (2) they show that these agents conceive of the acts of filling out and archiving documents as the entirety of their work (that's all they do) but, at the same time, as something small or non-important (since all what they do is “just filling out paper”, in a kind of work that “just informs”); and (3) they make explicit, in the materiality of the papers, that for these officers those works of minor importance are inevitable and inexorable, carrying airs of destiny. As suggested by Herzfeld (1992, 139), the idea of fate or destiny, among the languages and symbols triggered in the departments, meetings and bureaucratic practices, allows both citizens and bureaucrats to deal with frustrations, humiliations, and defeats experienced during and due to their interactions without losing self-respect.

Those dimensions of police administration of missing persons cases make it imperative to pay attention to the documents that police officers handle daily, and therefore are the main motivation of this paper. Nevertheless, the importance of paying attention to papers is further reinforced by numerous references to other documents present among the records of missing persons cases.

III. “Belonging to a family album”

Quincas, Belmiro, and Elias

The sisters Neusa and Inácia live together in a house in Tijuca and some time ago began to allow Quincas, who was receiving psychiatric treatment at the Institute of Psychiatry at UFRJ (IPUB), to live in a shed on the property. One afternoon, Neusa went to the shed to invite Quincas for lunch, but found only a note:

Ms. Inácia and Ms. Neusa, sorry for be saying these words, but I'm aimless, I know that my life will be hell out of this house, since I never
met two people who liked me so much. You know I'm not crazy, that is a thing of destiny, so I apologize a lot for leaving this way. I do not know where I'm going, but I ask please take care of all my documents for me. Quincas. At least I left a note for you. (SDP/DH 004/07)

The following day, carrying the note, an IPUB document card, and two photographs of Quincas, Inácia went to the 19th DP and reported what had happened to a police officer. The officer then produced a case file in the name of Quincas that, two months later, was referred to the SDP with the note, the IPUB document, and the photographs. As soon as the documents were received, a police officer in the Sector phoned Inácia's residence for an update on the case. He then learned that Quincas had returned.

A similar sequence of events involved teacher Sílvia and her husband, the municipal guard Belmiro. One morning in March 2008, Silvia went to the 37th DP, at Ilha do Governador, and her reports gave rise to a missing person case in which she appears as communicant and Belmiro, as missing person. The record says:

According to the communicant, her husband, a municipal police officer and an addict in treatment, left home without any word. He had been in crisis lately and would have been seen for the last time complaining a lot about life and saying he had enough and would disappear. According to the communicant he had been in a very aggressive mood, had stopped shaving, combing his hair and taking care of himself, but before leaving he took his police ID, INSS [National Institute of Social Security] benefit cards, bank card and a small photo album. She wanted the fact registered because the municipal guard was absent in his compulsory medical exam in the Municipal Guard. (SDP/DH 187/08)

Within the three following months, three warrants were sent to Silvia, summoning her to attend the DP, but none was answered. In July 2008, the case was finally referred to the SDP, where the only record produced was a report in which the officer in charge recommends it to be archived. In the document, the agent claims to have phoned Silvia and received information that Belmiro had returned days earlier.

The zeal and importance given to documents by Quincas and Belmiro points to the paramount importance and the multiple capacities of these and other papers that certify and assure identities, relationships, and rights, not only in police departments, but in the general context of States. Graphic artifacts such as civil identification cards, INSS benefit cards, and municipal police documents, as shown by Peirano (1986, 2006a, 2006b), carry with
them the symbolism of stability, and are objects of permanent value because of the
permanent status assigned to the bonds they establish, manifest and/or guarantee among
patients and the State. Navaro-Yashin says that documents integrate the base paraphernalia
of modern States and legal systems: “they are their material culture” (Navaro-Yashin, 2007:
84) and, accordingly, they are more than mere traces of material powers and practices of
the State or, as stated by Da Matta (2002), "the visible hand of the State."

Documents are artifacts that, like any bureaucratic practice, affirm the basic
teleology of the State and its almost demiurgic authority over official acts of consecration
(Herzfeld, 1992) (Bourdieu, 1996). Production, distribution, and archiving reproduce both
the State-idea, and the State-system that, for purposes of analysis, we can distinguish as
constituent parts of the modern State (Abrams 1988). After all, if on one hand they are
embodiments of permanent links between individuals and states, performatively turning
these subjects into citizens, on the other hand documents are also conditions for procedures
and demands to be untangled in different apparatuses of public administration. Belmiro's
case, for instance, was reported at the DP not because Sílvia wanted the police to
investigate it, but to cease responsibilities arising from his absence for a medical exam he
had to attend. The police document that certified the disappearance of the guard, if accepted
by the Municipal Guard, would have the ability to stop or avoid administrative and criminal
penalties that could cause trouble to Belmiro. Following this chain, such a document would
also have the ability to avoid problems for Sílvia herself, who was married to Belmiro on
paper.

Nevertheless, and inseparably, these documents have also a second ability: to allow
the subjects to which they refer and who possess, carry and/or put them into circulation to
be individuals, and subscribe stability not only in the State world they inhabit, but also, and
inseparably in the course of their own lives. (Caplan & Torpey, 2001: 6-7) Let's remember,
in this sense, that Belmiro had disappeared taking with him his municipal guard card, his
INSS card and a photo album, and also that Quincas presented himself in the note left for
Neusa and Inácia as someone with no destination who, however, was concerned with
keeping his documents safe. If "documents have a symbolic life within a particular State"
(Peirano, 2006a: 35), they not only make the subjects (properly documented) citizens of
that State, but also "establish the individual as one and unique, and produce, in the modern world, an ideally absolute individualization." (ibid ibid: 27)

Another illustrative case of this dual ability of documents is Elias' one. He was a doorman who lived in a flat next to Alice's, one of his three sisters. After almost two weeks without news of him, Alice communicated the disappearance of her brother in a DP. In the first record of the case the police officer who attended her wrote that Alice had been in the flat, which "was perfect, with everything tidy, including all his documents inside" (SDP/DH 051/07). Afterwards, while investigating input records of corpses in IML, the officer found that a man with similar physical characteristics to those of Elias had suffered a fatal hit days before and was at the Institute awaiting identification. He was Elias. Because he was hit not carrying with him any of his documents, in case he was not identified through his fingerprints, and recognized and claimed by a family, he would be buried as an indigent in a mass grave. 15

Elias' case not only highlights the symbolism of stability carried by the documents and their dual capacity (to turn subjects into citizens and to allow for the inscription of those subjects in their own life trajectories), but also announces some effects caused by the possession, circulation and, consequently, the absence of documents - such as, for example, being buried as an indigent. If obtaining certain documents removes the subject of the condition of missing person, Elias’ case reveals that not carrying them in certain circumstances may turn him into an indigent. The need to own and carry documents, in this sense, "has its reverse side: to remove, dispossess, deny and empty the social recognition of the individual who does not have the required document in certain contexts". (Peirano, 2006: 27)

Álvaro

By analyzing missing persons cases it is possible to know two orders of effects caused by the documents in which they are recorded: (1) unintended effects, indicative of the social force driven by the production and circulation of official papers, that "in their attempt of dominant rationality, the State does not control" (idem ibidem, 38); and (2) regular effects, that suggest that the same force is often a constituent part of the routine practices of State agents. Like Álvaro's case narrated below, some missing persons cases
make clear that the production and circulation of official documents can engender processes that are improbable and, in certain sense, uncontrollable. The social force driven by them often exceeds the administrative space of the State-system, casing effects that extrapolate institutional walls, checkpoints, police stations, and other government offices. Notwithstanding, other cases, narrated below, indicate that this force is often essential to the regular functioning of bureaucratic procedures and practices that are predictable, controlled, and even desired by state agents such as, for example, police officers.

A municipal civil servant, 59 years old, Álvaro left home saying he would "go for a drink and a walk" (SDP/DH 099/06), as he used to do very often, but this time he did not return. A week later, his sister, with whom he shared an apartment, went to a DP to report the fact, taking a portrait of him. Three months later, the case was referred to the SDP without any clue about where Álvaro could be, and containing, among its records, that portrait.

The SDP was then sought by a person, also a civil servant from the city Rio de Janeiro, who asked the police not for information about Álvaro, but that some relative of him be found to go to City Hall to officiate the disappearance and "sign the necessary documents" (SDP/DH 099/06) assuring that he was missing. This need for documentation generated queries in information systems that allowed a police officer to locate Valéria, a daughter of Álvaro, and summon her to appear at SDP.

To the surprise of the Sector’s officers, Valéria went to the SDP the morning after the call, to say that she could even go to the City Hall to record the disappearance, but also that she knew nothing about the case or about Álvaro himself. Valéria had not seen her father since she was a baby and it only when she arrived at the Sector that she saw his face for the first time, through the portrait included among the records of that missing person case. To the astonishment of the police officers, before leaving the SDP Valéria asked to keep the portrait, "for her personal storage" (SDP/DH 099/06).

Álvaro's case makes it clear that the activation of the affiliation between him and Valéria, a tie that existed only in bureaucratic records, was a direct effect of these same records and of the need for formalizing his disappearance in the City Hall. It may be seen therefore, as a product of the unexpected social force driven by the production and circulation of official documents, whose effects go beyond institutional walls. Moreover,
the case of the civil servant, which ends with the photo moving from the bundle of documents that make up that missing person case to Valéria's "personal storage", shows that multiple affections established between people and documents can be considered facets of the arts of governance (Navaro-Yashin, 2007: 88), though they are unprecedented, difficult to control and often surprising.

But if cases like Álvaro's reveal unanticipated effects of the social force driven by official documents, others explain the more regular effects these papers may cause. Bureaucratic practices, particularly those of registration and documentation, trigger processes essential to the very functioning of the State-system, ranging from those set forth in regulations, rules and laws to those unregulated or even illegal although desirable and predictable from the point of view of bureaucrats. The production of a collective agency and therefore the de-invidualization of acts and responsibilities described by Hull (2012a) is an example of one of these processes, as well as the encompassing and verticalizing perceptions of the State, such as those ethnographed by Gupta and Ferguson (2002). Although much of the work of bureaucrats happens in brief interactions through very diverse stations, demands, claims, denials, and processes “must find their way onto the paper of files to have a life beyond talk”. (Hull 2012a: 113).

**Arlete, Cinira, and Melissa**

If, as I argued earlier, police officers deal with missing persons cases resorting to the pair of opposites family issues X police issues, now, to conclude the paper, I seek to demonstrate that these agents not only classify missing persons cases as family issues, but also delegate responsibilities before the cases to the families of the missing persons. One of the driving forces of this process, as indicated by the cases of Arlette, Melissa and Cinira, is precisely the ability of the documentary records of the cases to cause effects that not only go beyond institutional walls, but also can transpose the dividing line, produced by the police officers themselves, which would separate police issues from family issues.

In these three cases, all of them involving teenagers who left their homes voluntarily and returned after different time intervals, the families of the missing persons are regarded as unities that should self-manage and therefore administer and solve their own issues, such as the eventual disappearance of one of its members. That administration, although passing
through police departments via the *communication of missing persons cases*, is effectively completed within the families, tracing a path similar to the one of Domingos' photo, in the case that opened this paper. The portrait of Domingos, we shall remember, was delivered at the police station by the *communicant* of the case, but eventually ended up returning to a "family album".

The main instruments through which *missing persons cases* are managed and even solved by the families of the missing are commitments, obligations, and affections related to the control of behaviors, desires, and also of the mobility of the missing. Such commitments, obligations, and affections act as means of managing the cases because, in effect, they are recorded and filed in official documents. They are, after all, commitments, obligations, and feelings that “find their way onto the paper of files”, as stated by Hull, and therefore they carry the social force driven by official documents. Arlete's case is exemplary of this process.

On January 7, 2008, Regina, a maid, left early for work, as usual. She returned at the usual time and found her daughter, Arlete, 16, watching television. The two had dinner together and then went to bed. Regina went to sleep, "leaving her daughter awake, and her daughter said that she would go to the residence of her friend Ana, and that she was going to sleep there". (SDP/DH 131/08) The following day, Regina worked as usual, but when she returned home she did not find Arlete at the house.

During the four following days, the maid followed her routine, waiting every night with the hope of finding Arlete back home. That did not happen. On January 12th, she went to a DP and had the disappearance of her daughter registered as a *missing person case*. Almost a month later, she was again at that police station to report the very opposite: Arlete had returned.

In June 2008, Arlete's case, although solved, was mistakenly sent to the SDP. Before filing it, the police officer in charge of it saw fit to call Regina and close the case with the following record:

By telephone the communicant said that her daughter had returned home after staying a few days in the company of friends, and stated that since then she seeks to maintain greater control over the minor. She even punished her with a spanking when she got home. It was instructed that the mother arrange the identity card of the minor. (SDP / DH 131/08)
The case of Melissa, a 14-year-old schoolgirl who used to spend a day or two away from home without any word, had a similar outcome. In April 2008, Melissa spent three days out without communicating with any person in her family, and her mother decided to go to a police station. At the time, a missing person case was filed in the name of Melissa. A week later, however, her mother returned to the DP to report that the girl was already home. In the case records, the police officer who attended her reported:

That according to information from the communicant her daughter Melissa was found in the neighborhood of Quintino at a friend's house, and brought home for certain measures with respect to her behavior to be taken. (SDP / DH 159/08)

Finally, somewhat richer in details and records, there is the case of Cinira, a 19-year-old college student who left the house in which she lived with her mother and sister and returned ten days later. Once she went back home, Cinira herself went to the DP where her missing person case had been recorded. The records of her visit to the DP resemble those ones regarding the cases of Arlete and Melissa: they set down on paper commitments to control behaviors. In the case of Cinira, however, there is commitment to self-control and to what would be a good direction of herself, and not of others. The speeches of the young girl to the police officer who attended to her remained so registered:

(…) that in fact no crime happened related to her disappearance; that she left the house where she lives with her mother at approximately 10 pm, not giving satisfaction to anyone, not making any kind of contact until reappearing ten (10) days after the disappearance, saying she was bored of life, tired and dramatic; that she is very sorry not to have made contact with the family; when she goes out for a walk, and if she is late, she will call her family to communicate where and with whom she is; the declarant said (...) that during the period she was out she did not feel like talking to anyone, an attitude which she regrets a lot. (SDP / DH 020/08)

These confessions of guilt and regret, such as the “spanking” recorded in Arlete’s case, the commitment to control one's own desires, feelings and behaviors, in the case of Cinira, and even to punish another person for her behavior, as we saw with Melissa's mother, certainly were not reported in police stations and recorded in official documents randomly. Their effectiveness as tools through which missing persons cases are managed stems from the social force driven by the very material support they are recorded on,
although, as we saw earlier, police officers look upon these papers as “only as administrative procedures”, unimportant and ineffective. They confirm that mundane bureaucratic practices as “just filling out paper” are able to fundamentally change the way bodies are oriented, lives are lived and subjects are formed. (Ferguson & Gupta 2002:984)

Commitments, affections, regrets and obligations that find their way onto paper files are ways to manage and even resolve *missing persons cases* that are established between families and police officers, and that cross the border between *family issues* and *policy issues* bounded by the officers. Notwithstanding, they consist of modes of administering the cases that cross the line demarcated to separate these universes without obscuring or undoing it. Commitments, affections, and obligations are crucial resources of that both mark and reproduce the separation between *family issues* and *policy issues*, as well as evidence that the effects of what police officers “end up doing” when faced with missing persons cases are not confined in the space of the police stations. In this sense, the documents they “end up dealing with” play a crucial role in a process of delegation of the responsibilities to administer and solve *missing persons cases* by the police officers to the families of missing, and this administration is finally held by means of commitments, affections and obligations.

Although they are recorded exclusively by police officers, commitments, obligations and feelings registered in *missing persons cases* files are experienced in *family*. Hereupon, that the first record of the case of Cinira, in which she ensures that "no crime happened in relation to her disappearance" (SDP/DH 020/08), is enlightening: in some way, it seems to exonerate the police of acting on the case. A crime not having occurred, the onus would be on Cinira to repent and commit to contacting her family whenever she left, even if she did not want to do so. Considering the conceptions of police officers of the SDP regarding their own work, according to whom, when there is no crime they can “just fill out paperwork”, it is quite clear that police officers do not only record, but also entail commitments, obligations and feelings through which the families manage *missing persons cases*. The documents filled out, manipulated, and archived by police officers are therefore key pieces of the process of delegation of responsibility from police officers to the families, whose effectiveness derives largely from the social force they set in motion.
Closing remarks

During the time I conducted fieldwork in the SDP, the Homicide Division of Rio de Janeiro occupied the whole seventh floor of the headquarters building of the Civil Police of the state. The SDP consisted of a small room on that floor, furnished with six desks, four computers, three handsets, some storage cabinets and many drawers arranged along three of its four walls. Those drawers made up what the police officers working in the Sector call “the SDP archive”. Each drawer of the archive stored, in individual folders, various combinations of forms, letters, records, photos, and notes that constitute missing persons cases.

The main argument in this paper is that these various documents are not only material traces of the cases they record, nor are they mere compliances of the notarial function performed by police stations of Rio de Janeiro, although they do serve more to record practices performed by police officers and less for the accumulation of inputs for their inquiry and solution (Miranda et al, 2010). More than that, the documentary records of missing persons cases are a constitutive part of two main processes through which the cases are managed: first, the position taking by police officers, and second, the delegation of responsibilities to the families of the missing persons. If official documents can organize, associate and relate people (Hull, 2012a: 134), as much as provoke emotions of the most different orders (Navaro-Yashin, 2007), this paper sought to present the processes, relationships and emotions put into action by police records of missing persons cases.

The understanding of such processes makes explicit nuances, shades, and dimensions that are less visible, but no less effective, than what Reis (1998) calls, in a study about conceptions of citizenship present in Brazil, “bureaucratic oppression”. Compelling requirements of documentary evidence even of the fact that a subject is alive, as in one of the cases treated by the author, would be experienced in Brazil as abuses, irrationalities, excesses, and evidences "of the anonymity and the impersonality that are, at bottom, the bureaucratic translation of the essentially human dramas" (:249). The author's interpretation is similar to DaMatta's (2002), who argues that official documents are "signs of an intolerable and brutal - because impersonal and mechanical - political and bureaucratic control" (:39). Together, both authors put into relief the oppressive traces of the production
and circulation of official documents, and point to experiences of frustration and humiliation caused by them, invariably associated to the idea of impersonality.

The analysis of documentary records of missing persons cases, however, call attention to other experiences and processes caused by the production and circulation of official documents in public offices, revealing frustrations and attempts of self-exoneration among those who have the prerogative of producing and archiving records, as well as commitments, obligations and feelings of those who need those documents, and whose life is subject to record. On the one hand it reveals that the so-called “bureaucratic oppression” also affects bureaucrats themselves, who see themselves as “just filling out paper” and, as we saw in the case of Elói, performing a type of work "that just informs" (SDP / DH 394/05). On the other hand, it also suggests that the very idea of “bureaucratic oppression” should encompass not only the numerous and inescapable demands of documentation experienced by Brazilian citizens in various contexts and situations, but also the affections, commitments and obligations provoked by the production and circulation of official documents.

[1] All names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals involved in the missing persons cases narrated throughout the article.

[2] The term civil disappearance is used (cf. Oliveira 2007) to make a difference in relation to the so-called political disappearances, typified by international law as forced disappearance of person. Defined under the International Criminal Court in April 1998, and regulated by the Rome Statute, forced disappearance of persons is understood as "the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by a state or political organization, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of these, followed by the negative to reporting on the deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of leaving them outside the protection of the law for a prolonged period. This concept was kept in the final Statute as a crime against humanity." (Jardim 2011: 14).

[3] I use of italics throughout the text to highlight categories and recurrent expressions in SDP which proved to be fundamental to understand the routine of the Sector. Purposely, among categories and expressions stressed are both administrative terms formally constitutive of police work and classifications and interpretive keys that are informal but used regularly by police officers. This gathering of more and less formal categories is due, first, to the intention not to produce a formalistic approach to the object in focus here, and, second, to an understanding that informal representations and practices prevailing in bureaucratic offices are less indications of incompleteness of bureaucratization in certain countries, and more of the fact that bureaucracy is, in practice, a matter of social relations (Herzfeld 1992: 177), and not a universe of pure functionality, formality and impersonality.
In order to analyze the effects of the production, distribution and archiving of *missing persons cases* records, I will not describe in detail the types of documents that make up these cases. For a detailed description of these roles, see Ferreira (2011:72-112, 295-297).

Administered by the National Secretariat of Public Security (SENASP), INFOSEG Network "integrates information from organs of Public Security, Justice and Authority in the entire country, providing data with surveys of people, processes, arrest warrants, and vehicle data, drivers and weapons. The INFOSEG Network provides information from the following organs: the Civil Police, Military Police, the National Traffic Department; Brazilian Army, Superior Court and Federal Court, Federal Highway Police Department, the Federal Police Department, the Internal Revenue Service; Courts of Justice of each State". (SENASP, n/d, p.3) Only civil servants from public agencies authorized by SENASP access the web for this purpose, by using a personal password. All of the SDP police officers have passwords to use the INFOSEG Network.

Paes (2008) reveals the police definition of *atypical fact* when describing the routine of citizen care by police officers from Rio de Janeiro: "First, the police officers conduct a short interview with people to know what is the event about (classifies the fact as a crime or not) then (...) seek to impose a legal definition to the crime, to see which article of the Criminal Code can be attributed to the fact. In case of suspicion or if the existence of crime appears, some administrative categories are assigned, such as removing corpse, atypical fact or act of self-resistance" (Paes, 2008: 173).

On the paths and decisions around the opening or not of police investigations under the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro, and on the inquisitorial procedures that mark its elaboration, see Kant de Lima (1995) and Misse (2011). On the patterns of recording and production of surveys in the same context, see Paes (2008) and Miranda et al (2010).

Eilbaum (2012) draws attention to the fact that although in its current use in police stations of Rio de Janeiro the acronym VPI designates a type of documentary collection, it originally refers to the stage of the police inquiry that precedes and determines the establishment (or not) of police investigations: "The acronym VPI comes from § 3. Article 5. of the Brazilian Code of Criminal Procedure. It refers to when a criminal offense is reported to the police, this should, once verified the validity of the information, establish a police investigation. From the act of verifying the information, the police proceeded to create its own administrative bureaucratic pieces, called the VPI." (2012, p.414)

If on one hand the status assigned to VPIs and inquiries is not only distinctive, but also lower than that of criminal investigations, the ethnography of Kant de Lima (1995, p. 68-69) shows that such procedures provide a greater margin of police autonomy than investigation, since its filing shall not require authorization by a judge or prosecutor, but the will of a delegate.

The dichotomy of *family issues* vs. *police issues* echoed among the (few) scholars dedicated to the phenomenon. In an excluding way, there are interpretations that classify the disappearance of persons as one facet of "urban violence" (Espinheira 1999), while others see it as a direct result of "domestic violence" (Oliveira and Geraldes 1999) and values of patriarchy and their impacts on gender and generation within families in Brazil (Oliveira 2007).

In a comparative analysis of performance patterns and police operations, Bayley (2006) reflects on the complexity of the task of defining the nature of police work and ensuring permanent access to it. For the author, in the practice of departments and operations, the definition that police work is done constantly, taking into account "the organizational description of what police officers are doing - patrolling, investigating,
controlling traffic, advising and managing" (118), and the description of what they usually do, and also the many "situations with which police officers get involved: crimes in progress, domestic disputes, lost children, automobile accidents, suspicious persons, alleged burglary, public disturbances, and non-natural deaths "(119). The police administration of disappearance cases as discussed in this article reveals, however, that in certain contexts police officers themselves define what is police work not from, but as opposed to part of what they are doing, what usually do and the situations presented to them.

[13] The demarcation of a border between a universe of crime and criminality in which intervention by public authorities is appropriate and what would be a family issue, demanding private solutions, also appears in the police administration and judicial cases of "domestic violence" analyzed by Muniz (1996), Soares (1999) and Enne, Viana, and Carrara (2002). Although the issue is outside the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out that the work of Soares (1999), in particular, suggests that there are many possible approaches between the SDP and the Police Service to Women (DEAMs) of Rio de Janeiro, whose staff "consider themselves diminished in their careers when they are moved from other departments for the care of women, because they believe that this is just a work of 'social workers' or 'psychologists'. They see themselves as mere bureaucrats and disregard the uniqueness of the stories they are told, daily, at the stations". (idem ibidem: 53).

[14] Araújo (2008, 2012) has been developing research on the incidence of the crime of forced disappearance of persons in Brazil today, initially from an ethnography together with a movement that brings together family members of victims of police violence in Rio de Janeiro.


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