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## “Living the stories of your great-grandmother”: Making sense of Russia’s war in Ukraine through Polish intergenerational family storytelling

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### ABSTRACT

After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Polish people were tasked with making sense of war in close proximity while supporting millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing to Poland. In times of distress, such as war and refugee crises, intergenerational storytelling helps people make sense of their experience. Interviews with 28 Polish adults during the first five months of the war revealed that intergenerational family storytelling prompted them to: *cope with war*, *connect with Ukraine*, and *help others*. These narrative functions were informed by various levels of culture, as proposed by ecological systems theorizing. Findings expand communication narrative sense-making theory by accounting for sociohistorical influences in intergenerational family storytelling and highlighting how family storytelling can motivate action during crisis.

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On Thursday, 24 February 2022, the Polish people awoke to the news that Russia had invaded Ukraine. It was *Źusty Czwartek* (“Fat Thursday”) in Poland, which is a day that is typically celebrated by sharing donut-like *pączki* with friends and family. *Pączki* would still be eaten this year, but conversations surrounding them would involve shock, fear, and disbelief of these historic events. In the coming three weeks, more than two million Ukrainian refugees would flood into Poland (UNHCR, 2022); eventually nearly six million would cross the Polish border. While the Polish people heroically mobilized to support these refugees, they were also attempting to make sense of war next door in light of their historic involvement with war.<sup>1</sup> How Poles made sense of Russia’s war in Ukraine likely contributed to their coping with the stress of a war in close proximity along with their response to the refugee crisis in their own country.

Grounded in narrative theorizing and storytelling research (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Fivush, 2019; McLean & Breen, 2016), communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) claims that humans use story structures such as plot, setting, characters, and scene to make sense of their life experiences. Centering in communication,

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CNSM theory focuses on storytelling, or “the communicative manifestation of narratives and stories” (p. 118). Individuals are born into family stories, and those stories create the backdrop for their identity and meaning-making throughout their lives (Fivush, 2019). CNSM theory posits that family storytelling molds family meaning, values, beliefs, and functions to create identity, cope with difficulty, socialize each other, and connect us (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Relevant to the current study, intergenerational family storytelling, or storytelling across generations (Flood-Grady & Koenig Kellas, 2019), includes family history narratives, which are stories about family members’ lives that are “passed down” over generations (Fivush & Merrill, 2016).

Although CNSM scholars have noted that culture and time are woven into the fabric of family storytelling, very little CNSM research has attended to these sociohistorical forces (Koenig Kellas, 2022). The present study contributes to the emerging line of CNSM research on culture and intergenerational family storytelling (Denson, 2022; Elkhalid et al., 2023) by drawing on the ecological systems approach to family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). This approach posits that individuals use their personal stories (autobiographical memory) as well as family (micro-system, exo-system) and cultural (macro-system) narratives to make sense of their identities and world. By naming cultural systems at play, the ecological systems approach provides a structure for scholars to articulate how family storytelling interplays with culture.

In the present study, we explore the presence of ecological systems in Polish intergenerational family storytelling functions, meanings, values, and beliefs during the first five months of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Doing so illuminates the multiple systems of family storytelling (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) that have yet to be explored in CNSM research (Koenig Kellas, 2018). We also amplify the voices of Polish individuals – who were at the epicenter of sense-making in the wake of the invasion and subsequent refugee crisis – which expands interpersonal and family communication research beyond typical U.S. American populations (Afifi & Cornejo, 2020). Our findings inform future refugee support efforts by demonstrating how people react to war in close proximity and provide help to those affected through the lens of their own family narratives. To those ends, we first review research on narrative sense-making with respect to intergenerational storytelling and cultural memory.

## **CNSM theory and the functions of family storytelling**

CNSM theory provides the structure for understanding the individual and family-level meanings, values, and beliefs embedded in family stories by outlining the communicative processes, functions, and outcomes of storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018, 2022). This theory contends that (a) storytelling is grounded in communication and (b) linked to health and well-being through (c) functions of creating, socializing, coping, and connecting. CNSM theory offers three heuristics of family storytelling research – retrospective (i.e., the stories we hear and tell about individual and family past), interactional (i.e., verbal and nonverbal storytelling behaviors), and translational storytelling (i.e., creating and testing CNSM-based interventions to help improve well-being).

Relevant to the present study on retrospective storytelling, CNSM theory Proposition 1 highlights the importance of family intergenerational storytelling by claiming that story content “reveals individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making, values,

and beliefs” (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 65). Past research exploring this proposition has uncovered meanings, values, and beliefs embedded in intergenerational family stories surrounding love (Denson, 2022), mental illness (Flood-Grady & Koenig Kellas, 2019), and family origin stories (Elkhalid et al., 2023), among other topics. For example, Black individuals report learning about self-awareness and emotional regulation, love and belonging, and fear and struggle from their intergenerational family stories about love (Denson, 2022).

CNSM theory articulates that family storytelling functions in four ways that are consequential for individual and family well-being (i.e., CNSM theory Proposition 2). These functions include: *creating identity* (i.e., constructing personal, family, and cultural-level identities), *coping* (i.e., recovering from stress and distress), *socializing* (i.e., teaching family members cultural and personal values, morals, and beliefs), and *connecting* (i.e., building and maintaining interpersonal relationships). Other functions of family storytelling have surfaced in the literature as well. For example, younger Palestinian refugee family members claim that their intergenerational family history stories reinforced their sense of responsibility to defend and advocate for Palestinian causes (Elkhalid et al., 2023). Although CNSM theory lays the groundwork to explore the functions of family storytelling, most CNSM research has yet to account for the role of culture.

Narrative theorizing asserts that a family’s race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and gender norms inform the content and process of family storytelling (Fivush, 2019; Koenig Kellas, 2022). For example, grounded in CNSM Proposition 1, Denson (2022) found that Black individuals identified race, gender, and religious barriers to sharing family stories about love, such as a strong Christian background silencing stories about dating and sex. Scholars have recognized the paucity of family intergenerational storytelling research engaging with culture and thus called for more research on the topic (Fivush, 2019; Horstman et al., 2023; Koenig Kellas, 2022). The present study contributes to an emerging body of literature accounting for cultural influences in intergenerational family storytelling (Bakir-Demir et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021; Elkhalid et al., 2023; Reese et al., 2017). We draw upon the ecological systems approach to family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) to provide a structure for articulating the role of cultural narratives in Polish family stories.

## **Ecological systems approach to family narratives: Culture and intergenerational stories**

The ecological systems approach to family narratives is based on the Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems model of development, which positions human development as occurring within multiple social and physical systems, rather than just solely on individual traits or family characteristics (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). The ecological systems approach to family narratives emphasizes that we are our stories; personal stories that we tell are a manifestation of identity, are shaped by multiple sociocultural forces, and change over time.

How individuals come to “story” an experience is informed by their autobiographical memory, which is shaped by the micro-system, exo-system, and macro-system (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). First, one’s autobiographical memory includes their stories of personal experiences as well as the influence of genetic predispositions, gender, and temperament.

Second, in the micro-system are the family stories about situations the storyteller experienced directly. These stories may broaden their perspective by including perspectives of other family members. For example, in a story about living through WWII in Poland, individuals may include their siblings' perspective of their hardships (Łapińska & Cierpka, 2020). Third, the exo-system contains "vicarious family stories" that the person has not directly experienced, such as their parents' childhood or their time fighting in the War. These stories provide a foundation for individuals to understand their family's place in the world (Thompson et al., 2009).

Finally, the macro-system is the cultural context which family stories are situated (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). This includes the cultural expectations, myths, master narratives, and historical accounts. For example, Europeans may link their family histories to events in WWII, creating an intergenerational historical memory (Svob & Brown, 2012). Embedding family stories into cultural history creates a *cultural memory*, or knowledge that is passed down through generations and directs behavior (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). Hammack (2008) notes, "stories of a culture – stories of national identity, struggle, suffering, and resilience – become the stories of an individual as he/she constructs his/her own personal narrative, fusing elements of daily experience ... with the experience of a collective" (p. 233). Individuals create their identities in relation to intergenerational family stories – or the stories parents and grandparents tell younger generations about their experiences – which connect them to their larger sociohistorical context through their family members' experiences (McLean & Breen, 2016).

Importantly, the systems articulated in the ecological systems approach to family narratives inform one another. For example, a grandchild telling the story about her about grandfather's involvement in WWII may likely involve elements of both exo-system (i.e., telling a story about an experience she did not have) and macro-systems (i.e., situating the story in the historical events of WWII in Poland). Taken together, the autobiographical, micro-, exo-, and macro-systems interact to create a "narrative ecology," wherein humans make sense of their world and create their personal narrative (McLean & Breen, 2016).

## The current study

In sum, CNSM theory asserts that family stories exist within and are informed by socio-historical systems (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015), yet scant CNSM research has accounted for those systems. An emerging body of CNSM scholarship has focused on the influence of culture on the *content* of family stories, particularly in the meanings, beliefs, and values embedded in family stories, as suggested by Proposition 1 (e.g., Denson, 2022). The present study expands that focus by exploring the *functions* of intergenerational family stories (i.e., creating, socializing, coping, connecting) recalled in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In other words, what do intergenerational family stories *do* in this context?

The ecological systems approach to family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) provides a structure for CNSM theorists to better articulate the various cultural systems at play in family storytelling. Doing so may illuminate additional family storytelling functions or alternative ways functions manifest in Polish culture. Our findings may demonstrate how individuals and families process disruption (such as war in close proximity

and refugee crisis) in ways that support and compromise their well-being (Koenig Kellas, 2018). As such, our research question is:

RQ: What are the functions of Polish intergenerational family storytelling in making sense of Russia's war in Ukraine?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 28 Polish adults, including seven cisgender men and 21 cisgender women, who ranged from 23 to 83 years old ( $M = 41.30$ ,  $SD = 17.06$ ,  $Mdn = 38$ ). All participants were White, which is consistent with the Polish racial/ethnic make-up (97.7% ethnic Polish). They were highly educated, with all having a college degree and three with PhDs. Twelve participants were married<sup>2</sup>, six were partnered, five were single, three were dating, one was engaged, and one was widowed. Twelve participants had children (two months to 50 years old;  $M = 20.63$ ;  $SD = 17.90$ ). Participants grew up and lived in small towns and cities throughout Poland, including Bielsko-Biała, Kraków, Krasnystaw, Łódź, Lublin, Warszawa, and Wrocław; and several currently lived in international cities (i.e., Boston, Brussels, Lisbon). When asked how long their family had been in Poland, 20 people said “forever,” three said “since the Middle Ages,” two reported three or more generations, one said “since the partitions” (1700s), one said 6–7 generations, and one said, “for sure since my parents.” All participants had known at least one grandparent, and 13 participants knew at least one great-grandparent. Participants were interviewed individually, except two sisters (pseudonyms Aleksandra and Irena), who came to the appointment together and requested to be interviewed as a pair.

### Procedures

The interview protocol was created by the first author, who is a U.S. American scholar in Communication, along with three Polish Psychology scholars and one U.S. American Psychology scholar research team members. As part of a larger project, the interview focused on family storytelling and resilience in Polish families. We created the protocol in English and then translated it to Polish. The interview began by asking the participant about their overall family story “beginning from the earliest story or fact you know about your family and continuing from there.” Then we asked about “stories that have been passed down through the generations of your family,” and then specific stories about war and life during the post-war communist state (PRL). Follow-up questions included participants' reactions to the story (e.g., “how does this story make you feel?”) and lessons they gleaned (e.g., “what are the lessons for this story? What does it say about your family?”). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, we added questions on the war and subsequent refugee crisis (e.g., “How, if at all, do you think Polish people are reacting to the current war in Ukraine based on their history of war/communist rule?” and “What, if any, memorable family messages or stories have you remembered in response to the Ukrainian war in the last few weeks/months?”). Our data analysis centered on participants' answers to the questions about Russia's war in Ukraine as well as references to the conflict throughout the transcripts. The current

manuscript focuses on data collected from 25 February to 29 July 2022, thus our findings represent Polish response to the war in its first five months.

Participants were recruited through advertising flyers and social media posts in research team members' social and professional networks, as well as snowball sampling. Participants contacted the research team members to schedule the interview and select their preferred location of the interview, which included in person ( $n = 14$ ) in participants' homes, workplaces, cafés/restaurants, or parks, or on Zoom ( $n = 14$ ). Interviews lasted 79.71 minutes, on average ( $SD = 20.46$ ). Interviews were conducted in English by the first author ( $n = 23$ ), in Polish by the fourth author ( $n = 4$ ), or in English and Polish by the first and sixth authors together ( $n = 1$ ). Audio files of the English interviews were transcribed verbatim by AI software and then cleaned by research assistants; Polish audio files were transcribed by human transcribers and translated to English by a Warsaw-based translator. The dataset included 609 single-spaced pages of transcripts, which was on average 22.56 pages ( $SD = 8.04$ ) or 9,911 words ( $SD = 2,490.86$ ) per participant. Participants were given pseudonyms that reflected their gender and Polish heritage.

### **Data analysis**

We grounded our qualitative data analysis in the phronetic iterative approach (Tracy, 2020), which alternates between considering the emergent (emic) data and existing (etic) frameworks, including literature and theorizing in family storytelling. To begin, the first four authors immersed themselves in the corpus of the data. Each was assigned five transcripts for primary-cycle coding, except the first author, who open coded the entirety of the data. In this primary-cycle coding phase, we identified descriptive codes and made extensive notes while considering, "what is happening here?" (Creswell, 2007, p. 153) and more specific questions such as, "how are participants making sense of the war?" and "what are family stories doing?" In a group meeting, we engaged in constant comparative analysis by comparing descriptive codes and observations across the dataset, particularly soliciting the Polish scholar's perspective. Consistently, she confirmed the U.S. Americans' analysis and added cultural nuance based on her positionality (e.g., teaching the group about Polish schools' approach to war history).

After creating a codebook that included key codes, definitions, and examples, the first author then conducted secondary-cycle axial coding, wherein she organized, synthesized, and collapsed primary-cycle codes into conceptually situated themes (Tracy, 2020). For example, the primary-cycle codes "grandparents remember," "grandparents help us feel," and "intergenerational trauma" came together to create the sub-theme *my family remembers*. Throughout this process, the first author wrote analytic memos to work toward emerging findings. These memos were helpful when engaging in negative case analysis to integrate seemingly discrepant data (e.g., many participants discussing the "we are helpers" mentality versus others claiming that Polish people's identity as "helpers" is really a myth). Once axial coding was completed, the research team met to discuss the findings. In the iterative process of obtaining research team member and reviewer feedback, the team recognized that the findings reflected CNSM theory's assertion that retrospective family storytelling functioned to create, socialize, cope, and connect (Proposition 1; Koenig Kellas, 2018). Findings were adjusted accordingly to reflect the theory.

To verify the findings, the authors engaged three criteria of Tracy's (2010) "big tent" framework: worthy topic, credibility, and sincerity. Worthy topic is demonstrated through timeliness of the data collection (occurring in the first five months of a war) and the significance of understanding sense-making in times of crisis. Sincerity can be seen through the authors' self-reflexivity (Tracy, 2020). The U.S. American scholars were particularly aware of their positionalities as non-Polish citizens, and consulted the Polish scholars throughout the research process, particularly during data analysis. Relatedly, credibility is shown through multivocality by the researchers and participants. Findings were also sent to three participants for member reflections, who each provided rich feedback that supported and sharpened the findings. For example, we integrated Malina's suggestion to emphasize the timing of the data collection, as the data reflect the Polish people's immediate reaction to the war, which has evolved over time.

## Results

In accordance with CNSM theory and the ecological systems approach to family narratives, analyses revealed three functions and corresponding beliefs of Polish intergenerational family stories regarding Russia's war in Ukraine in its first five months. First, family stories functioned to help individuals *cope with war* through building a common story of war in autobiographical accounts, family stories, and cultural history. Second, these stories help Polish individuals *connect with Ukraine* because the Polish believe *we have a common enemy* in Russia and because *we are brothers* with the Ukrainians. Third, Polish family stories also prompted Poles to *help others* because the Polish believe *helping is good, we are helpers, and helping manages fear*. These functions and beliefs are uniquely positioned in micro-, exo-, and macro-level narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). In what follows, we explain and illustrate these findings and ground them in the ecological systems approach to family narratives. We also explain how these systems interpenetrate in certain types of family stories. At times, we list multiple participants' names to illustrate the presence of a finding in various accounts.

### *Cope with war*

Aligning with CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018), one of the resounding functions of Polish family stories during the Russian invasion of Ukraine was to help Poles *cope* with the fear, anger, and dread that surrounded the news of the war. Embedded in these stories was a belief that history was repeating itself and Poland would again need to endure the wrath of war. This belief functioned in ways that were at times uplifting and at other times dooming. Participants invoked autobiographical accounts (i.e., *I've been there*), exo-system family stories (i.e., *my family has been there*), and macro-system cultural history (i.e., *Poland has been there*) as guides for coping with the war (Fivush & Merrill, 2016).

### *I've been there*

Because our participants ranged in age from 23 to 83 years old (average 41.30 years), many drew on their autobiographical stories of their childhood during WWII and/or post-war communist rule of Poland to cope with the current Russian struggle. They

felt like “*I’ve been there.*” The German occupation of Poland started in Fall 1939 and lasted throughout WWII. Thus our oldest participants endured war as children, and recalled its fear and devastation. For example, Bartek (age 80) remembered bombs and German tanks invading Warsaw and how, at two years old, he and his mother fled the city: “Our flat was completely burnt, completely burnt by German soldiers. And everything was lost.” Wiesław was born in 1942, “the worst year of the German occupation.” He shared a story of witnessing the end of the Warsaw Uprising in October 1944, the Poles’ unsuccessful last effort to liberate Warsaw from Nazi Germany occupation:

I remember it like this: mum took me in her arms, it was a late evening. We stood on a glazed porch in this rented house, and behind the window, there were flashes and roars. Mum was holding me in her arms, and I remember not only this picture of flashes and roars but also my mum’s words who said to me: “Son, remember this day. This is the end of the war.” It was at the beginning of May 1945, and then she said: “The Russians and our people are celebrating and they are launching rockets.”

Wiesław and other participants recounted the facts of their time during the War in stoic ways that seemed to express their character was built on hardships and thus, they could endure again.

After the Warsaw Uprising, the German army retreated from the city and the Soviets forcefully established the PRL, a communist state that lasted until 1989. The communist party imposed restrictions on access to goods and freedom of the press, religion, and speech. Many participants shared stories of standing in lines for food, maintaining secrecy about their parents’ involvement in anti-communist efforts, and being detained by the authorities (e.g., Stefan, Jan). Wiesława lived in Wrocław, which was the epicenter of anti-communist efforts, and explained the atmosphere of that time: “From today’s point of view, it was exciting. But 30, 25 years ago, was really, really, really, hard, because nothing was very certain, right? Everything was uncertain. Everything could happen.” This sense of uncertainty mimicked Wiesława’s reaction to the Ukraine conflict, making apparent the belief that war was back in her life provoked by anxiety, fear, and dread.

These *I’ve been there* accounts helped participants cope with Russia’s war in Ukraine in ways that were at times empowering and at other times disempowering. Recounting their experiences with war and occupation provided these individuals with a foundation for sense-making and coping that influenced their beliefs about the current war. “History is very vivid in the current decisions of people,” says Kamilia. “I definitely see that my parents and my grandparents, like ... I don’t want to say they live in the past, but they make the current decisions, sometimes based on the past experiences.” Autobiographical stories are included in the ecological systems approach to family narratives because they affect and reflect intergenerational storytelling and older participants tell these stories to their family (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). As such, these stories are cornerstones of Polish intergenerational family stories (Cierpka, 2012).

### ***My family has been there***

Many participants used exo-system family stories about war and/or their family’s involvement with Ukraine or Russia to cope with the current struggle. These stories claimed, “*my family has been there.*” For some, the Russian invasion was a trigger for their older

family members to tell their stories of war. Magda reported that her grandmother, who does not normally like to talk about her time in WWII, has been “talking about it now because of the Ukraine conflict.” Her grandmother has been crying a lot and having insomnia and nightmares. She said, “I’ve never thought that I would live to the day where I can have to, where I have to face ... war again.” Participants reported similar messages, such as grandmothers saying “[I] was born in times of the war, and [I] wouldn’t like to die in times of war too” (Kinga) and “I’ve seen this; I know this” (Agata). Karina explained that this new push toward storytelling about the War was because “they feel [war] on their skin.” It seems the current Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted intergenerational family storytelling in some Polish families, which has facilitated a belief that war is unpredictable and unwanted.

Others remembered stories from the past to cope with the stressors of the present. As a child, Wiesława remembers her mother telling stories of her time in a WWII work camp. She believed her mother shared these stories because she wanted to warn/protect her daughters from the stressors of war. Anna articulated that she felt she was reliving the stories of her family: “Could you ever, like the worst scenario, assume that you would be living the stories of your great grandmother in 2022 ... It’s just like, totally unreal.” Mina echoed this sentiment by claiming that these intergenerational family stories were the only insight she had of war, until the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. This visualization of what it might be like to live through a war seemed to give her clarity but also dread. This sentiment was echoed by others, including Karina, who said that her family stories from WWII and PRL have been a guide for their understanding and coping with Russia’s war in Ukraine.

### *Poland has been there*

Finally, participants often pulled from macro-level historical memory to cope by remembering *Poland has been there*. These stories upheld the belief that the Polish were a people of war, which has elements of both coping and creating identity (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Participants resoundingly told stories of how Polish people were educated in school, media, books, public monuments, and museums about their history of immense war. Kinga articulated how Polish people live with ideas of war: “I think that all of this is still pretty alive in us, each of us knows a story or a memory [of war].” Similarly, Leszek claimed that the Polish “have war in themselves” from WWII. Participants such as Kamilia, Malina, and Marta told stories of participating in Siberian Refugee Day at school, which commemorated the one million Poles who were deported to Siberia after WWII. Kamilia explained that former prisoners of war would visit her school and get flowers from the children.

Some participants claimed that the presence of war stories in Polish identity has affected Polish people’s ability to cope with Russia’s war in Ukraine. He believes that through these ubiquitous WWII stories, “war trauma went onto the next generation.” Wiesława tied Poland’s stories of war to present day Polish individuals’ fear of another war. She pointed out that Poland commemorates tragedies (e.g., Katyn Massacre, Warsaw Uprising, Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) every year, which keeps these memories present to Polish citizens: “So we ... [remember] the beginning of the Second World War. So we remember as Polish society, our war experience, and right now we are afraid of experience again, same, same, same thing.” Some participants noted that the

PRL period of communist rule had lasting effects on the Polish people. Karina said, “we have a lot of remains of this communism ... it is still inside us.” These participants highlighted a Polish tendency toward secrecy and suspiciousness as leftovers from this PRL period. As a whole, many participants connected historical Polish war stories to coping with the current war.

Notably, these war stories often contain a Polish master narrative of abandonment, or a belief that the country was forgotten and/or left to suffer during WWII. Justyna believed, “what’s happening in Ukraine, we were in the same situation not so long ago and nobody helped us.” She articulated, “there is this feeling of historical injustice in Poland because when Germans and Russians attacked us before the West even believed us and decided to engage, a few years passed.” Anna explained that older Polish people are distrusting of the government, the EU, and/or NATO because of this legacy. Wiesława claimed that the UN “has left us before.” Mina discussed the intergenerational legacy of Poland’s abandonment:

We were attacked during the War, by Russians, by Germans, we were left alone. It will explain a lot of what is even happening now. [We are] still reaching out to the Second World War [and] in a way that we are not confident because we were left during the Second World War, like, by the all the countries. We were left alone. [For] even my generation that we don’t know about those times, we still keep it in mind.

Because of this historical legacy of war, Polish people seemed to understand Russia’s war in Ukraine uniquely. Many believed their shared historical narratives of war, invasion, and abandonment have helped the Polish cope with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in ways that are functional and dysfunctional. Family stories reflect and contribute to these historical narratives.

### **Connect with Ukraine**

Polish family stories enforced the fact that Poland is *connected with Ukraine* historically, politically, and relationally. These family stories reflect the function of connecting individuals in relationships with one another (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Autobiographical accounts, exo-system family stories, and macro-level cultural history (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) emphasized the Polish beliefs that we *have a common enemy* in Russia and *we are brothers* with the Ukrainians.

### **We have a common enemy**

Most participants recalled family stories about how Russia impacted their own lives and/or the lives of their parents and grandparents. Whereas the stories about war told in *my family has been there* stories may (or may not) have involved Russia, *we have a common enemy* stories contains a belief that Polish people should feel weariness, disdain, or even hatred toward Russia, which connects them with Ukraine (e.g., “the enemy is again the same,” Eva). Malina claimed that the Polish, along with other Eastern European people, understand the Ukrainians’ plight because they believe “every country in this region suffered from Russia at some point in their history.” Jan believed that Russia as the aggressor “intensifies Polish people’s reaction” and gives them a reason to rally around the Ukrainians.

Participants explained that many Polish people talk about Russians as “obviously horrid” (Kamilia), “monsters” (Wiesława), “cruel” (Magda), and “barbarian” (Kamilia). Many recounted stories of Russia’s brutality during WWII, including stories of rape (e.g., Kamilia, Justyna) and torture (e.g., Jan). Eva told a story of how her father-in-law witnessed his family being killed by the Bolsheviks, including his father being “crucified like Jesus, but on the floor.” She said, “it affected him for his whole life, that kind of horrible experience.” She articulated that her family members – even her son – struggled with anti-Russian sentiment because of this family story. Jan’s great-uncle was killed in the Katyn Massacre<sup>3</sup>, his mother and her family were shipped to a work camp in Siberia, and his father was imprisoned and tortured by the Russians. Justyna focused on stories of Russian soldiers raping Polish women and how “women suddenly started to remember family stories about their grandma, grandma’s sister, or someone else who was raped or somehow harmed by the Russians ... maybe that was the trauma triggered.” These stories showcase the strong intergenerational links between Poles and their stories of Russian adversity.

A unifying sentiment was that, during and after WWII, Germans were bad, but the Russians were worse (e.g., Eva, Justyna, Kamilia, Karina, Ksenia, Leszek). Magda stated:

People who are 90 or 95, they repeat the same thing, which my dad always says: Nazis, Germans, they were, of course, some of them were super terrible people, but there were also good Germans. With Russians who came in “45, they are terrible people.” They were always terrible people. And now you know, with Ukraine they are ... nobody’s surprising Poland. So this is a story that they always say about Russians as well and Germans, that Germans were cruel, but not all of them.

It was very common in the dataset and in Polish culture for participants to compare the Germans favorably to the Russians in WWII, and this sentiment likely has lasting effects. Wiesław even shared a story from when he burned his hand on a hot counter at age two, and his mother broke curfew to find a German doctor that was happy to help heal him.

The subsequent 44 years of communist rule in the PRL also garnered stories of tension regarding Russians. Participants discussed the communist period as a horrible and oppressive one (e.g., Aniela), recalled being forced to learn Russian (“the language of our oppressors,” Kamilia), and stated that the Polish “hated communism” (Leszek). Karina told stories of her parents’ traumatic memories of Chernobyl<sup>4</sup> being triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet the “fighting Polish” spirit was also triggered. Aga recalled that during communism, “everything [that] was Soviet was stinky and bad” and that they Polish did “everything to get freedom and independence.” Eva asserted that “helping Ukraine is part of the resistance movement.” As such, perhaps some Polish people have tapped into that spirit to mobilize in support of Ukraine. This is even if “it wouldn’t be that way” if Poland had been attacked instead of Ukraine, as Agata recounted a memorable conversation with her grandmother about how she did not think people would be quick to help Poland if they needed it.

Because of their past with Russian aggression, many participants expressed a sentiment that history was repeating itself with the Russians. Karina’s parents expressed that this was expected by saying, “well, this is what Russians do!” Justyna said, “What are the Russians doing right now? What they were always doing, with the Ukrainians, and all the minorities.” Others were more exasperated: “Why is it happening again?”

Why is it always Russia?” asked Kamilia. “Why is the whole history based on them killing people from our region?” In summary, the history of Russian aggression in the region left our participants calling upon their family and national stories to make sense of the Russian attack on Ukraine.

### *We are brothers*

Polish family stories also connect the Polish people with Ukrainians through a sense of brotherhood. Their geographic closeness, shared history, and Slavic heritage have fostered a belief that these two countries share a deep bond. “I guess it just because we feel like they are our brothers in a way,” said Malina. Participants used the term “brothers” (Stefan), “brotherhood” (Eva), “just like us” (Jerzy), “a commonwealth” (Jerzy), or “neighbors” (Anna) to describe the shared connection between Poland and Ukraine. Many participants had family ties in Ukraine or parts of Ukraine that used to be Poland: Jan’s maternal grandfather worked in Ukraine (Poland at the time) in the 1930s; Irena’s father’s family is Orthodox; and Stefan’s family was from Eastern Poland/Western Ukraine. Wiesława’s mother-in-law, who was born in Ukraine, “would be really devastated with this war in Ukraine right now.” Participants highlighted numerous connections between their family and Ukraine.

The brotherhood between Poland and Ukraine created empathy for the Ukrainians. Aleksandra simply said, “we just empathize with them.” Malina describes this mindset:

I think that we really are understand Ukrainians because we compare ourselves a lot to them. Because first of all, we are quite similar. We are neighbors. And there’s a lot of there was a lot of Ukrainians living here already. I think every Polish person knows at least some Ukrainian. So ... we feel some connection with them, more than other nations.

Jan said the pictures of destruction in Ukraine “are so similar to the images of Warsaw right after the war, and this pulls people into this story and makes them emotionally able to help.” This empathy likely fostered an ingroup dynamic that motivated the Poles to help Ukrainian refugees and fighters, as explored in the next finding.

Of course, the shared history between Poland and Ukraine has not been entirely amicable. There is a very complex history of war and violence between the two nations, often punctuated in participants’ stories about massacres in Volhynia (*Wołyń*) in WWII, where approximately 100,000 Poles were massacred at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists. Justyna mentioned “[people] come forward and say that they [the Ukrainians] haven’t apologized for Volhynia, that it was a Polish genocide.” Others reported family stories about Ukrainian atrocities such as Stefan’s uncle being killed by a Ukrainian soldier or Justyna’s grandmother’s family being murdered by Ukrainians. Participants reported that some Polish people hung on to this difficult history during this time. Jerzy referred to a “anti-Ukrainian paradigm” where he was “fed these anti-Ukrainian stories based on true facts.” Agata acknowledged: “This cultural history serves as a complicating backdrop to Polish sense-making about the war in Ukraine and refugee support.” Family stories of dark times between the Polish and Ukrainians complicated the narrative of brotherhood between the two cultures.

Many participants believed the complex history between Poland and Ukraine needed to be put aside during the crisis. The abuses of the past “have been forgotten. Put away for a moment, overshadowed by a common enemy” (Jerzy). Jan believed “there is no need to

paint a repulsive picture of them and to mention the Massacres in Volhynia,” which propagandists did to encourage anti-Ukrainian sentiments. The Polish empathy for their *brothers* and motivation to stop the war (e.g., “we learned always in the school that this can never happen,” Adela) seemed to override the tensions from the past. Adela noted that the history between Ukraine and Poland is not important: “I think that [being] a human being is important, their lives are important.” Some participants, like Justyna, acknowledged this complex history as coloring the connection between the Poles and Ukrainians:

It’s not like it’s unconscious. People know the history and know what happened there. They also can’t forgive the fact that their family, their child was torn apart or their head was cut off. These things are not completely bogus, they were happening in different places, but people can overcome the fact that *this* child that is dying right now or was hurt by a bomb and will live without an arm the whole life. It’s not the child’s fault that my great-grandfather’s head was smashed with an ax. They can get over it and help, and they are helping because they can feel the analogy.

Justyna and others acknowledged the challenges of “forgiving and forgetting” for those who personally experienced loss or violence at the hands of Ukrainians, but encouraged Polish people to put hard feelings aside for the moment.

### **Help others**

Polish family stories functioned as a motivation for Polish people to get involved in current war efforts and help the Ukrainian people. Although “helping others” is not one of CNSM theory’s originally proposed functions of storytelling, other narrative research has identified that intergenerational family storytelling can prompt action (Chen et al., 2021). Elkhaliid et al. (2023) identified “reinforcing responsibility” (i.e., to engage in social activism to resist and preserve their Palestinian identity) as a function of storytelling in Palestinian refugee families. These findings help us to understand the relationship between micro-, exo-, and macro-level systems of family narratives and personal motivation for action in getting involved in efforts related to current events (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Specifically, these stories reaffirmed the Polish belief that *helping is good* and value that *we are helpers*, while also considering that *helping manages fear*.

### **Helping is good**

Overwhelmingly, participants’ family stories reinforced the belief that *helping is good*. Some participants shared stories about how their family members were helped by good Samaritans during their time of need (e.g., Bartek, Jan, Wiesław). For example, Wiesław shared a story micro-level from his childhood of a German officer picking him up, putting him on his lap, and giving him chocolate, rather than punishing young Wiesław for playing with the war medals on the officer’s uniform. Wiesław said his mother said, “God was watching over us” and underlined unexpected kindness from this German officer. These stories demonstrated the importance of doing good and using their power to make a difference in the lives of others, especially during times of crisis.

These helping stories seemed to solidify participants’ belief that *helping is good* and motivate them to contribute to Ukrainian refugee support efforts. Many participants,

like Eva, felt compelled to “do everything we can to help” the Ukrainian people. Many told micro-level stories of how they and their family members got involved with current refugee support efforts (e.g., Aleksandra, Aniela, Eva, Irena, Wiesława). For example, Mina said that her parents’ and grandparents’ stories of their hardships motivated her to help Ukrainians: “I know it from the stories that it was hard for them. So I want to help as much as I can.” Part of her urge to help is in response to the difference between her stories of living in Poland, in relative comfort and peace, and the stories of hardship told by her family. Kinga shared that the war forced Polish people “to stop and reflect upon what is really important to us. And very often it turns out that what we care about on a daily basis is actually completely insignificant.” Eva echoed this sentiment by poking fun at herself and her friends for being so worried about trivial things like their manicures. When reflecting on their experiences helping the Ukrainian people, many participants were proud of what they have been able to accomplish, but also aware of the work that was yet to be done.

Some participants even described feeling pressure to help more than they have the capacity to. Jerzy shared that “it’s overwhelming for me because I have this constant guilt that I should be doing more.” Similarly, Magda shared that her mother also took on more than she could handle. “Sometimes she’s overwhelmed with other, with other people,” Magda said, “but she still helps them even though it’s not healthy for her. And I asked her ‘why do you do it?’ And she says ‘it’s the right thing to do.’” Conversations like these reinforce the belief that *helping others* is “the right thing to do.”

### ***We are helpers***

Family stories also demonstrated the macro-level value that helping others is an integral part of Polish culture (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). The data reflected a strong belief that although Poland experienced immense war and devastation in the last century, the people have worked together to rebuild their nation. Adela shared:

Historically you know, [we] suffered a lot. But we never gave up. So we, even if we disappeared from the history from the map and for 145 years, I think we managed to, to wake up and to build the country from scratch. And, and what I was thinking, telling you before that Polish people have, I think they are smart people, and they are hardworking people, you know, who, who care about, about the future.

At this time, the Polish were bettering the world by supporting the Ukrainians. Being part of a hardworking nation is something that Polish people are proud of. “I think that this pride shifts into action, like when we see a country in need,” said Kinga. Mina explained, “we need to help them because we also used to be [in trouble]. But nobody helped us ... and we don’t want the same for others.” The helping spirit seemed to be wide-spread: “I don’t know anybody who didn’t help these people in Poland ... Everybody was helping, everybody” shared Adela. Their history motivates them to help those who experience devastation like in Poland’s past.

Building on the *we are brothers* finding, which focused on Polish people’s empathy for Ukraine, in *we are helpers*, participants focused on how this brotherhood motivated the Polish to rise to action and help the Ukrainians. “I think that we also feel like we didn’t receive much help during the Second World War,” said Malina. “And we were still like, we should do something now.” The Polish are motivated to give the help that they wish

they received when they needed it. This is especially interesting in the context of Poland-Ukraine relations, because as Malina shared, before full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Polish people were “complaining a lot about Ukrainians. It’s not like, you know, we were always loving them. Because I’ve heard a lot of people complaining that they come here and they, they don’t speak the language.” Even though the two nations have not always been friendly, the Polish people were able to put history behind them and welcome Ukrainians into their homes when they needed a place to stay.

### *Helping manages fear*

Although many participants acknowledged Poles’ altruistic motives for helping Ukrainian refugees, many also articulated helping as a way to manage fear of a Russian invasion of Poland. After hearing stories about the traumas their families endured during wartimes, and seeing what their Ukrainian neighbors are currently experiencing, it is unsurprising that Poles were worried about their future. At times, this worry manifested in a belief that the helping efforts of the Polish people were mainly due to a desire to protect themselves. Aga shared that “people are scared that that [sic] we [Poland] can be next.” Ksena admitted that it is not altruism, but fear, that is motivating many Polish people to get involved in war efforts: “We are so afraid that they will come to us. And we, and I think most Polish people are, we will do anything so that it will stop at the Ukraine.” Wiesława articulated her fears for the future of Poland:

It’s very likely for Russian (sic), for Putin and his colleagues to invade Poland, maybe. Of course, not tomorrow, not next year, but in 10 years who knows? So, and right now, we, we, as a Polish society, are really aware of this possibility. And really wants to, to be not related with Russia. We don’t want to take gas or gasoline from them. No, no. Coal, coal or electricity, right. We want to be independent and not connected with Russia.

Wiesława adds that Russia’s war in Ukraine is “like a cold shower for everyone in Europe,” or a daily reminder of how fragile peace and safety can be. Aga shared a sentiment of helping to better your own and your country’s plight: “if you take care of Ukrainian people, maybe it’s like you pay off your duty” and create good karma. Through helping others, participants hoped that if they were to be “next,” that others would remember how the Polish sprang into action to help the Ukrainian people when they needed it.

Some participants, like Irena, drew attention to the fact that Polish are helping the Ukrainian people in different ways than other refugee groups that travel to Poland:

It is absolutely opposite to what is happening on the Polish border with Belarus. When we have refugees from Syria and other countries, when what we [did was] absolutely disgrace [ful]. This is, this is a shame. This is, this is something absolutely difficult to imagine that it could happen. Now, maybe somehow people are trying to compensate with Ukrainians [for] what we [did] with people from Syria, coming from Belarus.

Drawing upon the previous theme of *we are brothers*, perhaps it is the elements of history, culture, and language they share that motivates Polish people to do more for the Ukrainian refugees. It may be easier for the Polish to take the perspective of Ukrainians than it is to take the perspective of Syrians. Jan believed the government did not help the Syrian refugees “even though things happening there were just as horrible as what is happening

in Ukraine ... For sure, there is a cultural and linguistic affinity [between us and Ukraine], an easier understanding.”

In sum, *help others* stories highlighted the immense support efforts of the Polish people at the onset of the war, and attributed those efforts to the beliefs that *helping is good, we are helpers, or helping manages fear*.

### **Interpenetrating systems: Exo-system and macro-system**

The ecological systems approach to family narratives theorizes that the autobiographical, micro-, exo-, and macro-systems intertwine to inform one another in family stories (Fivush & Merrill, 2016), and our participants’ stories supported that assertion. Their stories particularly showcased the interpenetration of layers in the exo-system and macro-system. Many participants relayed their intergenerational family stories while, in the same breath, claiming that these stories represent or are part-and-parcel of a cultural narrative. For example, Bartek told a harrowing story of his father being captured and taken to an internment camp in WWII. He was killed by the Gestapo, apparently after advocating for a fellow inmate by speaking German to the officers. The interviewers were astonished by the story. He dismissed their reaction and called it a “typical Polish story.” Others responded similarly when telling stories of family members being detained during PRL (e.g., Aga, Jan, Jerzy). They seemed to believe – without much fanfare – that every Polish person has a dramatic personal and/or family story involving war/communism.

Some participants directly articulated that their family’s stories of war created a collective consciousness in Poland. For example, Justyna said, “Each of us, not personally, but through family history ... each grandparent, survived this kind of loss and was a witness of death for sure.” Kinga linked the “Polish fighting” (“*Polska Walcząca*”) cultural narrative – which portrays Poland as tough and scrappy – to family war stories:

I think this [Polish fighting] kind of thinking is very familiar to us, the same that the Ukrainians and their government have right now about fighting. And I think that’s another important thing for us, that it is familiar ... . When it comes to more personal aspects of these [war] stories, I think that all of this is still pretty alive in us, each of us knows a story or a memory.

Similarly, Aleksandra claimed, “either through the older people or in our genes, [Polish people] are somehow educated about the war, the suffering that is connected with the wars.” She said this connection is why Polish people have been helping the Ukrainians so much. Kinga explained that the “stories of our grandmas and grandpas are very vivid but also the books, the museums, paintings, all of that is very vivid in our generation’s mind,” when making sense of the current war. These reactions show the links between the exo-system (i.e., telling an intergenerational family story) and macro-system (i.e., interpreting it as part of a larger cultural narrative).

## **Discussion**

The present study illuminated the functions of Polish intergenerational family stories during the first five months of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Based in CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018), analyses revealed three functions – to *cope with war*,

*connect with Ukraine*, and *help others*. Each of these functions were animated by interpenetrating systems of family storytelling (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). In accordance with CNSM Proposition 1, participants' family stories largely represented individual, family, and collective beliefs about Polish nationality, Russians, and war. These findings expand CNSM theory by: (a) demonstrating that family storytelling functions reflect multiple levels of family and cultural systems, (b) emphasizing the influence of macro-level narratives on family storytelling, and (c) providing support for *motivating action* as a function of family storytelling. In what follows, we highlight the ecological systems present in each of the findings. We conclude with limitations of the present study and directions for future research.

### **Coping: Informed by interpenetrating ecological systems**

Our findings revealed unique combinations of ecological systems at play in the family storytelling functions. Thus, the family storytelling functions described in CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) are multi-systemic, as outlined in the ecological systems approach to family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Participants recalled (often interpenetrating) autobiographical, micro-, exo-, and macro-level narratives that guided their *coping*, *connecting*, and *motivating*. In what follows, we investigate each of these emerging family storytelling functions in conversation with their ecological frames.

First, participants drew from interpenetrating autobiographical, micro-, exo-, and macro-system narratives to *cope with war*. Autobiographical accounts interacted with macro-system narratives about war to help the older generations of Poles cope. Many autobiographical accounts focused on dramatic memories from participants' childhoods or young adulthood (e.g., Stanisław remembered, as a child, watching Russian soldiers march through Krakow). This aligns with research on "reminiscence bumps," or the human tendency to overrepresent of events that occurred between the ages of 10–30 years old in life stories (Svob & Brown, 2012). Reminiscent bumps largely occur around three types of life transitions, all present in the current data: expected/normative events (e.g., high school graduation, wedding day), non-normative/idiosyncratic events (e.g., being detained by the communist party), and unexpected, externally imposed events that affect an entire cultural group (e.g., surviving war).

The latter category of reminiscent bumps represent "collective transitions," or times when a culture dramatically shifted (Svob & Brown, 2012), and were especially present in participants' autobiographical accounts. Many participants outlined their memories of collective traumas during WWII or PRL times (e.g., Warsaw Uprising, Katyn Massacre, Chernobyl disaster). Similarly, Cierpka (2012) found that WWII and postwar historical events were dominant in Polish older adults' description of self. Participants often centered the War in their sense of self (i.e., "I am a child of war"). For Polish older adults, WWII serves as a touchstone for a generational identity. These older individuals' stories are ripe with historical events and are "inculcated with special significance, being inserted into the story at every turn, as background for experience and a reference point for reflection on one's life. Older adults have witnessed history as it unfolded" and seek to pass on their knowledge (Cierpka, 2012, p. 243). Collective transitions, such as WWII in Poland, become part of the micro-, exo-, and eventually macro-system of family stories and serve as touchstones for future generations' personal and family stories (Fivush & Merrill,

2016). Future research should continue to investigate autobiographical accounts of Russia's war in Ukraine, adding to the sparse literature that examines cultural nuances in sense-making of historic events (Cierpka, 2012; Horstman et al., 2023)

Narratives in the exo-system were part of the foundation of our participants' coping (and not coping) with war in *my family has been there* stories. Participants recounted their relevant family stories in rather objective, fact-based ways (e.g., Eva recounting her father-in-law's father "crucified like Jesus, but on the floor"), rather than with emotion. This may seem surprising, given the dramatic details of these accounts. Past research has indicated that intergenerational family stories (of war) may be commonplace in Polish families (Cierpka, 2012) and serve as prescriptive cautionary tales (Green, 2013). Yet as evidenced in literature on Polish family intergenerational storytelling about WWII and post-war struggles (Schuchardt, 2019), we saw variation in family members' willingness to share these types of experiences at all. Polish-German young adults, in particular, are starting to "break the silence" of the war generation by telling their grandparents' stories of growing up in postwar Poland. In the present study, some participants note their parents/grandparents started talking more, or less, about their past war experiences given the current situation in Ukraine. This finding also supports past work that found for some people, it may be helpful to work through present events by explicitly linking to the past, whereas for others, those emotions and thoughts (either still unresolved or perhaps traumatic) are best served with self-imposed silence (Fivush, 2010).

### **Connecting and motivating action: Macro-level narratives inform exo-level stories**

Second, many exo- and macro-system stories were told to *connect* Poles to Ukraine. Participants pulled forward cultural memories as told in their families or in the culture writ large to react to Russia's war in Ukraine (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). As supported by past research on Polish narrative identity (Cierpka, 2012), many of our participants weaved together stories of family experiences with cultural knowledge from school or books (e.g., Stefan told stories of his family integrated with his knowledge of his hometown Lublin) and Polish master narratives. Master narratives are defined as, "culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors" (McLean & Syed, 2016, p. 323). These narratives provide a structure for sense-making that is bound by culture and time, although individuals can choose to either accept these master narratives or reject them. Polish citizens are exposed to master narratives of war – such as the Polish fighting spirit ("*Polska Walcząca*") and anti-Russian sentiments – through public education in school, books, films, and museums as well as in family stories. Thus, these macro-level messages were also present in exo-system narratives, which shows how individual and family stories can affect and reflect cultural assumptions (Fivush & Merrill, 2016).

Yet Russia's war in Ukraine has created tensions with the assumptions of anti-Russian sentiments found in the *we have a common enemy* stories. For example, in her member reflection, Eva acknowledged the issues of Russophobia in Poland, but also: "we now have a sad satisfaction that we were right all along about Russia and [the] danger it represents." Justyna, Irena, and Aleksandra also acknowledged the desire to move past anti-Russian

sentiments but the challenges of doing so when stories of atrocities at the hands of Russian soldiers were solidified in both their family and cultural stories. This questioning of master narratives is how alternative narratives are created, and eventually, how master narratives change (McLean & Syed, 2016).

Third and finally, Polish individuals articulated macro-level stories about Poland's past such as being abandoned during WWII motivated them to *help* the Ukrainians (because *helping is good* and *we are helpers*). The *helper* identity was present in micro-, exo-, and macro-level family stories and has been seen in past research on Polish narrative identity (Cierpka, 2012). The expectation that Poles are *helpers* likely serves the Polish people favorably by *motivating* them toward prosocial action. Telling stories of and identifying with the Polish identity of those who help in times of crisis shows considerable narrative resilience. Recent CNSM research shown that cultural assumptions and narratives are deeply embedded in members' stories of resilience in the face of historical adversity (Horstman et al., 2023). For example, Black, Coloured (mixed race), and Indian South Africans affirm "toughness" as an important identity anchor in coping with apartheid. Yet resilience can be unwanted, wearing, and distracting to addressing systemic issues affecting families and individuals (Harrison, 2013). Future research should study how Polish people's "narrative ecology" (McLean & Breen, 2016) contributes to and prevents resilience enactment.

This finding of *motivating action* also expands CNSM theory's articulation of storytelling functions. Although not a function originally articulated in CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018, 2022; Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015), *motivating action* may be an emerging function of intergenerational storytelling. This function is supported by recent CNSM research highlighting social activism as an outcome of intergenerational storytelling in Palestinian refugee families (Elkhalid et al., 2023). Palestinians living in the U.S. are motivated by their parents' and grandparents' stories to support Palestinian causes in their personal lives and, sometimes, professional careers. This finding, along with the current study's finding of *helping others*, aligns in part with CNSM theory's articulation of the *socializing* function of family storytelling (i.e., teaching one another "values, morals, beliefs, behavior, and actions," Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 64). Yet the current study's finding differs by focusing on the behaviors that transpire from family storytelling from a younger generation's point of view, rather than the intent of a family member telling the stories. Past work has differentiated functions of intergenerational family stories from older and younger generations' points of view, reporting that adolescents use intergenerational narratives for identity-building rather than older generations' intent to socialize values (Merrill & Fivush, 2016).

Taken together, past literature and the current study's findings suggest that CNSM theory should expand to consider the behavioral functions and outcomes of family storytelling, and account for differences in the storyteller and story-listeners' perspective. In so doing, CNSM theorizing and research could better capture the *actions* that are passed down and promoted through family storytelling, in addition to the meanings, values, and beliefs. This could be insightful, particularly as scholars continue to answer calls for applying CNSM theory in a variety of cultural groups through translational scholarship.

### **Limitations and more directions for future research**

Although the present study advances theorizing and scholarship on family storytelling, limitations exist. First, although we recruited widely, our participants were highly educated and thus largely represented a middle-upper class socioeconomic group. Future research should work with community organizations to access people with a wider array of backgrounds to highlight their unique family storytelling. Second, although the racial/ethnic makeup of our sample reflects Polish demographics, future storytelling research should more pointedly recruit minority perspectives, including religious minorities (especially Jews), racial/ethnic minorities, and individuals identifying as LGBTQ+, whose challenges are unique and pointed in Polish society (Mizielińska et al., 2015). Stories in these families shed light onto alternative sense-making in a fairly homogenous society (Schuchardt, 2019).

In addition to the directions for future research provided above, there are many other avenues for potential scholarship. For example, future research should investigate the potential ways the *we have a common enemy* anti-Russian master narratives change over time and with respect to Russia's war in Ukraine. A related direction would be to explore the functions of this anti-Russian sentiment in family/cultural stories among Poles or others in the region. How might these family and master narratives influence discriminatory behaviors, support efforts, or family/cultural identity? Having or creating an enemy serves to unite people, in both helpful and damaging ways (Aronson & Cope, 1968) and can create outgroup hostility, even generations later (Svob & Brown, 2012). Researchers should keep a pulse on the evolution of family- and cultural-level anti-Russian sentiments in the region as Russia's war in Ukraine progresses.

Further, future research should collect and analyze jointly-told Polish family stories in this context. Although several participants told stories that incorporated their immediate family members and reflected shared family experiences that had been discussed within the micro-system, the joint storytelling commonplace in this system (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) was not as present in our participants' accounts. This is largely because we conducted individual interviews. Our one dyadic interview with sisters Aleksandra and Irena exposed the complexity of joint sense-making (see Koenig Kellas, 2018) and highlighted a need for future research. The sisters playfully bantered about the discrepancy in a story about what their father as a child stole from the family farm (*did he steal eggs or milk?*). They worked together to create a shared understanding of an experience (Ochs et al., 1992), a process that varies across families (Bohanek et al., 2006). Future research should collect joint stories of Russia's war in Ukraine, as family members might call upon different stories to understand the current war (or have different interpretations of the same stories), and perhaps these different stories (or interpretations) inspire variation not only in sense-making but also in helping behaviors.

In conclusion, the present study advanced narrative theorizing by attending to the multi-layered nature of family storytelling. Specifically, we strengthen CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) by calling upon the ecological systems approach to family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) to illuminate sociohistorical influences on family stories. As the story of Russia's war in Ukraine is currently being written, individuals in Poland and around the world are evoking family narratives to make sense of and behave in response to the conflict.

## Notes

1. In the last century, Poland endured significant destruction due to war. During World War II (WWII), Poland faced invasion from both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, leading to significant devastation and loss of life. About 17% of the Polish population was displaced or died during the war and the capitol city, Warsaw, was nearly entirely destroyed (Easton, 2019). The Soviets then established the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL*), an oppressive communist regime that was characterized by political purges, suppression of dissent, and censorship of media and culture, which lasted until 1989.
2. The interviewers did not collect demographics on sexual orientation for privacy purposes, since LGBTQ+ status is a sensitive topic in Poland. As of 2023, same-sex marriage is not legally recognized.
3. The Katyn massacre was “a series of mass executions of nearly 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia prisoners of war carried out by the Soviet Union ... in April and May 1940” (Katyn Massacre, 2023).
4. The Chernobyl disaster was an explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Northern Ukraine in April 1986.

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