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Stories of transmission and gradual resolution of trauma-related shame in three generations of Slovenian families

Abstract

In this paper, we will present a study into the dynamics of the transmission of emotional traumatic in three families of victims of World War II and post-war communist oppression. This study is taken from a broader research project in which we investigated the experiences of nonclinical families that managed to survive through three generation, and in which post-traumatic growth is present, i. e. the ability to integrate traumatic experiences and provide greater security for future generations.

The main focus will be on how emotional content is transmitted and transformed through generations and how to recognise it in various forms of behaviour, thinking and emotions, that appear in each of the generations. As we follow the transformation of traumatic content, we will also follow the the signs that show how traumatic content has integrated and begun to bring new, deeper emotional and mental insights.

The emotional depth of the traumatic experience is what burdens the victim the most and slows down the dynamics of trauma processing. It appears in the form of symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome, insecurity and mistrust. This is found even in victims who have articulated the trauma sufficiently to rise above intimidation, managed to develop emotionally strong and connecting interpersonal relationships, maintain faith in the future, and form a coherent narrative of their traumatic past.

The most interesting result of the research was that all three families, regardless of their diversity, are similar in term of processing the trauma. They were all able to speak open-

ly about their traumatic experiences. In all three families there there was a great deal of discussion and searching for the social framework and personal truth of historical events, and the desire to present and describe the events that left such deep wounds in such a way that they would be clear, reworked and accessible to future generations as a document of the reality of some tragic and difficult times.

Another source of trauma processing was religious faith, which allowed all the participants in this study to look at trauma and life more deeply, through relationships and connections between people and through a deeper understanding of human history embedded in a broader and deeper spiritual flow. Faith helped these families to find the courage to make decisions, to face life's challenges, and to endure even the most severe of life's trials.

A third source that facilitates the processing and integration of a traumatic experience is secure interpersonal relationships and compassionate parenting. Despite the fact that the whole question of parenting was demanding and full of challenges for our interviewees, the quality of parenting has been improved from generation to generation, and sincere affection for children and gratitude for children were present everywhere. The ability to follow the new generation and its initiatives while maintaining a connection to its roots is a dynamic that characterises all three families. There is also a lot of thinking and conscious effort in establishing and maintaining good marital relationships in these families.

For the recovery from trauma this study shows the importance of talking about it and also talking about it in a safe relationship until it takes a form that is genuine and at the same time clear, coherent and thus suitable for the general public. That's when the traumatic story ceases to be traumatizing and becomes a story of courage, perseverance, and truth.

Keywords: trauma-related shame, generations, Slovenian families.

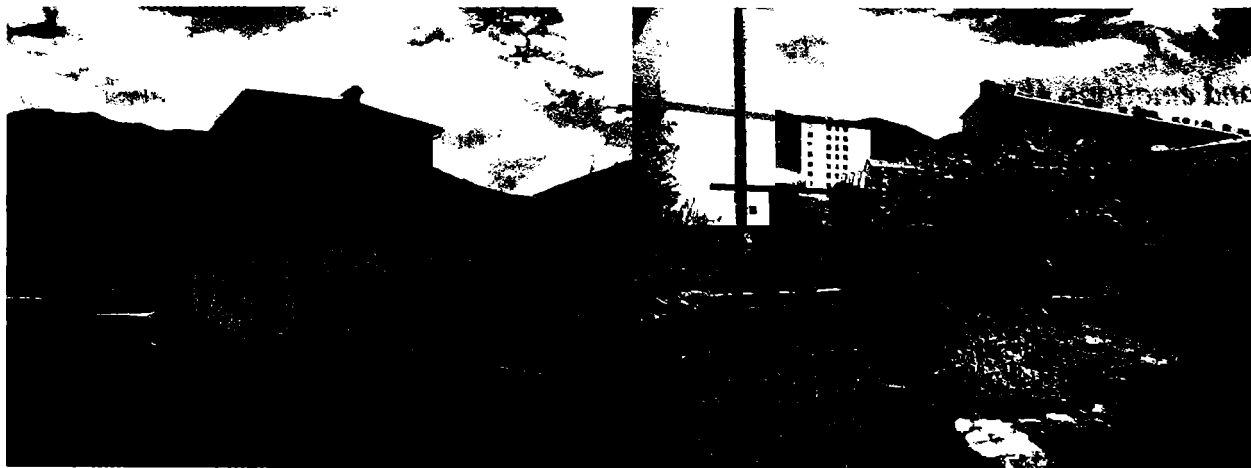


Fig. 1: Photo of the house (barrack), part of the former refugee camp (source: personal archive of the researcher).

We visited her at her home in Austria on a warm June day with the intention of conducting an interview for research. She was one of many survivors of the traumatic times of war and post-war in Slovenia, who lost her home and civil rights and continued her life in one of the refugee camps set up in neighboring countries after the war. Over the years, people migrated from the camps to countries around the world or made their homes elsewhere, as the barracks were by new blocks-of-flats and houses. However, she and her husband built their own home in one of the barracks on the camp. During our visit, we were shocked by the image of a modest house, the name of the street – Lagerstrasse, being the only proof that this is a place that connects the traumatic past with the present in such a significant way.

The family was offered to move out but refused and chose to renovate the barrack which remained practically the same as it was during the war. For the couple's children it was rather shameful to live there, having to always introduce themselves as coming from the "Lagerstrasse" and being Slovenian.

In our study, we try to show how traumatic experiences impact the identity formation and the emotional structure of survivors, their children, and grandchildren. We analyse their life stories through the prism of unacknowledged emotion of shame, tracking the gradual transformations of this emotion from one generation to the next.

1. Historical overview

The pain of war and post-war trauma, marked by feelings of fear, shame, grief, loss, and many others, has long been found only in the hidden suffering of victims and their resistance to the principles of the regime (Cukjati, 2018).

Immediately after the beginning of the Second World War, in April 1941, the territory of Slovenia – then still part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – was divided between three occupiers: German, Italian and Hungarian, whose purpose was to destroy everything connected to Slovene consciousness as quickly as possible, with aim to erase the Slovenian nation as an ethnic unit.

Slovenians sought different ways of organizing themselves to defend their national identity. The Communist Party, which had been operating illegally until then, declared an armed uprising against the occupier in June 1941 at the request of the International Union of Communist Parties, based in the Soviet Union (Griesser-Pečar, 2007), which turned out to be more intended for the

takeover the authority (Borak et al., 2005). With the help of the Security Intelligence Service, they began to systematically deal with individuals and groups of Slovenians their political competitors, first by violent acts (murders, confiscation of property...) and later by labeling them as “national traitors” (Cukjati, 2018). By the autumn of 1943, many casualties among the population were the result not only of the struggle against the occupier, but also of partisan violence, intimidation, robbery, and murder, and consequently the occupier’s revenge measures (Možina, 2019). The highest number of casualties was among the civilian population, who sought opportunities for their own protection and asked the occupier for help, as they did not want to risk finding themselves between two enemies. Thus, with the permission of the Italians, the first anti-communist units, called village guards, were established in central Slovenia (Možina, 2019).

After the capitulation of Italy in 1943, when partisan units defeated most of the village guards, the inhabitants reorganized with the help of the German occupier. They established their own police units, called “Home guards”. These were an effective defense against partisan violence, but the inter-Slovenian conflict took on new dimensions. (Borak et al., 2005)

In May 1945, after the end of the war, the Communist Party took power in Yugoslavia, and the Home Guards, together with thousands of civilians, withdrew to Austria, which was then the English occupation zone, in fear of partisan revenge (Mlakar, 2003). The British returned most of the Home Guard prisoners, including many civilians, to the partisans as a price for their withdrawal from part of Austria. After being interned in the camps of the secret communist police, most of them (between fifteen and eighteen thousand) were killed in May and June 1945 without trial and thrown into mass graves – abandoned mine shafts, anti-tank trenches, excavated caves and karst abysses – today there are more than 600 of them recorded throughout Slovenia (Možina, 2019; Ferenc, Alič and Jamnik, 2011).

The power maintained by the Communist Party in Slovenia through the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power has for decades grossly violated human fundamental rights and freedoms, collectively intimidated people, including with the help of trials that did not comply with any principles of law, the establishment of criminal institutions, the nationalization of private property and so on (Kolarič, 2016). Above all, they directed their anger against all those who took part in the anti-communist uprising and their families: the murdered family members were deprived of their right to a grave and was to be erased from public memory, their families were punished with silence, and they had to mourn secretly (Dežman, 2004).

Out of fear of government repression and shame over the stigma of “national traitors” for harassing them, denying them the right of schooling, employment, people remained silent about their experiences, many to this day. Nevertheless, at first, mainly by post-war political migrants, testimonies and records kept coming to the public, showing that the horrors of the communist regime could not break many (Cukjati, 2018). As part of their recovery from trauma, they have strengthened some parts of their lives and thus developed resilience to possible additional traumatic experiences. develop consciously and consistently, they embarked on an important path of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004), which also helped them to forgive – that is to the process and decision (to accept their pain, mourn the lost and making sense of suffering and injustice) needed for a full and creative life (Erzar, 2017).

2. Intergenerational transmission of shameful traumatic experience

Psychological impact of trauma is multilayered. Many psychotherapists describe shame as the core emotion in trauma transmission (Levin, 2015; Schore, 2003, Fisher, 2021). Traumatic experiences, together with the accompanying beliefs, emotions, values, and patterns of behavior, can be consciously or unconsciously passed on from the generation of survivors to their descendants (e.g., Danieli, 1998; Kellerman, 2009; Yehuda et al., 2007). Descendants adopt feelings similar to those developed and transmitted by their parents and grandparents sometimes they may even express symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder or somatic symptoms (Danieli, 1998). According to Wallin (2017), unprocessed pain is expressed in victims of trauma through a variety of symptoms, seeking and finding relief in subsequent generations (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop, 1998; Kellerman, 2009). The painful burden placed on these generations may assume the form of problems with self-esteem and identity, certain types of cognitive problems (e.g., anticipation of a catastrophe, preoccupation with death), affective problems (e.g., anxiety, nightmares, anger, guilt, feelings of loss) or problems in interpersonal relationships.

Factors contributing to the transmission of trauma are diverse; usually transmission occurs as a combination of factors on several levels. Psychodynamic theories of transmission see the transfer factor in unconscious and unprocessed parental emotions (Volkan, 1997; Dekel and Goldblatt, 2008), sociocultural theories emphasize the importance of inappropriate parenting and socialization models (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop, 1998; Wallin, 2017), family system theories find the

transfer factor in unbalanced communication and enmeshment of family members (McGoldrick, 2004b; Gruenberg, 2007), and biological theories believe that trauma is transmitted epigenetically, (Lipton, 1995; Yehuda et al. 2007).

When we talk about trauma, caused by war and life under a totalitarian regime, an important part of transmission is played by the silence imposed on victims by the politics of denial, which gradually turns into self-silencing. Thus, the painful feelings such as anxiety, guilt, shame, and sadness become visible only when the conspiracy of silence is interrupted, usually after many years or decades (Kestenbeg, 1982; Weingarten, 200; Kellerman, 2009).

The main strategy of totalitarian regimes against the so-called “enemies of the people” is intimidation and shaming. While the former threatens and silences the victims, the latter blocks their initiative, as each initiative is discredited in advance and presented as wrong or shameful. This opens the way to further devaluing the victim, denying their basic rights, and allowing all possible intentions and labels to be attributed to the victim.

The emotion of shame includes the entire family of emotions connected with shame, such as embarrassment, humiliation, discomfort, shyness, dishonour, mortification, and degradation. Together they represent the basic emotions of human relatedness (Scheff, 2000). There is also a strong relation between concerns related to connectedness and maintenance of relationships, and the deepest experience of one’s own self as acceptable, lovable, and desired, or unacceptable, undesired, and unloved. Avoiding shame, checking the image one fears may arise in others, concealing one’s true self behind a mask of compliance, submissiveness, and conformity – all these forms of social behaviour point to the close link between how we experience ourselves and how this experience echoes in our relationships.

The recovery from excessive or toxic shame is slow and requires more than one generation (referenca). In our research we illustrate the paths of three different Slovenian families from extreme shame, caused by war and postwar traumas, to recovery, as evidenced in the generation of their grandchildren. We show how members of different generations of these families managed to pass from emotionally „frozen” states to a more flexible emotionality and more emotionally grounded relationships.

When a person reacts to traumatic events by numbing the conscious emotional responses and staying in emotionally unresolved states, her/his emotionality and initiative is frozen. Through parenting, the limited scope of parental emotions and initiatives is transferred to their children who grow up in an emotionally rigid environment. Their emotionality is characterized by overreacting and diminished flexibility in relation to the outer world. They

often develop psychological symptoms and relational difficulties resulting in divorce, mental breakdown, and depression. They are also prone to suffer from affect dysregulation and the loss of identity, as they feel that they do not belong and are not worthy. Only the third generation was able to build more flexible and safe identities, accompanied by a solid sense of belonging, positivity and creativity.

3. Procedure and method

We interviewed three female victims of war and post-war violence in Slovenia, their three children (two daughters and a son), and four of their grandchildren (three females, one male). The first-generation interviewees decided for themselves which of their second- and third-generation descendants would participate in the research. The main inclusion criteria were that all interviewees be of Slovenian nationality and speak Slovenian, that members of the first generation of females be born in 1941 at the latest and have their own, original memory of traumatic events, and that members of all three generations be willing to talk about their experience.

The questions guiding our extensive in-depth interviews were how victims of totalitarian regimes experienced the traumatic events in their families during and after WWII, and how their descendants feel the impact of these experiences in their own lives. More specifically, we asked the members of the first generation how their trauma was perceived and communicated, while the members of the second and the third generation answered the question of how the first-generation trauma affected their identities, life choices, and relationships.

The use of in-depth narrative interviewing enabled the researchers to document the most natural expression of an individual's personality. All interviews, lasting in average one hour and forty-five minutes with the first- and second-generation interviewees and 40 minutes with the members of the third generation, were audio recorded and verbatim transcribed. The transcripts were read and approved by all the interviewees.

The following is a brief description of the families that participated in the research.

Family A

The family-of-origin of the first-generation survivor, who was very national conscious, withdrew to Austria after the end of the war for fear of communist violence. When she and her sister were on the train with the wounded home guards they cared for, they were seized by the partisans' troops. Communist authorities sentenced them to long prison terms with forced labor and stripping of civil rights. After six years, they were amnestied, and our interviewee managed to join her parents in the refugee camp in Austria. Although many families from this camp migrated to Argentina, Australia, Canada, and the United States, her parents decided to stay, since their two daughters were still imprisoned in Slovenia at the time. When the family reunited, she married a refugee from the camp, started her own family there, and continued to live at the camp site until her death in 2018. Prison left consequences on her physical health, so she struggled with various illnesses all her life, which also prevented her from having more than one child. Her main struggle was to preserve the Slovenian language and culture in her family and in the wider community. Her son, who has three children and one grandson, still lives in Austria.

Family B

The first-generation survivor of the second family has lived all her life, together with some of her children with their families, in a village marked by the beginnings of an armed anti-communist resistance. As a result, most families in the village were victims of revenge of communist authorities and many, especially males, were killed in post-war mass killings or imprisoned in labor camps. This was also the case in the family B, whose traumatic experiences strengthened their desire to survive. So, to this day, they have made sure that life continues not only in their family (she and her husband have 5 children and 17 grandchildren), but also in the village. The village and its inhabitants have long been humiliated and intimidated by communist authorities, and many have also struggled with poverty, as they have been deprived of the rights to social security benefits that would otherwise belong to them. Nevertheless, they were active in many organizations and events, first locally, and after the independence of Slovenia also at the state level (political parties and meetings...). Many of their efforts are aimed at making society know and understand the truth about the nature and the crimes of the totalitarian regime in Slovenia.

Family C

Unlike the first two families, the family-of-origin of our third interviewee lived in Italy, where she grew up as a member of a large autochthonous Slovenian minority. In the thirties, her family suffered from the Italian fascists regime who executed two of their relatives, while another two were killed probably by communists in 1944. Her parents and many of her relatives joined the partisan fight against Italian and later German occupation, and they may have been active in the Communist Party as well. For their “merits” they were rewarded by the regime. Today, this fact makes their daughter uneasy. Since she got to know the other side of Slovenian inter- and post-war history, she feels shame and guilt.

The interwar activities of her parents left a considerable psychological burden on them. After the war, there was a constant telling and retelling of war stories in the family, as well as excessive drinking. Their daughter grew up with estranged parents, feeling that she was left to take care of herself alone, which also left consequences on her – problems in the relationship (divorce). Although she formed a safe relationship with her second husband, with one part of herself, she remained trapped in the web of traumatic feelings. She partially resolved them with the help of her daughter, who, as a psychologist, set out on a path of understanding the dynamics of trauma and resolving it. Her daughter made it her mission, which he shares with her husband, to raise awareness about the consequences of traumatization in older Slovenian population and their descendants. She and her two children participated in the interviews. Her mother, first-generation survivor, moved to Slovenia during her studies and all her children and families live there today. Aside from the daughter psychologist, she had another daughter in the second marriage and a son from the first marriage.

4. Analysis and results

Using phenomenological analysis, we were able to examine how interviewees make sense of their experience and how meaning is created through embodied perception. The researchers first read several times all the transcripts and the personal notes taken during the interviews. After they created meaning units, they used them to develop a coding system. The coding was done in two phases: in the first phase, content areas were identified, in the second phase, the narratives were searched for emotional expressions. According to

qualitative research methodology, the coding was done inductively, so that the codes remained open for development and change. The coding process was performed using a computer application for qualitative analysis RQDA.

The thematic analysis showed that in all three families the theme of shame, associated with feelings of guilt, fear, and insecurity, is manifested through two subthemes: (own) parenting and conformity to family values, especially those related to elements of nationality (language, culture, religion, political belief), and identity related to the sense of belonging and social security. While the first-generation survivals felt ashamed of their identity, low social status, and broken relationships, their children, who tried to differentiate themselves from the parents, found these areas to be areas of emotional struggle and development. By working through shame, they developed emotionally richer and more secure position for their offspring belonging to the third generation. It is this generation that could finally use what was previously the source of shame as a source of security and knowledge.

Table 1: Transformation of shame through the three generations

G1 (survival)	G2 (differentiation)	G3 (growth, future)
Source of shame 1. Society - nationality - faith - ideology	Struggle points 1. Society - social activity - entering the main culture	Sources of security 1. Society - freedom to be - freedom to create
2. Relationships - divorce/marriage - parenting - family (relatives)	2. Relationships - secure marriage - compassionate parenting	2. Relationships - freedom to connect - freedom to speak
3. Identity - health - language - wealth	3. Identity - emotional survival - education - researching	3. Identity - freedom to feel - freedom to choose

While the burden of shame affects every generation, the level of active coping and transformation of this emotion is different. It is through verbalization or narration in secure relationships that the legacy of shame is recognized and attenuated, enabling younger generations to restore and strengthen their social connectedness and live a more creative life. The more one resolves shame, the higher one's self-esteem.

Parenting

Parenting has been the most common source of painful feelings for most of the interviewees who have their children (except for the third generation of families B and C), especially shame at not being good enough parents.

In Family A, the ability to be a good parent to children of the second and third generations was put to test due to divorce, which triggered the feelings of guilt and shame. The survivor of the first generation speaks little about her motherhood, so the feelings of shame or guilt in her narratives are not perceptible. From the narratives of the second and third generations, however, we infer that this theme still causes considerable stress. They (2A and 3A) talk about this topic with visible discomfort and very modestly, with long pauses, which could be a sign of the effects the unprocessed trauma of the first generation left on these generations.

2A: » (Longer silence) Well, it certainly wasn't easy. Now...when one is left alone with three children, unexpectedly... «

»It went so far that we all realized it wasn't going to work anymore. That it doesn't make sense, that this is already self-destructive, on both sides. Then you better draw a line. Otherwise, I didn't understand it at the time, maybe I didn't want to understand that it was like that... At that time, it was something new for me and I couldn't believe that it was happening to me, simply. Of course, every divorce also leaves certain traumas, even my children were traumatized then, and are still today. I don't know a single child from a separate family who wouldn't be traumatized...«

3A: »When I knew we were expecting a baby, the matter was clear to me. I thought we were going to be family or whatever...normal... Well, in the end I have the same situation now – what I never wanted, I got now. It's my own fault... Mom and Dad aren't together...kids, there, kids here, some tearing apart all the time. That what I had. «

In family B, the struggle to be a good enough parent is manifested by symptoms of postpartum depression, which was the case in both the first and the second generation. The daughter of the first-generation mother witnessed her mother's illness after the birth of her younger sister. In this family, we observe the effects of traumatization on offspring who grew up with traumatized and weakened parents (Danieli, 1998). The symptoms, however, decreased in intensity, as they went from a severe depressive episode requiring hospitalization in

the first generation to individual depressive moods in the second generation. Both mothers (1B and 2B) felt ashamed that they could not cope and showed their physical and mental weakness.

1B: »And my mother-in-law once said to me: «Go there in front of the house... go do something.» Ooo... but I couldn't. I couldn't work. My daughter was guarded at home. Then my sister looked after the baby. I mean, you are meant usually to cuddle a baby. I cried because I couldn't do it. It was so hard for me to live like that... sometimes I was desperate«.

2B: »For example, when I gave birth, I was having trouble with my hormones. I cried and... still convinced myself that I was strong. And then, suddenly... I said to myself: «Well, how come one little thing can make me cringe so much that I just start crying, for nothing, because there was nothing?»«

The shame associated with parenting was also felt by the mothers in this family. In the first generation, it was related to the experience of abortion, which made the first-generation mother bear the shame and guilt till present. In the second generation, the mother reported feeling shame at the uncertainty of being the good mother she thinks their children deserve. In both cases, we recognize the patterns of self-doubt. Because they both had the experience of growing up with their mothers who sought emotional support with their children (Field, Om, Kim, and Vorn, 2011), they were left with the feeling that “they are not enough” and that they cannot trust their own decisions.

1C: »And the fact that I had an abortion also hurt me a lot and I carried guilt for a long time. And my friends at work said to me: «Come on, come on, there's no woman who wouldn't have an abortion.» But it bothered me a lot. «

2C: »... When they were bigger, there were a bunch of these situations... I often said to myself that it's not good for them to have me for a mother who really isn't made for it... I felt bad for them because they are so nice. Really, I had a feeling that they deserve the best mom. There was a little bit of a wish that I wouldn't be like my mother that I wouldn't «fail» them. «

Nationality, language, culture, faith, political stance

In family A who lives in a bicultural environment attachment to these values was an important source of survival and at the same time a source of pain

and shaming, as they were often humiliated and discriminated as emigrants. All three women in the family were strongly marked by this situation. However, in their narratives, there are signs of recovery from trauma, as the amount and intensity of these feelings decreases from generation to generation. While in the second generation we notice occasional flashes of these feelings, they were replaced by the awareness of new opportunities available in Austria in the third generation.

1A: »... For the locals, you're always an *Ausländer*, that's a foreigner. «

»Oh, we felt strongly that we were foreigners. That wasn't easy, you know. And when my son started going to school, there was a teacher who wrote a note for me in a notebook that if my son would still sign himself with a Slovenian name that he will be punished. «

2A: »In fact, as a child, you don't even realize it. You realize it when society classifies you... Then I realized that for some I was a just camp child, a 'Lagerkind'. «

»On the one hand, I was just a camp child, socially something less valuable, and on the other hand, nationally speaking, I was not the so-called Austrian child, but we were some foreigners, some *Ausländer*, who were looked down upon. «

3A: »When I had to speak Slovenian in front of my friend, I was ashamed. «

»... And I remember how my father called me on the phone and sometimes it was difficult for me to pick up and speak Slovenian with him on the bus, because some people looked at me ugly. ... I have often heard «*suc*» and «*yugo*», this is how they insult us. «

Family B felt ashamed mainly because of their religious and political worldview. The village community played a protective role, as most families in the village shared the same traumatic experiences, as well as values and beliefs. This is shown above all in the life story of the first-generation survivor who mentions only a few painful feelings, probably due to her focus on work and life within the community, but it is also evident in the narrative of the third generation.

1B: »And of course, this teacher didn't know what to do with us, since we were already so well informed [about the events during the war] from our parents that even if we didn't know something, we felt how it really was... I don't know if we were afraid of consequences... «

2B: »It was known exactly that you were a Christian. Even now, for example, people will not always proudly say they are Christians. Well, I'm not hiding my opinion. But I knew that if I said it out loud, I would probably be treated as inferior in certain social circles or I wouldn't rank high. «

3B: »In fact, every house in the village has had such an experience. And you can talk about all this here without worrying, because you know what happened to other families. Outside the village, for example, when it comes to communism, it's a little different. For example, it is difficult to argue with someone who speaks well of communism or attacks religion. For example, when I'm looking for a new company, I always have to sniff a little bit about what people are like, I don't dare say it in front of everyone, for fear that it won't be accepted. «

The Family C, whose first generation grew up in a bicultural environment in Italy, equally felt shame related to nationality and language. The feeling of shame, however, being too threatening and painful to be processed, was displaced onto the second generation. The member of this generation explains how her relatives ridiculed her for mispronouncing the Italian words.

1C: »Italians have always been doing this way. They made you feel that you were not worthy. Yeah, I felt that. For example, when I went to the store with my aunt who spoke Slovenian language, the shopkeepers treated us differently. You knew you weren't worth it. «

2C: »I got the sense what it was like to be a Slovenian in Italy more from my relatives... But I was always ashamed to say something in Italian in Trieste because I had a harder pronunciation, and then all my relatives laughed at me. So, I think there was a huge amount of anxiety around that. It was felt how they, as Slovenians, felt threatened. Yeah, so they made fun of me. «

Shame in this family is also related to the political worldview and beliefs. A member of the first generation, whose parents were active communists, feels shame for their actions and "blindness", as well as guilt and shame that she did not realize the cruelty of the regime her parents were devoted to. The member of the second generation felt ashamed that she belonged to the country that brought up and supported the communist regime. In her mind, Slovenia, which was then part of this country, was somehow different and represented for her a kind of island of solution. And that is what was believed in her mother's family as well.

1C: »An aunt once said to my mother: «Anyway, she was a member of UDBA [Secret service in communist Yugoslavia].» It hurt me very much, but it was probably true. (cries) It bothered me that my mother didn't realize what she was doing. «

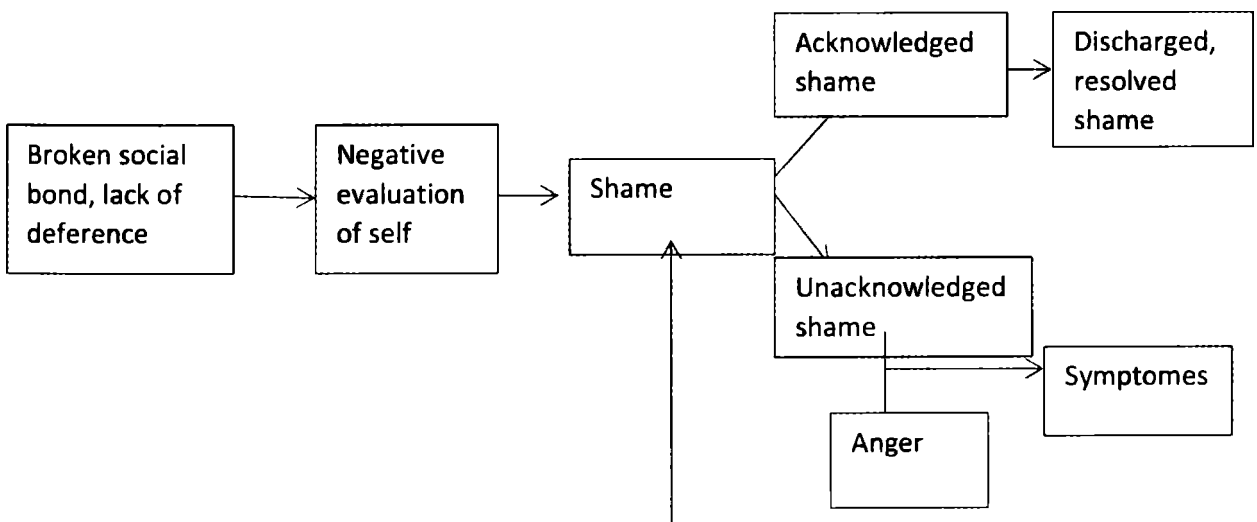
»I thought it was nice, my parents were wonderful... when we came to Ljubljana, all these important ladies visited my mother and I thought it was nice. Now I am horrified when I know their role. (cries) At the time, I thought my mom was «cool.» «

2C: »What I felt, and probably still feel to this day, is that all my life I have been infinitely ashamed to be from Yugoslavia. Until Slovenia became independent, I was ashamed to say where I came from. «

»I always said that I am from Slovenia, that is, next to Italy. Because if I said I was from Yugoslavia, it was like saying my second name is shit. It was terribly humiliating for me to say that... to our relatives and to Italians too, and to any foreigner I met as a child, for example on vacations. If I were from Burkina Faso, it would be better. It was a shame. «

As Tomas Scheff explains, the multigenerational cycle of shame starts with broken social bonds and/or lack of respect in the first generation and results in the negative evaluation of self, which provokes feelings of extreme shame. If these feelings of shame are recognized and verbalized in the second generation, this leads to discharge and resolution of the emotional burden in the third generation, as well as the development of creativity and positive emotionality (Scheff 1990).

Figure 2: Shame cycle (adapted from Scheff, 1990, p. 88)

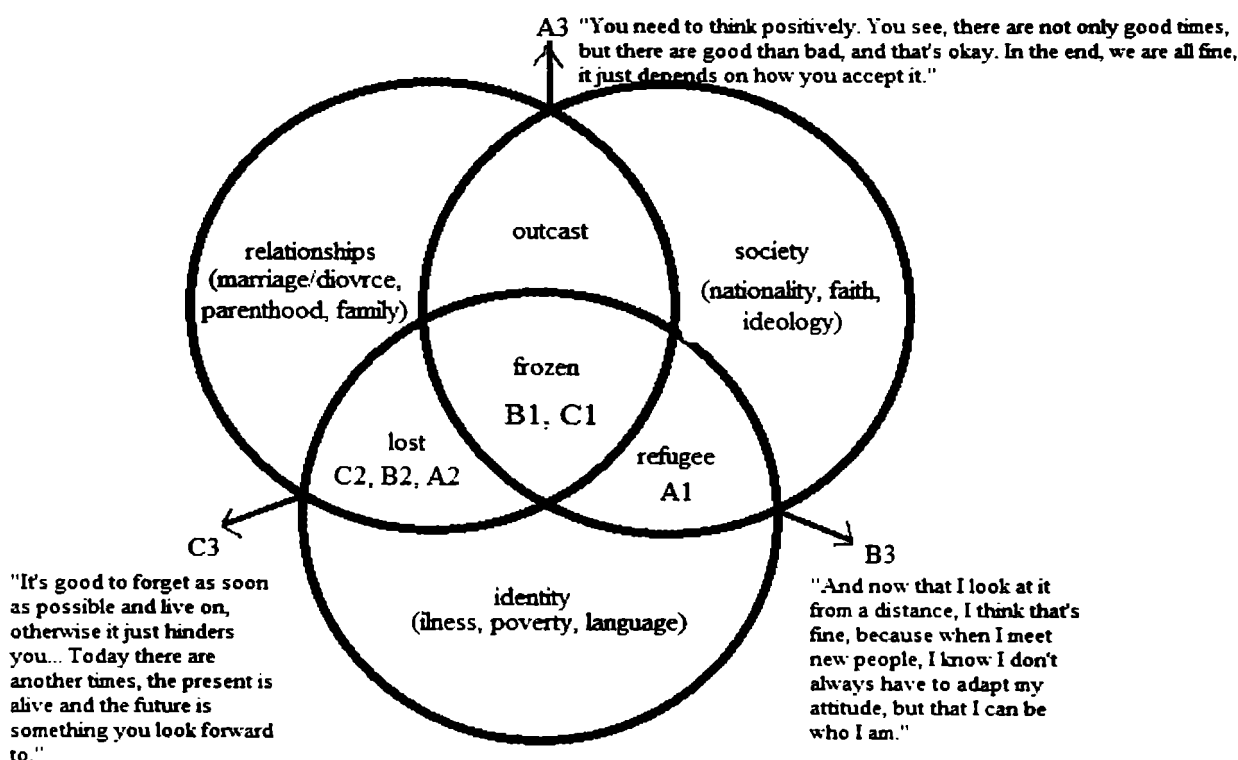


Discussion and Conclusion

Maintenance of social bonds is the basic human motivation. To interact we must be able to communicate and attune to each other. The feelings of shame and pride function as “interactional devices” since they are the basic and most powerful of all social emotions. Shame is aroused when social bonds are threatened; on the contrary, pride is felt when social bonds are intact or restored. The loops of shame take place on three levels: between people, within a person or as a combination of both. That is why unacknowledged shame manifests itself in low self-esteem and rage against others.

In our study we differentiated three sources/levels of shame: individual (identity), relational (partnerships and family ties) and social (between groups and in the society at large).

Fig. 3: The interplay between different sources of shame in three generations of each family. The third generation of every family outgrew the traumatic past and resolved shame at different opening points. We see that B1 and C1 representatives started from the frozen shame state, being passivized by excessive shame, while A1 started from the position of refugee. All representatives of the second generation (A2, B2, C2) were starting from the “lost” emotional position, fighting for safety in relationships and for the inner security. They conquered shame passivity by developing initiative in relationships and society even if they failed. By recovering from shame state, they make bet-



ter emotional base for their offspring. The third-generation representatives managed to develop each of them a different shame free and active emotional identity position.

In the family A, the shame was related to Slovenian nationality and the fact of being “the traitor”. It was compounded by the living in the lager house at Lagerstrasse, which was a painful source of shame especially for the second generation. The strong marital bond between the grandparents didn’t work to empower the second and the third generation and release them from relational shame. They regained initiative only after the divorce and differentiation in relationships, by developing sensitivity to children and putting their initiative in culture and nourishing the Slovenian language and identity. The third generation is now able to talk about deeper levels of emotional experience and finally belong to the society at large (“*You need to think positively. You see, there are not only good times, but there are more good than bad, and that’s okay. In the end, we are all fine, it just depends on how you accept it.*”).

In the family B, the shame took two forms: first, the family were degraded as “traitors of the Slovenian people”, and second, they were degraded as members of the Catholic Church. These incapacitating feelings were transformed through active engagement in public in the second generation, and in the third generation they transformed into sensitivity as to how to connect with others, even if you are not the witness of the war events and memory-bearer. Here too the differentiation between generations was made mostly by addressing shame and speaking publicly about the war and injustice, which later developed into public initiative and freedom to connect with people who are not from the same village as the family and do not share the same religious background (»*And now that I look at it from a distance, I think that’s fine, because when I meet new people, I know I don’t always have to adapt my attitude, but that I can be who I am.*«).

The shame was twofold in the family C as well. First, being of the wrong nationality, second, having parents who believe in the wrong ideology. Here too the first generation gained control and initiative by divorce and by relying on faith, which distanced them from the rest of the family and enabled the second generation to start from a different emotional basis. Maintaining secure relationships and emotional freedom in the second generation allowed the third generation to enter the world free spirited (»*It’s good to forget as soon as possible and live on, otherwise it just hinders you ... Today times are different. Different thinking: the past is past; the present is alive, and the future is something you look forward to.*«).

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