

Transgenerational Transmission of Forced Migration Experiences in Palestinian Families: A Biographical-Narrative Analysis

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Abstract *This article examines how experiences of war and forced migration are transmitted across generations within Palestinian families in Germany. Based on eight biographical interviews with young adults, the analysis reconstructs how family histories are narrated and shape individual biographies. Notably, all second-generation participants began their stories with their families' migration histories, although the study focused on educational trajectories. Two cases—Aliya and Bilal—illustrate distinct modes of transmission: restrictive parenting rooted in war experiences and persistent existential insecurity. The study advances understanding of transgenerational transmission and calls for further research on resilience and support for affected families.*

INTRODUCTION

This article presents the findings of a field study. The displacement and flight of around 700,000 Palestinians during the 1947–1949 Palestine War, known as the Nakba, constituted one of the most significant population displacements of the twentieth century.¹ This systematic uprooting led to the near destruction of Palestinian society.² The resulting refugee situation has made Palestinians one of the world's largest stateless communities.³ After repeated displacements, some families migrated to Germany. This was also facilitated by the political context before Germany's reunification in 1990, that created permeable borders. In west Germany (FRG), however, they often received insecure residence permits for decades as “de facto” refugees due to their statelessness.⁴

The biographical data reveal that young adults engage with the transgenerational experiences of their parents in different ways, shaped in part by available resilience resources. Within the sample, dynamics such as strong yet ambivalent family bonds, patterns of parental control and restriction, as well as pervasive sense of insecurity, emerged as central. These dynamics significantly influenced the

biographical pathways of the young adults and their life choices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transgenerational Trauma and Narrative Transmission

Fischer and Riedesser define a traumatic experience “as a vital discrepancy between threatening situational factors and the individual's coping capacities, accompanied by feelings of helplessness and defenseless exposure, resulting in a lasting disruption of one's understanding of self and world”.⁵ The DSM-5 describes a traumatic event as an experience involving actual or threatened death, severe injury, or sexual violence. Exposure may occur in different ways: through direct experience, by witnessing, by learning that a close relative or significant other has been affected, or through repeated confrontation with distressing details.⁶ El-Khalil et al.⁷ demonstrate that the psychological and social consequences of such events often extend beyond the individuals directly affected, impacting subsequent generations. Research has documented that the harmful effects of trauma can be passed down across generations—a phenomenon referred to as intergenerational trauma.

Collective trauma, by contrast, refers to the psychological impact experienced by an entire group as a result of events such as natural disasters, genocide, war, or pandemics. This form of trauma is tied to shared experiences and emotional responses and is closely linked to the social and cultural context of the affected group.⁸

Recent studies increasingly suggest that even descendants can be affected by traumatic exposures that occurred prior to their birth. Findings show physiological changes in stress regulation and brain structures that indicate a biological embedding of trauma across generations. Socially, intergenerational trauma shapes relationships and identity, often fostering mistrust and emotional restraint; psychologically, descendants show heightened distress and trauma symptoms, with parental PTSD serving as a key predictor.⁹

Marks¹⁰ points out that the transmission of traumatic experiences can extend across three to four generations, with the second generation being the most strongly affected. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Dunkel¹¹ explains how the inadequate processing of traumatic experiences by parents can lead to damaged personality components with which children may identify. The second generation may take on the task of integrating repressed emotions, resulting in compulsive repetition as children unconsciously attempt to make parental traumas comprehensible by reenacting them in the present. Leitner¹² describes typical phenomena of transgenerational transmission: respondents without personal war experiences—for instance, those born in Germany—report parentification in relation to parents perceived as weak or pacts of silence around tabooed family history. War and displacement experiences thus often shape the entire family and are transmitted across generations.

Narrative structures play a central role in this process. Family histories become “memory narratives” that are unconsciously transmitted and shape the identity formation of subsequent generations.¹³ In biographical interviews, such unconscious transmissions become visible as structuring narrative patterns: the way in which interviewees recount their family histories reflects transgenerational processes.¹⁴

The analysis of narrative structures as an approach to transgenerational transmission requires methodological caution. Alternative

interpretations must also be considered: are observed patterns evidence of psychological trauma transmission, or do they reflect culturally available “refugee narratives” used for identity construction? Albaba,¹⁵ in a study of Palestinian families in the West Bank, shows how family dialogues about the Nakba remain strongly tied to collective “we-discourses” and defense mechanisms. Such narratives can be understood as culturally available interpretive frameworks that structure identity and belonging.

Forced Migration and Post-Migration Stressors

Miller and Rasmussen¹⁶ developed a socio-ecological model that goes beyond the traditional focus on war exposure and identifies post-migration stressors as equally significant determinants of refugees’ mental health.

Post-migration stressors such as social isolation, unemployment, discrimination, and insecure legal status have proven to be as powerful predictors of psychological strain as war-related trauma.

These insights are central to understanding transgenerational transmission in the sample on which the present study is based. The combination of pre-migration traumas (war, displacement) and persistent post-migration stressors in Germany (decades of residence insecurity, discrimination) can intensify transgenerational transmission, as coping resources remain continuously strained. In the biographical interviews, it is not possible to diagnose trauma in the parent and grandparent generations. Nevertheless, the narratives point to profoundly distressing experiences that have shaped family relationships and are reflected in the life courses of subsequent generations. The intensity of features observed in individuals, the unconscious repetition of parental formulations, and the consistency of such patterns across several families suggest the presence of deeper psychological transmission processes that extend beyond conscious narrative constructions.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Through the qualitative sample of this study on large families and educational pathways of young adults from Palestinian families, a commonality became visible: all respondents of the second and third generation began their life and family histories in the self-structured part of their opening narratives by recounting the family's flight or migration history, without any prompting. This consistent pattern was not anticipated and required subsequent theoretical contextualization. The present reflections are therefore to be understood as a heuristic finding that generates hypotheses for future systematic studies of transgenerational transmission. This operationalization deliberately focuses on observable narrative phenomena and avoids causal assumptions about underlying psychological transmission mechanisms.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study is based on eight biographical-narrative interviews with young adults of Palestinian origin from large families in Germany. Recruitment took place through social-pedagogical networks and snowball sampling. Out of 16 commitments obtained over a period of three years, ten interviews were conducted, of which eight were methodologically successful, in line with theoretical sampling.¹⁷ During the interview process, it quickly became evident that particular ethical sensitivity was required, as disturbing memories became the subject of the interviews. Power-critical aspects—from methodological knowledge advantages to interpretive authority over the data—shaped the entire research process. After the interviews, follow-up contact was established to support participants in processing the conversation. Specific challenges arose from narrative compulsion,¹⁸ as participants often spoke more extensively about family members than initially anticipated. Ensuring anonymity proved complex in the case of large families, as sibling constellations could allow for indirect identification. Two interviews revealed a need for counselling, in which existing support

services were mediated. Responses to sensitive topics varied widely—from avoidance, to delayed narration, to expressions of gratitude for the opportunity to share extremely distressing experiences. The approaches of Miethe¹⁹ and Rosenthal²⁰ to dealing with unforeseen biographical narratives provided the essential foundation for the research practice. After clarifying the ethical considerations,²¹ the narrative interview was conducted according to Schütze,²² with the open, non-directive introductory question proposed by Rosenthal:²³

"I would like to ask you to tell me your family and life story—all the experiences that come to mind. You may take as much time as you wish. I will not interrupt you, only take some notes, and come back to them later."

Following this invitation, the opening or main narrative—structured by the interviewee—ensued.²⁴ Reconstruction followed a three-step procedure: chronological analysis of biographical data, sequential text analysis to reconstruct case structures, and comparison of lived and narrated experience.²¹ Analysis was conducted in interpretation groups to reflect on the researcher's subjective interpretations and to avoid reproducing orders of difference.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Aliya – Sexualized War Violence and Its Consequences

Aliya, the interviewee, narrated that her grandmother and mother fled from southern Lebanon to Germany in the early 1990s after multiple episodes of internal displacement. The reconstruction of Aliya's biography, who was born in Germany in 1994, shows how her mother's and grandmother's experiences of displacement, civil war, and sexualized war violence during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) shaped the narration of the interview. During the interview, a call from Aliya's parents revealed a previously

existing conflict - one that had not been apparent before - which she explained as follows:

"They just yelled at me, saying that I was lying [...] I kept postponing it [Author's note: the interview] because of my mother - I wasn't allowed to do it. But today I argued with her and told myself: I will go there now; I will do it (crying)."

Although her father demanded that she return home immediately, she nonetheless opened up and described her family conflicts in detail. This clarified why she had repeatedly postponed the interview before. The interview situation, as well as the analysis of the narration, makes visible the case structure: Aliya's life is marked by a constant ambivalence between what she herself desires and the fears of her grandmother and mother, which translate into restrictions. These dynamics, shaped by the family's specific history of displacement and migration from Lebanon and Syria, strongly influenced her upbringing. This ambivalence emerges repeatedly throughout the biographical narrative. To outsiders, Aliya may appear unreliable or elusive, as she cannot act in a consistent manner toward either her family or the outside world.

Based on their shared experiences of war and flight, a special bond between Aliya's mother and grandmother structured their relationship and strongly influenced Aliya's life. She recalls:

"She was always with her during the war, she always had her by her hand, from Lebanon all the way to Germany."

The phrase "she always had her by her hand" symbolizes the inseparable bond between grandmother and mother, forged by the war and displacement. These experiences left such a strong imprint that their physical closeness continued even in Germany. The grandmother lived with the family of six children in a very small apartment.

Aliya also reflected on the ambivalence of this upbringing. On the one hand, she showed understanding for her grandmother's parenting

style; on the other, she criticized it as unfair restrictions, especially when compared to her peers. Trapped in her unresolved fears, and having received no support, the grandmother projected her painful experiences onto her daughter and granddaughter. Aliya recalls:

"My grandmother lived with us; she always protected us - overprotected us. She was always afraid for us - we were hardly allowed to go out, only under supervision. She was still stuck in the war, when girls were often abducted. That's why she was so afraid."

When Aliya was fourteen, her grandmother passed away, which she described as a devastating loss:

"At some point she died, in 2008. It was really bad for us. My mother broke down ... we were so close to my grandma - she lived with us from the time we were born until the end. She was always with us. And then she was gone. It was terrible; we had to process it first."

The loss of her grandmother not only deprived Aliya of a close attachment figure but also burdened her, as the eldest child, with new responsibilities. She further explained that her mother seemed to have inherited her grandmother's fears:

"My mother somehow inherited something from my grandma - she was just as afraid for us as my grandma was back then. That girls would be kidnapped, abducted, that something bad would happen to them."

Trapped in her fears and lacking external support, the grandmother projected her painful experiences onto her daughter and granddaughter. When her grandmother passed away in 2008, Aliya described this loss as devastating, emphasizing the profound closeness that had existed between them. In mourning, she tattooed her grandmother's name on her arm - a gesture symbolizing the deep

intergenerational bond among grandmother, mother, and eldest daughter, which she described in the interview as almost mystical. Coupled with precarious living conditions and limited parental education, however, these dynamics did not provide a supportive developmental environment.

At the time of the interview, Aliya was 24 years old, had only a low school qualification and no vocational training. She still lived at home as the eldest daughter, although younger siblings had already moved out. She appears bound, even though she repeatedly stated in the interview:

"Everyone tells me, you have to leave, you have to get away from home, this is no life, but I cannot do that to them."

In sum, the case illustrates how a young woman born in Germany is confronted with a complex, contradictory family reality that often remains invisible in politics, society, and public discourse. Transgenerational transmissions, such as those in Aliya's case, shape development and should be given greater attention in both research and pedagogy.

Case Study 2: Bilal – Consistency and Repetition of Burdensome Experiences

Bilal's father was born in Syria in 1961, his mother in southern Lebanon in 1969. The interview reveals that both parents' families were displaced in 1967, growing up with statelessness and insecurity as formative experiences. They married in the mid-1980s in southern Lebanon during the civil war. In 1990, Bilal's father fled to Germany and applied for political asylum, as Bilal recounts:

"My father was supposed to fight with the rebels, but he didn't want to. People told him: you'll get money; you'll be protected. But my father had a family and didn't want to. So he fled to Germany - alone at first - because we didn't have much money and life in Lebanon was hard."

At that time, Bilal's mother—22 years old and pregnant with her third child, Bilal—remained in an insecure situation in Lebanon with two small children. Bilal was born in Lebanon in 1991, while his father was already in Germany seeking asylum. He recalls the family story:

"My father fled to Germany when I was still in my mother's belly. I wasn't even born yet. My mom was pregnant, and my father fled for a year."

This account reflects a familial narrative transmitted to him, as it predates his conscious memory. The interview analysis reveals that Bilal presents himself and his family within the framework of a family history which, in his perception, is decisively shaped by conditions marked by an underlying sense of threat. The affectionate use of "mom" in contrast to the more distanced "father" further underscores his solidarity with the mother and highlights the father's absence - an aspect that recurs throughout the interview.

When Bilal was one and a half years old, his father arranged for his wife and their three children to join him in Germany, financing the journey through work and borrowed money. Once again, Bilal describes in the interview the migration undertaken by his mother with three small children to Germany - without the father. The family applied for asylum in 1992 and lived in shared accommodations. In 1993, their asylum claim was rejected, but they filed an appeal. Only in 2001—nine years after their arrival—did the family finally receive a residence permit, when Bilal was ten years old and was able to move into their own flat. The protracted insecurity surrounding their legal status shaped Bilal's early life. From the beginning of his interview, he intertwined his life story with his parents' flight and migration experiences, describing his family as marked by constant insecurity. Although he grew up in Germany from early childhood, a pervasive sense of existential uncertainty structured his narrative. A particularly striking episode occurred during a family trip to Lebanon in 2006, when Bilal was fifteen. While traveling without the father again, the

mother and children were caught in the outbreak of the war between Lebanon and Israel. Bilal described ten days of rocket attacks, culminating in the family's escape through the mountains to the port of Tyre, from where they fled via Greece back to Germany. He recalls feelings of panic, heart palpitations, and fear whenever he hears loud noises.

The case analysis illustrates how Bilal, despite growing up in Germany, describes a deeply ingrained sense of instability and insecurity, mirrored in his behaviour: by the end of his twenties, he had only a low level of schooling and no employment. His insecurity leads to a withdrawal and inward orientation toward family relationships. His biography reflects not only his parents' displacement history and its consequences and his father's absence, but also his own feelings of insecurity.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of these two biographical interviews with young adults from Palestinian families demonstrates how themes of violence, war and displacement persist across generations through narrative structures within family storytelling. Both case studies reveal different manifestations of narrative patterns: while Aliya's case illustrates the transmission of concrete experiences of violence through protective behaviours, Bilal's case shows the adoption of diffuse narratives of insecurity. Forced migration within the family continues to shape the living conditions of families in this sample so profoundly—even decades after migration—that they continue to structure biographies into the second generation. The combination of familial, historical, and ongoing experiences of displacement and flight, alongside decades of post-migration stressors faced by Palestinian families in Germany, forms the structural context in which the observed narrative patterns unfold. These findings highlight the importance of trauma-informed approaches in education and social work with refugee families and their children. Future research should examine protective factors that can interrupt negative cycles

of transmission and design interventions that acknowledge both traumatic experiences and resilience resources within affected families.

Interpretative Boundaries

The present analysis cannot definitively distinguish between different explanatory models. Whether the observed narrative patterns are the result of psychological trauma transmission, cultural identity construction, or methodological artifacts remains an open empirical question. The interpretation therefore focuses on describing narrative structures without making claims of etiological explanation. Alternative interpretations must be considered in the analysis of biographical interviews: are the observed patterns evidence of psychological trauma transmission, or are they culturally available "refugee narratives" employed for identity construction? The consistency of narrative patterns across multiple families in this exploratory study suggests the presence of structuring processes of transmission that may extend beyond conscious narrative constructions. This hypothesis requires further investigation in systematic studies with larger and more diverse samples.

ETHICAL REFLECTIONS AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

As a non-Palestinian scholar, the researcher's analysis of family narratives inevitably involves power asymmetries and the risk of reproducing colonial knowledge structures. Interpretive authority over Palestinian experiences remains with the researcher, while interviewees primarily function as data sources. The retrospective reframing of a study originally focused on educational pathways further reinforces this asymmetry. Narratives of war and displacement, though already considered in the dissertation, are placed at the centre of analysis for the first time in this article.

This shift enables a more precise understanding of transgenerational transmission but also risks

individualizing or pathologizing Palestinian families, potentially obscuring structural discrimination and political causes. These reflections do not undermine the empirical significance of the findings; rather, they call for interpretive caution and transparent acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality.

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