

"It is simply pointless to tell our child any fairy tales."

Transgenerational aspects of forced migration in the digital era

Maria Borcsa & Paula Witzel

Abstract

Background: This article is grounded in the POLGER project, examining transgenerational family memories of forced migration after WW II (POLGER I, retrospective part), and the narratives in the context of forced migration due to the war in Ukraine (POLGER II; prospective part). Compared to socio-historic circumstances before the digital revolution, information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a central role in the experiences of individuals and today's family systems; this reality must be taken into consideration both in the context of voluntary as well as in forced migration.

Objectives: The authors illustrate effects of ICTs on transgenerational relationships by examining a familial subsystem of a mother and her adolescent daughter, who both fled Ukraine in 2022 due to the war.

Methods: In the context of an exploratory study, a familial subsystem was interviewed. First, an individual narrative interview with the mother took place. Subsequently, a semi-structured and circularly formulated transgenerational interview was conducted, designed as a conversation between the mother and her 12-year-old daughter.

Results: The results show that the adolescent possesses a knowledge and information surplus due to the use of ICTs. It is evident, that digital information and communication interferes into the mother-child hierarchy.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that transgenerational transmission has to be reconceptualized. Further research on the interaction between ICTs, forced migration and transgenerationality is needed.

Keywords: forced migration, Ukraine, information and communication technologies, transgenerational transmission, narration.

Introduction

This contribution is based on two qualitative research projects that examine the characteristics of transgenerational family structures and forced migration from both a retrospective and a prospective perspective. The aim is to identify family coping strategies in dealing with experiences of loss and trauma following experienced forced migration.

The first study, "*Transgenerational effects on families after forced migration: What can we learn from (hi)stories?*"¹³, focuses on families, in which grandparents fled or were displaced from former East German border areas such as Upper Silesia (now Poland) as a result of World War II (Hille et al. 2022). In this paper, we concentrate on our second study: "*Resilience-promoting narratives*,"¹⁴ exploring how mothers who have fled from Ukraine attribute meanings to their experiences of flight and share them with their child(ren). The two sub-projects examine generational family structures that are situated in completely different socio-historical contexts. In contrast to forced migration in the context of the Second World War, today's people on the move remain connected to each other through communication and information technologies (ICTs). ICTs are often an essential resource, creating globalized families (Borcsa, 2019, 2016). In this contribution, we use a case study of a Ukrainian mother and her daughter to illustrate the particular significance of ICTs in war context and forced migration.

Forced migration in a transgenerational perspective

Flight and displacement are summarized under the term *forced migration* and are most often associated with experiences of destruction, violence, and death (Nikendei, Greinacher & Sack, 2017). Forced migration requires families to step out of their social and cultural contexts in order to save their existence and find security in new living environments (Borcsa, 2017). According to the most recent data collections of the UN Refugee Agency (2024), by the end of June 2023, 110

¹³[POLGER_I_Projektskizze.pdf \(hs-nordhausen.de\)](#)

¹⁴[Transgenerationale_Effekte_auf_Familien_nach_Zwangsmigration._Teil_II_-_Resilienz_foerdernde_Narrationen.pdf \(hs-nordhausen.de\)](#)

million people worldwide had fled from war, conflict, persecution, and human rights violations. These days, due to the increase in socio-political conflicts, the real number is estimated to be significantly higher. The Russian invasion into Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the largest forced migration processes since World War II. Approximately 6.0 million Ukrainian refugees have been recorded in Europe; currently, around 1.14 million of them are living in Germany, including nearly 350,000 children and adolescents. Additionally, there is a trend of family commuting between the arrival and origin areas.

Transgenerational transmission describes the processes by which events or experiences from a family's past can influence subsequent generations (Sangalang & Vang, 2016). It is usually an unconscious and often unintentional process and can have both positive and negative effects (Völter, 2009). In psychotherapy, the term is often used to explain how traumatic experiences or unresolved conflicts within a family can affect the mental health and behavior of children and grandchildren. Family narratives play an important role in these processes: How do individuals who were affected by traumatic events like war talk with their family members about their experiences and what do they not talk about (De Haene, Adriaenssens & Rober, 2020)? How do they convey these events to subsequent generations? In this context, family conversations contribute to the revival and restructuring of the past (Völter, 2009; Borcsa & Wetzel 2023), i.e., personal experiences of family members of one generation are enriched individually by the subsequent generations, narrative elements are added, recombined, or omitted (Welzer, 2014).

Sociocultural trauma resulting from war, political violence, and torture tends to be passed down to subsequent generations. The effects of traumatisation on the family system primarily present themselves as a lack of full presence of the family members: significant elements of the full range of emotions, thoughts, and responses to needs are missing. According to Catherall (1998), the traumatization of individual family members can affect the family system in three dimensions: (1) it distresses family bonds by impairing caregiving; (2) family reality becomes distorted as family myths emerge; (3) intra-family rules are established around symptoms, which may prove dysfunctional in the medium or long term. Sangalang

and Vang (2016) showed that the transmission of trauma is associated with a higher lifetime prevalence of PTSD, mood, anxiety disorder symptoms, “and greater risk of abuse and neglect” (p. 753). Various recent studies (Limaj et al., 2023; Kokun 2023; Taheri, 2024) examining the effects of the war in Ukraine on the civilian population confirm that refugee families exhibit an increased prevalence of trauma. Though, the risk increases for subsequent generations to show psychological problems.

Additionally, in the context of any migration, acculturation—the adaptation to new environments and the adoption of different cultural values and norms—occurs at varying speeds among generations. This can lead to an acculturation gap between family members. Acculturation is considered dissonant, when parents and children, for example, differ in language acquisition and the adoption of new cultural rules. It is consonant, when their pace of adaptation is similar. It is selective when certain linguistic and cultural aspects of the heritage culture are preserved while others are combined with new components (Falicov 2005). Children and adolescents typically navigate the process of acculturation more quickly, as they are usually integrated into the everyday life of the host country earlier and more intensively through secondary socialization agents (kindergarten, school, etc.). Family roles and responsibilities are often redistributed across generations. For instance, children may take on parental roles as cultural and language mediators, being exposed to the risk of parentification.

Unlike forced migration during and after World War II, people fleeing today remain connected through communication and information technologies (ICTs) with those staying in the war zones. Stoliarchuk et al. (2022) conducted a study with 565 Ukrainian adolescents (at the time of the survey, 61.8% were in Ukraine and 38.2% abroad; the average age was thirteen years) and found that during military conflicts there was an increase in the need for social interaction with peers and heightened activity on social networks. Only 6.2% of respondents spend less than one hour per day on social networks; 13.5% communicate for one to two hours, 16% for two to three hours, 20.4% for three to four hours, 13.3% for four to five hours, 9.5% for five to six hours, and 13.9% spend more than six hours there. More

than a third of respondents indicated that their parents pay attention to their activities but do not impose restrictions. Over 20% report parental control and limitations on social network usage. Almost a third of the adolescents insist that parents should not interfere with their virtual activities.

Digital and Globalized Families

Intra-family communication processes continuously impact relationships between family members, both face-to-face and through the use of information and communication technologies (Limaj et al., 2023). One of the new and rapidly growing forms of familial relationships is the "digital family" (Taipale, 2019), a distributed extended family that utilizes ICTs, particularly instant messaging services, to stay connected and maintain a sense of unity. In the context of (forced) migration, we have coined the term "globalized families" (Borcsa, 2016, 2019). Globalized families arise through mobility, migration or displacement and through the worldwide technological changes that find their way into family households. Compared to migratory movements before the digital revolution, ICTs help to maintain and perpetuate cultural and social spaces, even when individuals or family members have physically left these spaces. In our view, and following the concept of Apitzsch (2014; cited in Borcsa 2016), we should no longer speak of emigration or immigration, but of transmigration.

If we look at today's one-national or trans-national families, especially instant messaging services (IMs) have expanded communication possibilities for their members (Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024). They offer a variety of advantages and potentials: adaptation to individual schedules, real-time sharing of important or exciting events, creation of digital family archives from photos and videos, protected exchange in closed groups, intimate discourses as well as the construction of family narratives (Karapanos, E., Teixeira, P. & Gouveia, R., 2016; Taipale, 2019, Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024). The sensation of a permanent link that can be activated at any time creates a "connected presence" (Schroeder, 2006, p. 1). This potentiality of communication produces feelings of togetherness and belonging. Becoming a digital family means shifting from personal, periodic

communication to a media-supported "always in contact" mode (Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024). This transition requires an adjustment of the entire family system: the introduction of new family roles and responsibilities, the definition of family boundaries in the digital space, the development of rules, and the creation of mechanisms for their implementation.

Bakardjieva (2005) has defined the familial role of "warm experts"; these are tech-savvy members of the younger generation who support primarily older relatives in developing digital skills. They provide "digital caregiving" and must ensure the functionality of the "digital household." The role of "warm experts" has both advantages and disadvantages: on one hand, their status is enhanced, while on the other hand, it can lead to stress and frustration due to the time commitment required and criticism from older family members regarding insufficient explanations (Taiple, 2019). Paradoxically, this may even results in mutual alienation and distancing. Kamal, MdNoor and Baharin (2016) added the role of "digital kin keeper": these are mostly female relatives who ensure the organizational flow of family life through constant online presence, record-keeping, event organization, and information sharing. They perform gender-specific caregiving work.

Alkobi and Khvorostianov (2024) examined the experiences and practices of Israeli Jewish family members in maintaining a three-generation WhatsApp family group and expanded the role system by including "flickerers." These primarily in-law relatives are reserved and passive, commenting on messages only sporadically and signalling their familial belonging merely by being present in the group chat. In contrast, "family gatekeepers" regulate and decide on the number of participants allowed to engage in the chat. The authors found that all families developed two communication rules for participation in the group chat: (a) an emotional, enthusiastic, and exaggerated writing style, and (b) avoidance of problematic discourses. They used two methods to enforce these rules: exclusion from the group chat and boycott, leading to tensions within the family. The preservation of the "family tablecloth" prohibits expressing criticism and discussing sad, depressing, sensitive, or embarrassing topics. Thus, connected presence does not necessarily improve the well-being of family members; it can

increase the avoidance of certain topics, generate feelings of guilt due to infrequent communication (Kędra, 2021; Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018), and cause emotional strain through expectations, pressure, and differences in interpretation during message exchanges.

With regard to globalized families, connected presence also poses risks to well-being: The relational aspect is affected by an "asymmetric mobile intimacy" (Cabalcinto, 2018, p. 37) between those who have managed to leave or escape and those who have been left behind. This is supported by statements from Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, who report that witnessing and hearing about the suffering of their relatives in Syria has intensified their feelings of powerlessness (Awad & Tossell, 2021). They downplay their experiences in the host region and struggle to open up to people in the country of origin. Nevertheless, Udwan, Leurs, and Alencar (2023) emphasize that refugees actively seek social support from digital sources during their transition to the host country, including family and friends from their home region, in order to cope with the biographical upheaval. They define the use of digital social support in the context of forced migration as a "digital resilience strategy." (p. 9). This gives refugees a sense of agency and control over their existence by continuing rituals or restoring routines from "normal life".

„She said: Mama, there is going to be a war. I said: which war? I have to pay the wages first.”

In the context of the above-mentioned study, Daria Petrenko¹⁵ has been interrogated in an individual, narrative interview. Afterwards, a semi-structured and circularly formulated transgenerational interview, designed as a subsystem conversation between mother and child, was carried out. Both interviews were conducted in September 2023.

Daria Petrenko fled from the Ukrainian city of Mariupol to Germany in the spring of 2022, together with her husband and their then ten-year-old daughter, Anastasia. In the following passage of the individual interview, the mother recounts the

¹⁵all names changed

beginning of the war. At that time, she was at her workplace when she received a call from her daughter asking her to come home earlier than usual: „*I said that I would take care of things because the salaries for the employees had not been paid yet, and I would be home soon [...]*¹⁶*in two hours [...]* As I got home, she calmed down at that moment, but at the same time, she was looking at TikTok. She was active on TikTok; I don't use TikTok at all. She said: 'Mama, there is going to be a war.' I asked, 'What war? I still have to pay the salaries first.'"

Mrs. Petrenko describes how she reassured her daughter over the phone, telling her that she would head home soon after fulfilling her professional duties. Although Anastasia was calmed by her mother's physical presence after her arrival home, she was simultaneously connected virtually through a video app that Mrs. P. did not use at that time and still does not use today. In her account, Mrs. P. attributes an informational advantage to her daughter, which caused confusion to her. Mrs. P.'s question, "What war?" reflects her incredulous dismay regarding the situation that would later prove to be true. Her insistence on needing to pay salaries first highlights her spontaneous impulse to cling to the normality and structure of daily life and to fulfil her obligations as usual—a circumstance that must have turned out to be irrelevant in hindsight.

In the transgenerational interview, the aspect of knowledge and information differences becomes evident in the dialogue between mother and daughter. Anastasia is asked to share her own perspective on the onset of the war. She expresses: "*I don't know; everything got mixed up in my head. A friend wrote in the group that there was shooting in another area [...] everywhere you could hear that Russia would attack on February 24, 2022.*" Anastasia begins her account by excluding the precise recounting of the events. It is evident that she and her virtual peer group utilized digital networking to stay up-to-date on the situation. She emphasizes that it was apparent in all (virtual) spaces that a military attack was imminent.

¹⁶ [...] refer to omissions

Daria then asks her daughter, "*Where did you hear that?*" Anastasia replies, "*On TikTok. And they* (pointing to her mother, turning to the interviewer) *say that TikTok is not useful.*"

Daria P. prompts her daughter to clarify her statement. Anastasia's nonverbal expression combined with the plural phrase "*they say*," positions her mother as a representative of the parental generation that has yet to recognize the utility and necessity of the communication app. This stance reflects Anastasia's self-confidence and certainty in possessing a knowledge advantage over her mother. Towards the end of the interview, her mother states, "*We didn't have to explain anything to her because she learned everything independently through TikTok, even though we always said she shouldn't watch it. It's simply pointless to tell our child any fairy tales.*" The mother mentions here that digital media have – voluntarily or involuntarily – freed them as parents from the obligation to explain the ongoing situation. She refers also to the parents' attempts to influence Anastasia regarding the use of the app. Daria concludes that there is neither a necessity nor a value in telling her daughter comforting untruths. In this statement, the mother acknowledges the communication app as an entity that limits parental authority concerning the child's construction of reality.

It can be assumed, that Daria P., out of maternal concern not to having her daughter exposed to e.g., fear-inducing information, disapproves her daughter's activities with information and communication technologies. However, her statement exhibits an ambivalence: implicitly, she conveys pride that she did not have to explain anything to her daughter. The awareness of this knowledge gap may strengthen Anastasia's sense of self-efficacy.

Final reflections

The case study illustrates that information and communication technologies are becoming central protagonists and in a certain way "new family members" (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011). On the one hand side, the digital revolution is altering the life and socialization conditions of all families and its respective members, while on the other hand, family structure is challenged by voluntary or forced

migration (Borcsa 2019). These mechanisms are interconnected and circular (for further elaboration see: Borcsa, 2019; Borcsa & Hille, 2016). Therefore, we recommend that ICTs should be actively integrated into the design of therapeutic settings and systemic work. Depending on the individual significance of digital devices within the family, the therapeutic setting can be collaboratively planned through a combination of face-to-face and digital procedures (especially video-counseling and –therapy); this can provide an opportunity to establish an easy and effortless access between family members living in different countries¹⁷.

The case study further demonstrates that ICTs challenge the classical understanding of transgenerational transmission. The hierarchical, top-down structure of transgenerational transmission has been contested by digitalization. Currently, family processes occur not only in a *trans*-, but also in a *cross-generational* manner, with younger generations influencing also older generations. Digital networking and the virtual relationships function as socialization agents, inducing modifications not only in the youngest generation but also in transgenerational structures in families. Family narratives “around the kitchen table” (Keppler 1994) with their omissions or distortions are no longer the only means and generators of family memory (Borcsa & Wetzel, 2023); the significance of ICTs for intra-family processes cannot be overestimated. Family communication is enriched by narratives from digital sources—a fact that undoubtedly deserves attention in both transgenerational research and psychotherapeutic practice.

The concept of the Genogram 4.0 interview, as proposed by Borcsa and Hille (2016), serves as an initial stimulus and inspiration to trace the impact of ICTs as “new family members” on multigenerational family systems, while also questioning the concept of “home” in relation to migration, mobility and globalization. It provides a groundwork for formulating linear, circular, and hypothetical questions regarding the significance of information and communication technologies, adapted to the respective family system. Family rules and rituals concerning the use of ICTs, the significance and virtual

¹⁷ Of course, psychotherapists have to be conscious about respective professional guidelines with regard to confidentiality and legal circumstances (Borcsa et al., 2021).

relationship-building with physically absent relatives, peers, or family outsiders, the attitudes and opinions of these individuals, as well as the permeability of digital information into the family system can be explored. Considering new technologies and their effects offers potential for new insights into their positive or negative impacts.

It is essential for systemic therapists to confront these new realities and adopt a curious attitude to gather understandings on how information and communication technologies can be utilized as resources for families (Borcsa & Pomini 2017; Borcsa & Hille, 2016). This approach encourages therapists to explore the potential benefits of ICTs in enhancing family dynamics, facilitating communication, and providing support, ultimately contributing to more effective therapeutic practices. By embracing these technologies curiously and well-informed, therapists can better understand the complexities of modern family life and utilize ICTs to foster resilience and connection among family members and beyond.

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