

# A Journey through the Generations to Clear a Painful Legacy through Psychodrama

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## ABSTRACT

The application of psychodrama in transgenerational trauma therapy has some peculiarities. In this paper, a complete psychodrama session is presented with a case containing examples of Invisible family loyalties, Unfinished grieving, Accountability across generations, and the Replacement child. The protagonist in the presented case is a 37-year-old woman who lost her brother when he was 21 years old; her family history is full of men who died very young, and she experiences constant unreasonable feelings of loss, as well as fear of losing her sons, although she does not believe in curses.

**KEYWORDS:** Invisible family loyalties; Replacement child; Unfinished grieving; Accountability across generations.

Uma jornada através das gerações para eliminar um legado doloroso por meio do Psicodrama

## RESUMO

A aplicação do Psicodrama na terapia de trauma transgeracional tem algumas particularidades. Neste artigo, é apresentada uma sessão completa de Psicodrama com um caso que contém exemplos de lealdades familiares invisíveis, luto inacabado, responsabilidade entre gerações e a criança substituta. A protagonista do caso apresentado é uma mulher de 37 anos que perdeu o irmão aos 21 anos. Sua história familiar está repleta de homens que morreram muito novos e ela experimenta constantes sentimentos irracionais de perda, bem como medo de perder os filhos, embora não acredite em maldições.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Lealdades familiares invisíveis; Filho substituto; Luto inacabado; Responsabilidade entre gerações.

Un viaje a través de las generaciones para eliminar un legado doloroso a través del Psicodrama

## RESUMEN

La aplicación del psicodrama en la terapia del trauma transgeneracional presenta algunas peculiaridades. A continuación, presentamos una sesión completa de psicodrama con un caso que contiene ejemplos de lealtades familiares invisibles, duelo inacabado, rendición de cuentas a través de generaciones y el niño sustituto. La protagonista del caso presentado es una mujer de 37 años que perdió a su hermano cuando este tenía 21 años. Su historia familiar está llena de hombres que murieron muy jóvenes y ella experimenta constantes sentimientos irracionales de pérdida, así como miedo a perder a sus hijos, aunque no cree en maldiciones.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Lealtades familiares invisibles; Hijo sustituto; Duelo inacabado; Responsabilidad entre generaciones.


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## INTRODUCTION

How can one explain the recurrence of death at approximately the same age in several generations of the same family? Or that most of the deceased have the same names and or similar circumstances of death?

Anne Schützenberger (1998) describes the De Mortelac family, which has a thousand-year history. In every generation, a child about three years old dies by drowning in a lake, river, or well. The author looks for an explanation of the effect of strong words, especially when accompanied by intense emotion and spoken by authority figures, in oracular prophetic stress and optimistic prediction (Schützenberger, 1998).

The interpretation and working in psychotherapy with „curses“ passed down transgenerationally is a bold idea that can provoke different reactions in readers. The so-called “family curses” can find a form of translation into psychological terms without having any trace of an occult-like charge.

In popular belief, curses are often viewed as unfortunate events or repeated patterns of suffering and are considered ineluctable family legacies. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, these „curses“ can be reinterpreted through the lenses of transgenerational concepts, seen instead as psychological and emotional patterns inherited between generations. This approach allows a more nuanced understanding of the impact of unresolved events and traumas in family history on subsequent generations.

Many studies have been performed in the field of intergenerational transmission of parenting influences and risk of traumatization in an attempt to disentangle genetic and non-genetic factors with more and more understanding of epigenetic mechanisms (Braje et al., 2020; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Explanations of patterns transmitting through generations have been searched in attachment types, parental responsiveness, and factors influencing them (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1997). Traumatic experiences can interact with unconscious fantasies based on folklore and the supernatural, and a relationship between supernatural experience and early attachment wounds can be explored (Monk, 2023).

In this article, it is presented the authors’ understanding of this specific dynamic between generations, focusing on four main transgenerational concepts:

### Invisible family loyalties

Loyalty can be understood as a manifestation of external coercion. The invisible fabric of loyalty implies the existence of “structured group expectations to which all members are committed” (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1984, p. 37). Family loyalty is like a strong invisible fiber network that holds together complex pieces of duty, fairness, and justice, and failing to comply with the obligations determines guilt and feelings that will become a second regulatory system in family relationships. The mistakes and traumas in one generation are “paid for” by the next generations through an unconscious feeling of moral duty. They are symbolically “redeemed” by descendants who unconsciously take on the suffering to balance the family’s relations of justice.

The unconscious functioning of the invisible family loyalty can also be understood through the latent formulated “myths” of the families.

### Unfinished grieving

Unresolved grief and trauma can be passed down from generation to generation (Volkan, 1993). This transmission occurs through behaviors, emotional responses, and even cultural narratives, affecting descendants who may not have experienced the original trauma (Volkan, 1993). Individuals may suffer from symptoms of unresolved grief and trauma, such as anxiety, depression, and inexplicable fears or phobias, and they might also struggle with issues related to identity influenced by the unresolved emotional legacies of their ancestors (Schützenberger, 1998).

## A replacement child

It is conceived to replace a dead person (Silverman & Brenner, 2015; Schutzenberger, 1998). The term was created by Albert Cain and Barbara Cain (1964) as a result of their study (“Mourning and Familial Loss”) focused on the impact of the loss of a family member, especially children, on surviving family members, results that were published in 1964 (“On Replacing a Child”). In the study, they have identified common behaviors in the families they have observed: unresolved parental grief, guilt, and hyper-idealization.

The replacement child is also a reminder to the parents of the loss. As Andrea Sabbadini (1988, p. 530), a researcher and psychoanalyst, stated, a replacement child “may be treated more as the embodiment of a memory than a person in their own right.”

We need to add that the replacement child (as he/she is becoming an adult) is experiencing a conflict of identity and identification based on all the expectations he/she grew up with.

Unfortunately, no significant study with a more extensive sampling can help us structure the experience of the replacement child across generations.

Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger (1998) distinguishes between a replacement child and a repairing child who receives a warm welcome and holds a good position in the family.

## Accountability across generations

The descendants “pay” for the debts of the ancestors (one of the ideas of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy’s concept approach) (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1984). He emphasizes relational ethics, accountability, and the balance of justice within family relationships across generations. One aspect of his theory deals with the concept of “destructive entitlement”, which can lead to revenge behaviors within families. Destructive entitlement arises when individuals feel that they have been wronged or deprived of what they are owed, leading them to believe they are justified in seeking compensation, even if it means harming others, including their family members (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1984).

In this context, “curses” can be understood metaphorically as the negative patterns, traumas, or unresolved conflicts passed down through family generations. These “curses” can manifest as persistent dysfunctions or destructive behaviors that impact family members across generations.

These concepts can be applied in psychodrama to work on stage with what has been internalized from previous generations’ traumatic experiences.

## METHODOLOGY

In this article is presented a case of a protagonist-centered work during a training weekend, in which the path of the protagonist’s psychodrama process goes back to three previous generations.

This paper refers to the data collected from the notes of another group member, written during the session; the notes of the first author Dr Tarashoeva, who directed the session, written after the session; and the protagonists’ written self-reflection, which are elements of the training program at the preparatory level. This allows the information in all written notes to be compared and corrected and the missed moments to be filled. After the session, data were discussed and analyzed with the co-authors in the supervision sessions.

Following the contract of confidentiality, the names are fictional. After reading the article, the protagonist signed an informed consent form to present her case at scientific conferences and to be published in an international scientific journal.

## Description of the case and the session

If, in the family history of a son’s mother, there are repeated deaths of a young man in three generations, including her brother, is it possible she does not feel fear for the life of her boys? Even if she is an intelligent young lady, when, in

the three generations, sons died young, most of them before they had heirs, how could she be free of the thoughts of the rumor of the “curse” in the family?

Dari is a 37-year-old woman who is a psychologist in a private practice. She is a mother of 3 children – a girl, seven years old, and two twin boys, three years old – and lives with her husband and the children. Dari is a member of the psychodrama group for personal development at the Psychodrama Center Orpheus. She had already worked in the group on the topic of the loss of her 21-year-old brother when she was eleven and how this reflects on her development and relationships with her mother. Before this personal psychodrama, she was not able to speak at all about this loss. After this work, she was able calmly to speak about him and her fear of losing one or two of her boys since they were born.

Dari wanted to work to overcome her unreasonable fear of losing a child.

In her parents' family, there is a rumor that her great-grandmother cursed her husband to wipe out his lineage. After that, many men died young, most of them before they had heirs. The facts of young people dying are known in the lineage, reaching Dari when she was 12 years old, after the loss of her 21-year-old brother. However, the story surrounding the “curse” is somewhat obscure, apparently silenced by the previous generations.

Several group meetings preceded Dari's work on the stage, during which everyone produced their Genosociogram. Afterward, Dari carefully asked her parents about the family history, facts, stories, and rumors. At one of the next group meetings, she told the group that she wanted to explore this topic, and after the sociometric choice of the group, she was elected to be the protagonist of that session and to work on her topic.

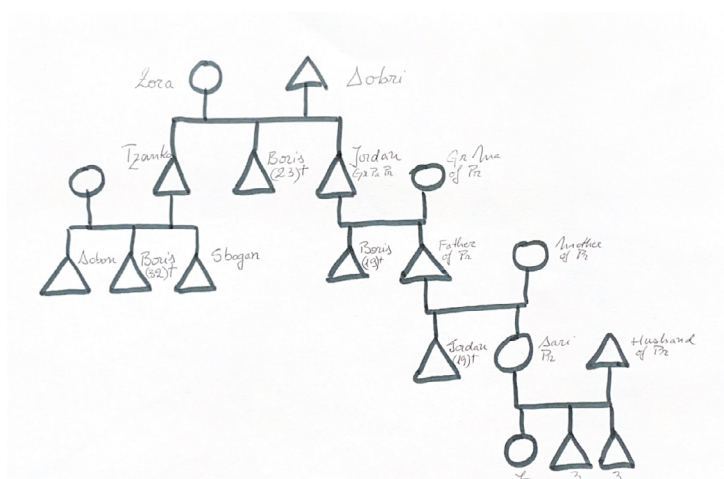


Figure 1. Genosociogram of Dari.

## Scene I

As usual in psychodrama, the session started from the actual problem: her unreasonable but constant fear. About it, she said: “I feel something bigger than me, a giant subject that transcends the limits of the visible. It is hard to put it into words.”

As an exception, this scene was left only verbally because the group knew about it from what Dari had shared in the previous meetings.

“When I was younger, I thought it was better not to give birth to boys because I would always live in fear. It happened: I gave birth to two twin boys.”

“I have always felt that I am a person in sorrow. No matter when and for what reason/for whom, I grieve for something lost. Something like ‘Women in the family are always grieving for someone.’ In my memories, one of my grandmothers always wore a black headscarf and a sad expression (for her lost child). My mother, too – as if nothing could bring her out of her grief for so many years now. It was like a part of me, like a sense of doom.”

“I have felt like a mourner, one of those women who used to go to funerals to make it easier to cry. At funerals of people outside my family, I have been the person who weeps the most inconsolably (as if it happened directly to me). I

wondered, am I dramatizing? What are these reactions of mine? Then, I connected with this role of 'grieving.' It is tough to describe in words."

## Scene II – action Genosociogram

Part of Dari's genogram is arranged on the psychodrama stage with chairs. Each chair represents someone of Dari's ancestors, represented by her with relevant information available to her.

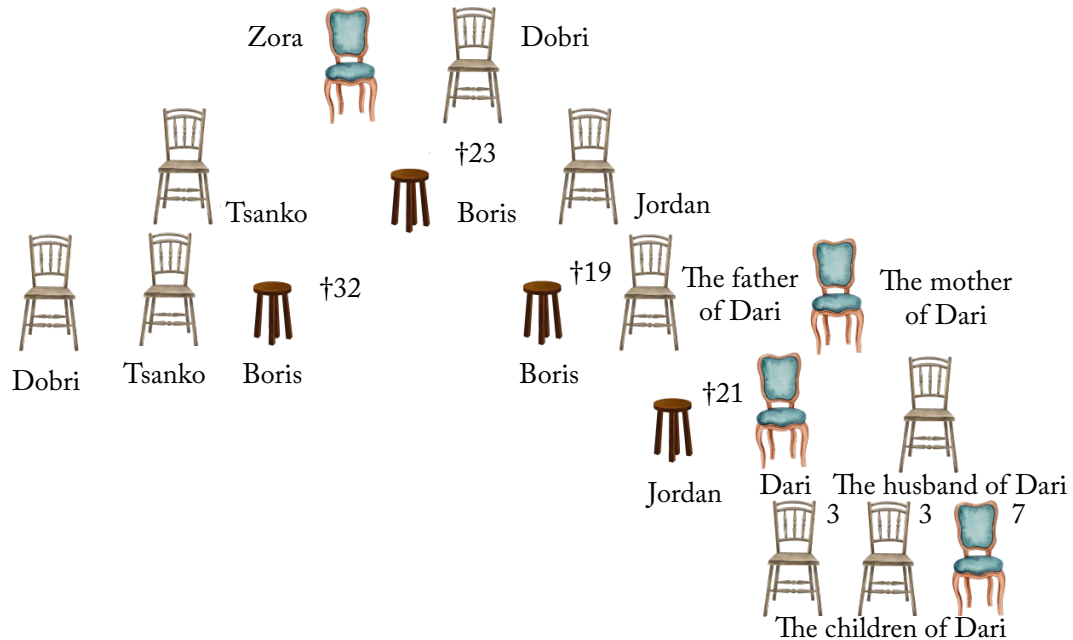


Figure 2. Action Genosociogram of Dari

The deceased young men were named Boris, except for her brother Jordan.

Dari knows about the oldest ancestors: great-grandfather Dobri, from whom the family name started, and great-grandmother Zora. Zora is said to have cursed her husband's lineage to be wiped out.

Zora and Dobri had three sons: Boris, who died when he was at the age of twenty-three as a soldier during a bombing, and two who lived and created families.

Each of the two sons had only boys (one had three sons, and the other one had two). Each of these families also lost one son — both were named Boris, named in honor of the lost brother.

Boris, the son of Jordan, the brother of Dari's father, died at the age of nineteen from leukemia, which happened after he, as a soldier, was sent to do something at the Nuclear Power Plant. Boris, Tsanko's son, died in an accident (electric shock) at the age of thirty-two. He left a wife and two sons, who now have their own families.

Dari's brother Jordan died at twenty-one in a car accident. It became apparent that Dari was the only female born in this family before her daughter. The last generation is Dari's three children.

Organizing the genogram on the stage, all participants are represented with chairs, and the deceased are arranged with stools and are close to each other/on the same side.

"When I got to the point of arranging my own family, stools appeared before my eyes to use for the children's seats. Then I burst into tears – my fear surfaced and hit me like a hammer in the head. I fear that one of my children will pass into the column of the deceased. If we put a stool there, it has already happened; it is settled. Then you said, 'That is not your child; it is just a stool.' We put chairs, not stools, for my children."

Sitting in her chair, watching the family from her seat, Dari was very anxious.

## Scene III

Time: 1958 to 1959, in the village house of the family.

The action begins with Dobri waiting for his wife to come back home. In his role, Dari shares in a monologue, “Zora has been gone for a week. She goes to monasteries in the mountains with unknown women from nearby villages. People in the village talk and discuss where my wife goes. She exposes me with this; I am ridiculed in the village.” A group member (an Auxiliary Ego) takes this role.

In the role of Zora, who is just coming back home, Dari experiences and shares, “I lost my son Boris a year ago; I cannot come to terms with this; I am looking for answers, where is he and why did this happen! I am looking for people foreign to the village, monks and priests; I am talking to them to find out where he is and how to find him. I go to churches and monasteries, which only gives me a little peace. My husband does not receive it well, but I cannot give up.” Another group member (an Auxiliary Ego) takes this role.

By successively entering each of the two roles, Dari recreates and experiences the event about which she has heard disturbing information. The Auxiliary Egos partners her in the corresponding role.

A conflict occurs when Zora comes home, and Dobri greets her angrily and accuses her. Zora does not allow herself to be insulted and responds sharply. A scandal is brewing, and Dobri swears at his wife. Zora’s answer is somewhat unexpected: she does not allow him to insult her and threatens him, “What if I catch you? I will bury you!”

The situation escalates to Dobri slapping Zora, and the curse is pronounced: “May the whole of your lineage perish, you scoundrel!”

After this scene, the two Auxiliary Egos play out, and the protagonist, Dari, watches it from the side in a mirror. A tearful and shaken Dari utters, “Bad! Very bad!”

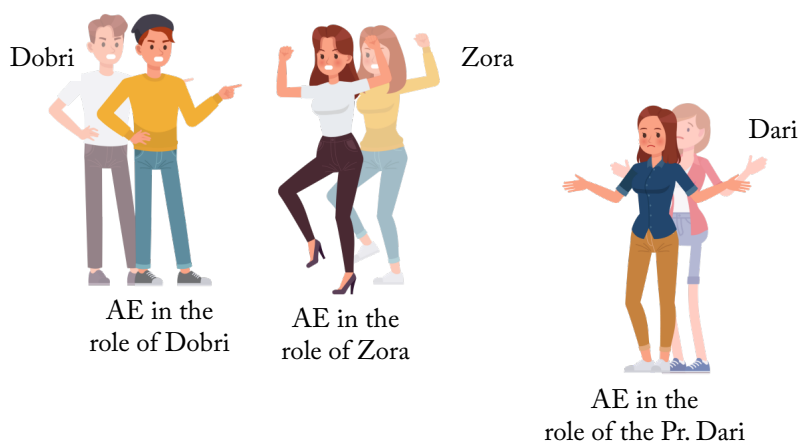


Figure 3. Representation of scene III.

## Scene IV

In her current role, Dari receives a bag with various heavy objects from the director. The director offers her to return to Zora and Dobri everything given to her through this “curse” and everything that is not hers but belongs to them.

With slow steps, Dari goes to the two Auxiliary egos playing the roles of Zora and Dobri, puts the heavy bag in front of them, and tells them:

„Take your conflicts, arguments, slaps, curses, and everything that is only yours.“ „I do not need to lose a child to start caring about what is beyond the surface. I do not need to be a grieving mother; everyone will go in their turn! I am just a grieving sister; that is enough for me. All the women here have come from other lineages, and they have suffered because of your legacy. I am putting an end to this!”



The director suggests that Dari tell her great-grandparents if there is something that she received from them that she wants to keep and thank them for.

“Grandma Zora, we are similar in temperament. I thank you for what I inherited from you – interest and curiosity for broader topics, spiritual development, and other explanations for how the world works. Moreover, to some extent, I assert my interest in front of my partner. Like you, I do not allow violence against me. I am grateful for the things I carry and will continue to carry from you. However, I will no longer be loyal to your story, with your curse, with which I have nothing to do; it is only yours, and therefore, I am giving it back to you!”

After returning the heavy bag and everything not hers to great-grandmother Zora and great-grandfather Dobri, Dari sits in her chair in the genogram. She shares that she feels complete and at peace.

Group members and the director doubled often during the action, while the protagonist played various roles.

## In the Sharing Phase

The group sat in a circle and shared their experiences and emotions with Dari in roles or as themselves. Dari’s experience deeply touched all group members; everyone shared that it had a significant impact.

After the group sharing, Dari gave positive feedback and was deeply thankful to the group and the director.

## After the Session

In her self-reflection, Dari shared and later wrote:

“This work took a gigantic load off my shoulders. I feel like I was tied to a particular experience; I unconsciously gravitated toward it. As if I HAD to do it – to go through the pain of a mother grieving for her child, to have my life marked by this label that remains forever.”

“The feeling of being ME and not fulfilling some foreign (ancestral) hereditary patterns is distinct.”

“This work also gave me a sense of empowerment, like I was taking back some control over my and my family’s paths. And the distinct lack of a sense of heavy duty! It is possible that the attitudes of future generations have been turned around here, and we have influenced many more people than we can imagine. I hope it is!”

Six months later, Dari wrote in her self-reflection:

“The anxiety is gone. Not that it cannot happen to me; anything happens in life. However, there is no element of compulsion. It was as if I had an obligation to lose one of my children. Now, I do not have this obligation! I do not even get that excited when I think about it. I can look rationally at the question of whether I will lose a child in my life or not. The answer is: I have no idea. More likely not; at least, this is what I believe.”

“I do not have that sense of duty and doom and predestination that I have to go through this maternal grief.”

## DISCUSSION

A complete protagonist-centered group session was conducted. The protagonist, Dari, gazed from her chair forward in time to her children coming after her and backward, through two generations up to the third, the progenitors Dobri and Zora, which developed robust emotional and representational processes in her. The protagonist often shared that she had difficulties finding words to describe her experiences. Entering the action through the roles of her ancestors, the flow of experiences, words, and emotions sprang from her without any effort and produced scenarios that surprised her. Crossing the boundaries of generations, the protagonist experienced the culmination of the action developed between the two progenitors in both roles.

Using the basic psychodrama techniques (role reversal, doubling, mirroring, and finishing unfinished business), the ancestors’ “debts” were symbolically “returned to them”, and invisible loyalty was interrupted. The protagonist thanked her progenitor, Zora, for her positive legacy and reframed others with healthy, conscious loyalty. The burden of the progenitors’ responsibility and duty was returned to those to whom it belonged, and the protagonist took responsibility for her actions and life.

How could one ever recover from the loss of a child?

According to Sigmund Freud (1929), cited by Vamik D. Volkan (1993), "... to have a child predecease a parent is a monstrous thing. It is the most difficult loss that humans mourn."

The unspeakable pain of a parent who lost a child is a mourning that goes through each stage in heavy dynamics, never having a closer for it. As Freud (1929, vol 5, pp. 1–478) said, the parents "remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute." As in the case of Zora, in her process of finding how to be contained, her expectations are directed towards the church (her religion) and her partner. The death of a child, most often, does not unite the family. Each member needs to grieve and find their sense of the loss.

Losing a child is losing continuity in the future, as if a part of you died already. Sometimes, the powerlessness experienced by a parent who lost a child amplifies the anger (as a stage of mourning) at such a level that it needs to be released in a short, explosive manner, helping them to "scream" their unfathomable pain. As with Zora, the "scream" is sometimes transformed into a "curse" in which they can feel the power of controlling the future.

In this family, until now, in each generation, a mother has lost a son, most of whom are named Boris. Each generation has a father losing a son, and with him, the continuity of the family name. In each generation until now, brothers have lost a brother. Dari is the first sister to lose a brother. As if everyone is expressing invisible family loyalties on the man's side and on the female's side, loyalty to the "cursed man", and loyalty to the suffering mother, father, and brother – the invisible psychological connection among extended family members, described by Ivan Boszormenyi Nagy (1984) and Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger (1998).

The unfinished grieving of Zora does not give her peace, pushes her to an indomitable search for a relationship with the lost son, and blinds her to the point that, in her anger, she does not realize that by cursing her husband, she is also cursing her future generations. The pain of losing her son is so intense that it becomes her whole universe, and the other family members become less and less important to her in the "economy of family life." Her beloved son died, and the other family members were still living, including her husband.

This unfinished grieving (Volkan, 1993; Schutzenberger, 1998) inherited from Zora is somehow transmitted from mother to mother, in addition to their grieving for their sons. It arrives in Dari as "I have always had the feeling that I am a person in sorrow." Moreover, "Women in the family are always grieving for someone."

The two brothers of the first Boris named one of their sons with his name as if to replace him, to find the lost brother. The replacement children die like the Boris after whom they were named in love and respect and to fill the void.

Personal names serve many purposes, both for the namer and for the named. They are conferred, at least in part, in honor of someone who has gone before (Seeman, 1983). As a consequence of their allusion to a stereotypical identity, names may then be selected, often unconsciously, transferring parental predilections to their children (Seeman, 1983). In Eastern Europe, in our observation naming a child after a beloved relative is common and can have a positive significance when the deceased passes at the end of a long life, so he is remembered with love. Sometimes, the name is given in the hope that the child receiving it will embody the person he/she is being named after.

This case could also be seen through Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's (1984) concept of "accountability across generations" – the descendants pay for the ancestors' debts.

In the case presented, the "curse" can be understood (in the case presented) as the great-grandfather's debt towards his wife, debt "paid" by his descendants. The great-grandmother's message in her "curse" is, "You have to pay for something" or "You are guilty of something, and you have to pay for it, so guilty that your descendants should die."

One of the unwritten rules of the people's expectations is that the order in which people leave the world is in the order they came into this world. When somebody passes away at the age that most people do, the pain of grieving is unconsciously expected. When the rule is broken, and somebody passes away young (before someone older than them), it can be perceived in many ways, but one of them is that there is unfairness and injustice in the world. Most of the time, people try to find someone responsible for that. Also, often, the guilt of being still alive or the anger that someone else survived is a feeling that arises in this process.



When the grieving pain includes the feeling of the injustice of the world (the unwritten rules of the life are broken) and the anger that someone else (maybe less important for the grieving person) survived, the result is a mixture of feelings that is very hard to cope with it. In Zora's situation, she geared the pain toward the father of her son, the one who survived instead of being the first one to leave the world, and tried to make him pay for that.

The protagonist reported that she felt more aware of her reasons for being anxious, that she has no more fears, and that this session profoundly changed her life.

The surplus reality of psychodrama provides an opportunity for profound experiences not only in one's own life roles but also from the roles of ancestors and people who lived before the protagonist's birth. Through Dari, it could be observed that entering the ancestors' roles, with unfinished grieving, could bring the protagonist action insights about the unreasonable feeling of loss, help them understand the incomprehensible switch to anger, and help them live without fear. This gives the chance to clearly distinguish the guilt and responsibility of ancestors, and to symbolically return them so that their successors can continue their lives free from the guilt of others, in peace with themselves and those who lived before them. This could stop the transmission of unfinished processes and symptoms to the next generations. Understanding this phenomenon allows not only the release of descendants from the burden of the past, but also deep healing of the family chain through awareness and resolution.

Surplus reality and psychodrama techniques offer Transgenerational Trauma Therapy the space and instruments for developing the Transgenerational Therapeutic Process.

Psychodrama works with an embodied story, which makes it very useful in working with all kinds of trauma therapy, as this was confirmed in this case, including Transgenerational Trauma Therapy. As an action method, psychodrama bypasses the blocked by trauma verbalizing and gives access to essential materials, like with Dari in the presented case.

Is psychodrama capable of giving access to what is embodied and locked in the genes or in the collective family unconscious and bringing it out of there by entering the roles of our ancestors? Is psychodrama capable of giving access to what C.G. Jung (1916) called the collective unconscious?

These questions may become good research questions for future researchers. More research is needed in this field.

An important area for future research is whether psychodrama can facilitate access to embodied experiences encoded in the collective family unconscious, allowing their externalization through psychodrama role enactment. Additionally, further investigation is needed to determine whether psychodrama can provide access to what C.G. Jung (1969) referred to as the collective unconscious. These questions present valuable directions for future empirical studies in the field.

## CONCLUSION

The presented concepts of Transgenerational Therapy enrich the psychodrama method and provide an essential, deep, and extended understanding of generational relationships. The concepts of Invisible family loyalty, Replacement child, Unfinished grieving, and Accountability across generations help psychodramatists see the underlying processes and use psychodrama tools to achieve therapeutic goals.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Nothing to declare.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Tarashoeva G and Schmidt C; Methodology: Tarashoeva G and Marinova-Djambazova P; Investigation: Tarashoeva G; Writing of the Original Draft: Tarashoeva G, Schmidt C, Marinova-Djambazova P; Writing – Review and Editing: Tarashoeva G, Schmidt C, Marinova-Djambazova P; Final approval: Tarashoeva G, Schmidt C and Marinova-Djambazova P.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The current study generated and analyzed all data sets in English. The Bulgarian data will be available upon request.

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