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SYNOPSIS

Objective. This study explored the types of war stories Polish families tell and the lessons family members learn from these stories. ***Design.*** Polish adults ($n = 32$) were interviewed about their intergenerational family stories. Interview transcripts were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. ***Results.*** Analyses revealed four types of war stories—survival stories, hero stories, tragedy and loss stories, and missing stories—and four lessons learned from these stories—how to live, how to be Polish, how to cope, and how to understand others. ***Conclusions.*** Findings advance narrative scholarship by integrating communicated narrative sense-making theory with the ecological systems model of family narratives. In so doing, we highlighted how macro-system meanings, values, and beliefs emerged in these family stories. Findings also show the presence and effect of silencing in intergenerational family storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

War causes trauma that reverberates for generations. Recent evidence suggests that physical, behavioral, and mental health issues associated with war trauma can be transmitted through generations, in part, through family communication (Bowers & Yehuda, 2016; Cardwell et al., 2023). How people do, and do not, discuss war in their family may perpetuate and/or heal the cycle of intergenerational trauma. This is especially relevant in cultures that have endured many decades of war, such as in Poland.

Poland has a long and intimate history of war. During World War II (WWII), Poland endured significant devastation and loss of life due to invasions by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. These invasions led to the collapse and exile of the Polish government and military, while civilians faced brutal occupation. Approximately 17% of Poland's pre-war population was displaced or died, the highest proportion of any country affected by the war (Rzeszutek et al., 2023). Most of Poland's ethnic minority population was killed or relocated after the war. Post-war, the Soviets gained control over Poland. The communist regime implemented collectivization of agriculture, nationalization of industry, and censorship of media, education, and culture, including historical revisionism, glorifying the Soviet role in Poland's "liberation" while vilifying noncommunist resistance groups.

Despite the fall of communism in 1989, these traumas continue to influence the Polish psyche and societal dynamics today, as evidenced by mental, physical, and behavioral health consistently poorer than surrounding countries (e.g., PTSD rates are 18.8% among Poles, 0.5% among Germans, 2.0% among pre-war Ukrainians; Rzeszutek et al., 2023). In the shadow of past wars, along with the ongoing war in Ukraine, Poles must wrestle with the place of war in their personal, familial, and national identities.

Family discussions of personal, familial, and cultural identity and history often occur through storytelling. According to the communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) theory, stories family members hear and tell have lasting effects on family members' "intergenerational meaning-making, values, and beliefs" (Proposition 1; Koenig Kellas, 2022, p. 119). Although CNSM theory positions family narratives within sociohistorical context, very little CNSM research has investigated intergenerational family stories with respect to cultural forces (Koenig Kellas, 2022). Thus, we engage with the complementary ecological systems model of family narratives, which centers culture as influential to intergenerational family stories (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Specifically, family members' stories of their own or shared experience (autobiographical), as well as their family (micro-system, exo-system), are grounded in cultural (macro-system) narratives. We draw upon these two theories to uncover macro-system narratives in the meanings, values, and beliefs present in families' micro- and exo-system intergenerational war stories. We investigate what is—and is not—included in Polish family war stories, as well as lessons derived from them. In so doing, we explore the multi-layered ways family war stories may perpetuate and mitigate intergenerational trauma (Cardwell et al., 2023).

CNSM Theory and the Ecological Systems Model of Family Narratives

CNSM theory investigates the processes, functions, and outcomes associated with family storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018, 2022). The core assumptions of CNSM theory are that narratives a) are communicated and b) link to well-being through c) the functions of *creating identity*, *coping with difficulty*, *connecting interpersonally*, and, relevant to the current study, *socializing* family and cultural values, morals, and beliefs. The theory is guided by three heuristics—retrospective, interactional, and translational storytelling. Research on retrospective storytelling, including the present study, focuses on the content of family stories. Past studies grounded in Proposition 1 have shown that family members glean meanings, values, and beliefs from intergenerational stories (Gunning & Koenig Kellas, 2023). The current study seeks to expand a growing line of CNSM scholarship attending to culture in family storytelling (Denson, 2022; Elkhalid et al., 2024; Horstman et al., 2024) by engaging with the ecological systems model of family narratives.

The ecological systems model of family narratives describes multiple levels of bi-directional influence on individual, familial, intergenerational, and cultural stories (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Arising from decades of research on the social and cultural construction of memory, self, identity, and narrative, Fivush and Merrill extrapolated Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model to the study of family narratives. At the center of their model are autobiographical memories, those that constitute individual identity. These stories are shaped within the micro-system, which includes parent-child and family stories about shared experiences (e.g., family vacations). Exo-system influences on this process include intergenerational stories about events that an individual did not personally experience (e.g., stories about a parent's childhood). Macro-system influences include larger cultural myths and history, familial history, and master narratives (e.g., historical events).

CNSM theory and the ecological systems model of family narratives inform each other (Elkhalid et al., 2024; Fivush & Koenig Kellas, 2024; Horstman et al., 2024). Both are grounded in an understanding that meaning is socially constructed through creating and telling stories and promote research on the creating, coping, relating, and socializing functions of this storytelling. These two theories acknowledge the bidirectional influence of culture and personal/family storytelling; yet CNSM work has mostly focused on individual and family-level story content and processes in the micro- and exo-system. CNSM theory provides narrative scholars with clear analytic distinctions between the retrospective, interactive, and translational storytelling and the corresponding foci of content, interaction, and interventions. The ecological systems model of family narratives gives scholars a framework to locate cultural systems at play in family stories.

Integrating CNSM theory and the ecological systems model of family narratives has shown that individuals may "pull forward" intergenerational family stories to help make sense of current stressors such as war (Elkhalid et al., 2024; Horstman et al., 2024). Intergenerational family stories are informed by macro-system master narratives and expectations such as "Polish people are helpers" (Horstman et al., 2024) and "Palestinians must preserve our identity" (Elkhalid et al., 2024). The current study builds on this work by focusing on the unique and multi-systemic place of war in intergenerational family stories.

Intergenerational Family Stories About War

Stories about war hold a prominent place in personal and public (i.e., macro-system) memories. Regarding personal memory, war is consistently a main theme in the autobiographical narratives of those who endured them (Svob et al., 2016). Older Poles tend to organize their sense of self around WWII and postwar events and use these stories to cope with their current stressors,

including Russia's War in Ukraine (Horstman et al., 2024). The autobiographical stories from older family members serve as the foundation for intergenerational family stories (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Families may tell war stories to convey moral messages to younger family members, highlighting the socializing function of family stories (Koenig Kellas, 2022). Macro-system collective memory, or "a representation of a shared past" by group members (Svob et al., 2016, p. 846), informs micro- and exo-system family war stories (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Communication and thus knowledge about a family's ties to war tends to wane over generations and may become replaced with cultural memory (Svob et al., 2016), which demonstrates the important links between family stories and culture.

In summary, intergenerational war stories are consequential to our personal and collective identities. Telling war stories may lead to reliving one's own or a family member's trauma but may also result in history preservation, resilience, and lesson learning (Cardwell et al., 2023; Elkhalid et al., 2024). Our goal is to use CNSM theory's proposition 1 and the ecological systems model of family narratives to investigate the types and meanings, values, and beliefs (operationalized as lessons; Gunning & Koenig Kellas, 2023) from intergenerational war stories told in Polish families. Doing so will illuminate what is—and what is not—included in family war stories while also demonstrating the effect of these stories on family members. As such, our research questions are:

RQ1: What types of intergenerational family war stories do Polish families tell?

RQ2: What lessons do Poles derive from their intergenerational family war stories?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 32 Polish adults aged 23 to 83 years old ($M = 39.70$, $SD = 16.20$), including 10 cisgender men and 22 cisgender women. All identified as White and Polish, consistent with Polish ethnic makeup (97.7% ethnic Polish). All had university degrees. Thirteen participants had children (aged 2 months to 50 years old; $M = 17.35$, $SD = 18.63$).

Procedures

The research team—two U.S. American scholars in Communication and one in Psychology, and three Polish Psychology scholars—created the

interview protocol. The questions focused on family storytelling (e.g., "What, if any, stories were you told by your older family members?"). We specifically asked about family stories about war (most often WWII) told by the participant or their older family members and the lessons they learned from these stories. Participants were recruited through the authors' personal and professional networks as well as snowball sampling. Interviews were held over Zoom ($n = 17$) or in-person in Poland ($n = 15$) in December 2021–July 2022. Twenty-five interviews were conducted in English, six in Polish, and one in both. Interviews began with informed consent, lasted 37–127 min ($M = 20.83$, $SD = 79.03$), and were audio recorded and transcribed. This resulted in 693 single-spaced pages of transcripts ($M = 22.35$, $SD = 8.35$ per interview).

Data Analysis

Aligning with recent methodological recommendations for exploring CNSM theory's proposition 1 (Gunning & Koenig Kellas, 2023; Koenig Kellas et al., 2021), we examined family story types and meanings, values, and beliefs, operationalized through lessons learned. We engaged in thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) by examining the stories as a whole unit, accounting for how stories were told and reflected cultural nuances. We started with data immersion and then engaged in open coding, where each team member was assigned to identify descriptive codes in five transcripts. The team met to discuss open coding observations and determine emergent themes (e.g., family members escaping, making sacrifices for their country, valuing education). Based on this meeting, the first author created a codebook, which included themes of story types and lessons. Each researcher was then assigned as primary coder for approximately five transcripts. Each transcript (i.e., each participant's collection of family stories) was coded for presence or absence of each theme.

We verified our findings through selecting a worthy topic, establishing sincerity, and keeping ethical considerations at the forefront (Tracy, 2010). Polish intergenerational storytelling about war is a worthy topic because it may teach us lessons on how to mitigate intergenerational war trauma. This is timely, given the current war-saturated global situation. Sincerity is established through authors' self-reflexivity and to maintain mindful of cultural ethics (Tracy, 2010), the U.S. American scholars solicited the perspectives of the Polish colleagues from project conception to manuscript compilation. Additionally, the first author immersed herself in the culture while residing in Poland during the time of the interviews.

RESULTS

Types of War Stories (RQ1)

Four types of war stories were told in Polish families (RQ1). Three types of stories were common—survival stories, hero stories, and tragedy and loss stories. Through these types, participants characterized their family members as survivors, heroes, or victims, respectively. The fourth finding was a marked absence of war stories in certain families (i.e., "missing stories"). On average, participants were told 3.09 ($SD = 0.82$) of the four war story types during their interview.

Survival Stories. Survival stories—how family members escaped, survived, or evaded impending death due to war—were told in 81.3% ($n = 26$) participants' families. These family members endured labor camps, evaded military duty, hid from Nazi or Russian soldiers, and survived the scarcity of war. Ksena (age 25) referenced her family members hiding in a cellar from the Germans. Most of these were exo-system stories about family members, with some macro-system historical knowledge informing them. Radek (age 37) explained how his grandfather evaded being drafted into the (Russian) Red Army: "He had some good commanders who told them to run and my grandpa was hiding in the woods for a few months." He accompanied this story with some explanation of the political tensions at the Belarusian border during the war, which highlights the interplay between Radek's knowledge of his grandfather's experience and WWII history.

Some survival stories were about surviving with limited resources (e.g., food, money) or in a labor camp. Both of Wisława's (age 67) parents worked in labor camps. Her mother "couldn't live a normal life. . . but she survived." Jan (age 67) and Agata (age 27) shared stories about their families struggling to survive. Jan said, "they survived in the cold and hunger, my grandma with the three of her children. . .what they could steal, they ate." In all, participants shared stories about their family members' efforts to survive war.

Hero Stories. Family members' heroic acts were the second most common type of story in our participants' families ($n = 24$, 75.0%). These stories embodied a hero's characterization by framing family members as sacrificing for their country, family, or others. Like survival stories, hero stories were predominantly exo-system stories informed by macro-system historical knowledge. Participants included historical facts and common stories of the Polish war into their stories about specific family members. Some family members, like Justyna's (age 37) great-grandfather, held venerable positions in the respected Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, or *AK*). Kinga (age 28) shared a legendary story about her great-grandfather fighting under the impression that his wife and two children were dead. Because he had

"nothing to lose" he chose to be part of "suicide missions during the [Warsaw] Uprising." In the end, he learned his family was still alive, and his missions were successful.

Other hero stories included family members who protected Jews or smuggled goods to support the family. Wisława said her mom would cross the Reich border to receive food and return to Poland to sell it. By doing this, they were able to have enough "for the basics." Kamilia (age 24) explained how her grandmother's basement had a "latch in the floor" covered by a "huge rug." When she asked her grandmother about this, she said, "because we used to hide Jews here." Kamilia shared that her "grandma is awesome." In these stories, family members looked upon their ancestors with pride.

Tragedy and Loss Stories. The fates of family members in tragedy and loss stories ($n = 24$, 75.0%) were less fortunate. These family members were characterized as victims who died, witnessed tragedy, or endured the evils of war. Most of the tragedy and loss stories existed in the exo-system (i.e., as a story about a family member). Agata said, "all of my great grandfathers they were killed during the Second World War." She explained, "one of them was killed by Nazis, because of the Jews actually, hiding in our borough." Agata's story demonstrates how stories of loss and tragedy can also be heroic.

Some participants referenced the devastating effects of war on the family. Justyna shared, "when the war began there, my great-grandpa's brother was killed immediately, he was in the army. His wife ended up in a psychiatric hospital because she couldn't handle it mentally." For Justyna, her family endured not only the tragic loss but also consequences on the remaining family. Stories also featured tragedies or deaths witnessed by a family member. Mina (age 36) explained that her grandmother saw Nazi bombing, and Marta (age 25) said, "[my grandfather] as a child, as a young boy, heard the Nazi soldiers shooting and killing people." Thus, effects of war devastation were widespread in families.

Some participants explained that their experience of tragedy and loss was a cultural phenomenon (i.e., macro-system). Kinga described her grandmother as an orphan; she said, "what's interesting is that my grandma doesn't recall this as a big trauma, because she didn't really know anything else, and she says that this was the situation practically everywhere when she was in primary school in Łódź." Like many other tragedy and loss stories, Kinga told the story plainly and stoically. In so doing, she storied the tragedy of numerous Polish children being orphaned during WWII, while also highlighting a cultural tendency to move on without grieving the immense loss from war, as explored in the "how to cope" lesson below. This shows how these tragedy and loss stories are informed by the macro-system, revealing both historical facts and exemplifying cultural traits.

Missing Stories. Finally, 87.5% of the participants ($n = 28$) reported entire stories or significant parts of family war stories were missing. There were holes in stories, silence about particular topics, and/or unknown details about their family members' role in the war. Stories from the older generation were unknown because it was unsafe to share them outside of like-minded cultural groups (macro-system silencing), the older generation was killed or dying of old age (exo-system story gaps), or stories were missing because they were too difficult to discuss (micro-system silencing). In an example of macro-system silencing, Eva (age 52) noted that Polish people did not share stories about war because it was unsafe to do so because of postwar communist restrictions on free speech. She explained that children were taught by their parents not to talk to their friends at school about their home life.

In exo-system story gaps, stories were unknown because the older generation passed away. Katarzyna (age 26) reflected on her grandparents who: "passed away when I was, you know, so little even, even before I was born, so I didn't get a chance to speak with them about it." Jan's grandmother would not tell her war stories, even though the family desperately wanted to know them. Finally, some stories highlighted micro-system gaps. These stories were not shared because they were too difficult to discuss. Agata said, "it was like [my grandparents] didn't want tell about it. And it was like, it was very painful for them." Even though they did not talk about it, Agata said, "it's in the air. It's in the air. You can't forget it." Although her family members did not discuss their war memories, they were present.

In other instances, pieces of stories were inexplicably missing. As Jerzy (age 46) shared his family stories, he made comments such as, "there's a bit of family mystery," "it's like we won't tell stories in my family," or "that's a story that's never been told." Missing stories were often apparent and painful to participants.

In summary, war stories of heroism, survival, and loss were present in Polish families, along with an acknowledgment of missing stories. These findings demonstrate what older Polish family members chose to highlight about their and their family members' stories, as well as what younger Poles remembered from those stories. These stories become the canonical narratives of Polish culture and thus provide a window into the meanings, values, and beliefs (or lessons) of modern Polish families.

Lessons from War Stories (RQ2)

We also analyzed the data for lessons the participants stated they learned from their intergenerational family war stories. This revealed four lessons—how to live, how to be Polish, how to cope, and how to understand others. Participants articulated 2.56 ($SD = 1.32$) of the four lesson types, on average, in their interview.

How to Live. The most common type of lesson was how to live ($n = 23$, 71.9%), which taught family members values of education, religion, travel, and family, and beliefs such as politics are evil, and the world is scary. These lessons were most common in the current study's survival stories. They reflect exo-system understanding about specific family members and macro-system cultural values such as appreciating their freedoms, working hard, or prioritizing family, although participants in this lesson did not explicitly connect these values to Polishness.

Participants learned to be grateful for the freedoms, wealth, and safety of their current lives. They contrasted their lives with war stories of difficulty, scarcity, and tragedy endured by older family members. Adela (age 45) said, "I don't know what to means to be hungry because I never experienced that. My parents did everything for us." Sometimes there was shame in this lesson. Kamilia said, "we're so spoiled with everything we have. And we still don't appreciate enough." At times, it was a motivation to build a brighter future. Stefan (age 31) claimed: "it's really essential . . . to work for the children to have a better life than you have. . . [Our ancestors], they live[d] for us to have a better life. And we should be thankful for them."

Intergenerational war stories were also saturated with the values of hard work, education, and valuing family. Marta claimed that a lesson of her grandparents' stories of war was "you need to work really hard" and "you need to be smart and find your own way." Lessons of appreciating and fostering family relationships were also central. Ksena claimed, "I was taught that family is the most important thing . . . and you [must] protect them." Stories about loyalty and love during war were inspiring to younger generations, such as Kamilia, whose grandfather "lived half of his life loving this woman after she died," and "that proved to me that love exists. I remember thinking as a kid that is so beautiful." Some lessons encouraged members to avoid things that may tear family apart, such as getting involved in the military or politics. Advice on how to live one's life by being grateful, working hard, and prioritizing family was common.

How to be Polish. Family war stories also contained lessons about Polish identity, particularly focused on the nature of "Polishness" ($n = 23$, 71.9%). In contrast to "how to live" lessons, in the "how to be Polish" lessons, values such as resourcefulness, strength, and patriotism were framed as Polish traits. These stories also include beliefs that Polish people are patriotic, strong and brave (especially Polish women), connected to war, and suffered from war trauma. It is no surprise, then, that these lessons are most common in the current study's hero stories. These lessons in these exo-system family stories highlighted macro-system assumptions about Polish people and their history, which demonstrates the identity-creation function of family storytelling.

With their patriotism came an assumption that Polish people should be brave and strong. Participants called Poland "a tough nation" (Wiesław, age 80) and characterized Polish people as "survivors" (Kinga). Wiesław claimed that Polish people are strong because they remember the past, and Marcin agreed: "I think Poles take the strength now from the fact that we used to be a quite powerful country. We are very determined, we can fight, we don't give up." Other family stories highlight the strength of Polish women, especially during war times. Wiesław admired his mother for her strength; she "kept my family in check . . . [she] was a truly tough woman, both feet on the ground." These stories not only teach children about strength despite adversity (as in "how to live" lessons) but that Polish people are strong.

Negative characteristics associated with Polishness included antisemitism (e.g., Aniela, age 40), narrow-mindedness (e.g., Leszek, age 41), inability to cope (e.g., Katrin, age 23), insecurity (e.g., Malina), and aggressiveness (Stanisław). Some participants claimed that Poland's history (and family stories) was saturated with war, and that it has negative effects on current Poles. Aleksandra (age 44) said, "Either through the older people or in our genes, we are somehow educated about the war, the suffering, that that is connected with the wars. And we sense it directly."

Some explained that the problems in their family's stories were emblematic of Poles. Justyna mentioned that her grandfather abused alcohol, but that was typical in post-WWII Poland: "Grandpa was, of course, drinking a bit, just like everyone after the war but that was the story from my father's side." Stanisław believed that because WWII was a violent time, that Poland has become a "very aggressive nation." He said, "I think the whole story of my family during the Second World War, it's not, it's not about, only about my family, I think this is generally about Polish families." As such, participants learned through these stories about what Polish people are like. Participants gleaned both positive and negative lessons about Polish identity (macro-system assumptions) through their family stories (exo-system stories).

How to Cope. Nineteen participants (59.4%) explained that they learned about coping with hardship from intergenerational family stories of war. Values of strength, gratitude, grace, and unity were present, along with beliefs of trusting in God and that talking about trauma is unhelpful. Most of these lessons reflected exo-system storytelling about participants' family ancestors (rather than about Polish people as a whole, as echoed above). These lessons highlighted how intergenerational family storytelling can help family members cope with difficulty (Koenig Kellas, 2022) and were most common in hero stories.

One of the resounding lessons about how to cope was to "be strong." Many explained that their family stories about war (i.e., exo-system stories) characterized family members as brave in the face of difficulty. Wisława told a story

of her mother being taken to a German work camp and then living a "normal life" afterward, despite her trauma. Kinga claimed that her family stories shaped her character: "by knowing these stories about very difficult times when some qualities were brought out . . . If we're alive, and our ancestors survived, it means that they were incredibly lucky or they showed their mettle . . . there was an incredible power in that."

Whereas encouraging family to "be strong" can be heartening to story-listeners, participants also suggested that individuals should "move on" (Kamilia), "push through" (Malina), or avoid difficulties from the past. Jan identified this avoidance as problematic and contributing to his mental health issues:

> My grandpa's . . . death in Katyń wasn't really mentioned at home, which seems completely illogical. Because of that, I got pretty lost [laughter] in the sense of my internal order, and then it was difficult for me to cope with it and it ended . . . Well, there were also other tensions but it all ended with a pretty deep and long depression.

Jan saw the lack of stories about his grandfather's gruesome death as a barrier to his coping with that family tragedy. Stanisław explained that his family "told the stories, but they didn't learn from the stories and . . . . they didn't show me how I can learn from these stories," because there was "no opportunity to focus on these traumatic events because [they] had to survive after the war, build a new life."

Some stories claimed cleverness and resourcefulness were critical to coping. When asked what she learned about her family war stories, Alicja (age 24) explained, "during tough times, what's considered to be bad might not actually be bad . . . Like stealing, you're not supposed to do that. But then again, [in] war times, people are desperate . . . So I guess sometimes it's morally okay to do those things." Justyna told an illustrative story about how her tenacious grandmother (who was "kind of a smarty-pants") escaped twice from a work assignment in Germany: "She says that either she was so angry or so determined as a 16-year-old that somehow it worked."

A few stories highlighted family, community, and religion as essential for surviving the stressors of war. Wiesław, Malina, and Justyna focused on their grandparents' strong relationships, along with their small-town support system of friends and family. Some, such as Agata and Malina, learned about the importance of religion. Malina surmised, "I think it was easier for [my grandparents] to get through [the war] because they were both really religious, like most people back then . . . it helped them just being religious and close to God." In all, participants articulated that they learned lessons about how to cope through their family stories of strength, resourcefulness, and unity.

How to Understand Others. About half of the participants ($n = 17$, 53.1%) explained that they learned lessons about human nature that included beliefs

about people in the family, people in general, or people groups. Most of these lessons were exo- and micro-system hero stories about family members' interactions with others, along with occasional macro-system assumptions about people groups. Because these stories focused on teaching family members about others, they largely represent the socializing function of family stories (Koenig Kellas, 2022).

Some lessons clarified the nature of specific family members. Michal explained that he learned about the character of deceased family members through stories his father told about them, particularly about his grandfather, who was quite "entrepreneurial" during the PRL. Marta learned from family stories about why her grandfather "is kind of the villain of our family" and "a really weird man."

Many gleaned lessons about human nature, or the generalized other. These lessons included how much or little one can trust other people. For example, Radek learned a bleak lesson from WWII stories of turning in Jews: "there are always many cruel people who will profit from someone else's misery."

Participants also explained that family stories demonstrated how their family members understood Russians, Germans, and/or Ukrainians. A common theme was that family members believed that, during WWII, the Germans were bad, but the Russians were worse. Radek referred to a story in his family about how "the Germans were more mannerly . . . and the Russians just robbed the whole village," and "of the two evils, they were less scared of the Germans." Some participants internalized their family members' distrust of Russians. Justyna explained that Russian soldiers "beat my grandpa, beat my great-grandpa, raped my grandma on the other side," which leaves her weary of Russians. Though she admits, "of course, we are not so innocent."

Participants' family stories contributed to understanding Ukrainians, which was relevant to the current Russian War in Ukraine and resulting refugee crisis in Poland. Whereas most family stories empathized with Ukrainians, who share cultural and historical commonalities, some fueled negative opinions about Ukrainians due to historical tensions. Justyna's grandmother's family fled from Ukraine after the Wołyń Massacres in 1943, where the Ukrainian Insurgent Army brutally killed approximately 100,000 Poles:

> When Wołyń began, they heard about it right away, so they ran away to Poland. Grandma had a bad opinion about the Ukrainian people her whole life, which I couldn't understand when I was younger. Now I do. I can't expect her to forgive people whom she saw murder her family or friends, although this is a difficult part of the history.

In sum, participants learned about the nature of family members, humans in general, and certain people groups through their family war stories. These lessons highlighted the family storytelling functions of socializing, creating identity, and coping and existed largely in the exo-system, informed by the macro-system.

DISCUSSION

Our findings about Polish intergenerational family war stories contribute to scholarship in intergenerational family storytelling by a) integrating CNSM theory and the ecological systems model of family narratives, b) advancing research on characterization in family war stories, and c) interrogating silence in these stories. We explore each of these implications along with limitations of the current study and opportunities for future research.

Advancing Theory and Research on Family War Stories

In the present study, we integrated CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) and the ecological systems model of family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016) by putting CNSM Proposition 1's meanings, values, and beliefs in conversation with ecological systems of influence. As such, we contributed to an emerging body of research on CNSM theory that considers the cultural systems at play in family stories told in international populations (Elkhalid et al., 2024; Horstman et al., 2024). We expand on past CNSM literature that focuses on individual- and family-level meaning-making in story types and meanings, values, and beliefs (e.g., Gunning & Koenig Kellas, 2023) by identifying macro systems at play, per the ecological systems model of family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016).

For example, like the present study's hero stories, Koenig Kellas et al. (2021) found that families tell triumph stories that focused on the successes of family members. These hero stories often reflect the Polish master narratives of war, such as *Polska Walcząca*, or the Polish fighting spirit (Duszak, 2013; Horstman et al., 2024). Words like *honor* and *God* are often present in Polish stories of war, reflecting a "national mythology on martyrdom, sacrifice, and nostalgia" (Duszak, 2013, p. 213). The uniquely Polish meaning of hero stories is supported by the finding that these stories had the highest frequency of lessons on how to be Polish. Similarly, Horstman et al. (2023) found that black South Africans' narratives of strength during apartheid were uniquely informed by a cultural narrative of not showing weakness to apartheid perpetrators. Taken together, although family triumph stories (Koenig Kellas et al., 2021) and hero stories may contain similar meanings, values, and beliefs, taking an ecological systems approach to these stories illuminates cultural nuance.

The present study also helped advanced scholarly understanding of how individuals characterize their family members in intergenerational war stories. Our participants told stories of their family members as survivors, heroes, or victims. Like Slabáková (2019) report of Czech family stories of WWII, in Polish survival stories, participants empathized with and respected their family members for their ability to survive under dangerous circumstances. Participants seemed to engage in "intergenerational empathy," or understanding and sharing

the emotions of their ancestors (Duszak, 2013). These stories seemed to provide individuals with relatable family member characters. Some participants noted how their mental health was negatively impacted by these stories, however many claimed that their ancestors' stories inspired them to steal against adversity. These findings suggest that these stories are potentially transmitting trauma (Cardwell et al., 2023), but also providing a way to empathize with family ancestors to overcome their own adversity.

Intergenerational empathy is more complex in hero stories, perhaps in part because of the presence of macro-system master narrative values. Our findings align with past work that reported heroization in Polish families' war stories and a tendency for younger generations to depict family members involved in war as moral and their questionable actions justified (e.g., Wisława explaining smuggling was justified in war times; Bachmann, 2013). Like past work in Czech families (Slabáková, 2019), participants tended to valorize ancestors involved in historical events (e.g., Warsaw Uprising) or affiliated with famous Polish war heroes or groups. This is notable because researchers claim that we are at an important time for WWII memory, as the war is being forgotten in family stories and being replaced by cultural memory (Duszak, 2013). Future research should continue tracking the evolution of WWII family stories.

Silence Around Intergenerational War Stories

Most of our participants (87%) claimed that whole or parts of their family war stories were silenced. Many noted that coping with the traumas of war was stifled, and lessons surrounding coping were lowest in trauma and loss stories. This suggests that Polish families did not use these stories as an opportunity to grieve these losses and instead coped with historical tragedy by avoiding talking about the past (Bachmann, 2013). The question that remains, then, is how Poles grapple with the gaps in their family stories. In short, these gaps seem to be functionally ambivalent. In some cases, participants inferred what could have happened based on macro-system history. For example, although Mihal did not know the details of his grandfather's involvement with the AK, he knew from studying WWII history that the AK carried out masterful underground operations, and he assumed his grandfather contributed to them. Others allowed the stories to remain incomplete or missing.

Although a deep literature has revealed links between narrative meaning-making and well-being (Fivush, 2019; Koenig Kellas, 2018), researchers have also questioned the totality of this assumption (Cardwell et al., 2023; Fivush, 2010). Silence can be powerful; certain people and groups may engage in silence to preserve their voice, identity, or well-being (Fivush, 2010). Telling intergenerational family stories may perpetuate trauma (Cardwell et al., 2023), as noted in our participants who believed that family members silenced their war stories to protect themselves or their younger family members from the

atrocities of war. Research also shows that family stories can be silenced when they may compromise a family's privacy or reputation (Bachmann, 2013). For example, Stanisław explained that his family "completely cut their German roots" after WWII. Many participants suggested that Polish family silencing may be remnants of communism's silencing of public memory and sense-making about the horrors of war (Rzeszutek et al., 2023).

Yet 30 years after the fall of communism, the benefits of this silence may have faded. As seen in studies on intergenerational storytelling about historical trauma (Elkhalid et al., 2024; Svob et al., 2016) along with the present study's findings, younger generations seek to hear and preserve their ancestors' war stories. They want these stories to be told and their families' sacrifices to be remembered, like Jan, who recorded his grandmother's stories to preserve them for future generations. The effects of family storytelling about war are complex and need to be explored in greater depth, particularly with attention to historical nuance.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

Limitations of the present study and opportunities for future research exist. First, our participants were disproportionately highly educated, English-speaking, and living in urban centers. Future research on Polish family storytelling should recruit individuals with less educational attainment and living in more rural areas. Second, although our sample largely represented Polish ethnic/racial demographics, future research should investigate family storytelling in Poland's minority populations, including racial/ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and religious minorities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLICATION

Aligning with the translational storytelling heuristic of CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2022), findings from the present study can be used in practical application. With ongoing wars raging throughout the world, families will be continually grappling with how to manage their stories about war (Horstman et al., 2024). Families would benefit from narrative-based training on how to discuss war with future generations in ways that mitigate intergenerational trauma (Cardwell et al., 2023). Storytelling and storylistening interventions would benefit from interrogating the benefits and risks of accepting Polish master war narratives such as *Polska Walcząca*. These interventions will be timely as WWII grows further in the past and personal/family stories are replaced by cultural memory (Duszak, 2013).

In conclusion, future research and practice can benefit from the current study's findings on the nature of and lessons from Polish family war stories. Research should continue to study the meanings, values, and beliefs present in the multiple systems represented in these stories.

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Ethical Principles

The authors affirm having followed professional ethical guidelines in preparing this work. These guidelines include obtaining informed consent from human participants, maintaining ethical treatment and respect for the rights of human or animal participants, and ensuring the privacy of participants and their data, such as ensuring that individual participants cannot be identified in reported results or from publicly available original or archival data.

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Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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