
Conflict Management as Emotional Inheritance: Religious Value-Transfer through Transgenerational Patterns and Children's Family Representations in Primary School Age

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Abstract: This study examines how family conflict-management styles, educational attitudes and emotional reaction patterns are transmitted across generations and how they appear in the inner world of primary school children. The empirical material consists of a qualitative, small-sample exploratory study conducted in a Hungarian-speaking rural community. Six third and fourth-grade children, aged nine to eleven, and their parents participated in the research. The adult participants took part in semi-structured interviews focusing on grandparents' marriages, childhood family experiences, current couple dynamics, conflict resolution, educational attitudes and religiosity. The children completed three drawing

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tasks: a family floor plan, an enchanted family drawing in which family members were represented as animals, and a drawing of their relationship to God. The analysis shows that family cohesion, care, work ethic and the joy of being together function as positive transgenerational patterns. At the same time, unresolved family tensions – alcohol misuse, divorce, silence, fear, harsh communication and rigid paternal authority – may reappear as emotional reflexes even when parents consciously try to break with the past. The child drawings add an important perspective: fathers are frequently represented as strong animals such as tiger, whale or lion. In supportive family contexts this symbolizes protection; in more burdened contexts it also carries elements of fear, threat or defensive positioning. The study argues that transgenerational transmission is not a linear repetition of the past but a dynamic process in which continuity, counter-patterns, compensation and residual emotional traces coexist. The findings have pedagogical and pastoral relevance, because children's aggression, withdrawal or heightened sensitivity may often be better understood as relational signals embedded in a family history rather than as isolated behavioural problems.

Keywords: transgenerational patterns; family systems; conflict management; child drawings; aggression; religiosity; primary school children.

1. Introduction

The history of family life is not only a sequence of events, but also a network of recurring emotional and relational patterns. In a family's present functioning one often encounters forms of reaction, educational attitudes, role expectations and conflict-management strategies that cannot be understood from the present situation alone. In many cases, parents do not act solely on the basis of their own conscious decisions, but also draw on an internalized inheritance that

they experienced as children in relation to their parents or caregivers. As parents, we often respond according to primary reactions learned from the way we saw our parents argue or remain silent, express or withhold love, exercise authority, ask for forgiveness, transmit religious values, or carry unspoken family tensions. The transgenerational approach begins from the assumption that experiences, coping styles, losses and relational patterns accumulated within the family system do not automatically close with the generation in which they originated. In later generations they often continue not as historical memories, but as emotional reflexes: in anger, shame, excessive adaptation, silence, fear of authority, or in the conscious determination that “I will do it differently.” Family therapy’s systemic perspective also reminds us that individual functioning cannot be understood apart from the family system and without taking into account the dynamics of at least three generations.² International literature, however, calls for caution: transgenerational transmission is not a fateful repetition, but a multi-channel process. Family communication patterns, attachment experiences, couple dynamics, parental trauma and stress-processing processes, educational strategies, religious socialization processes, and, according to some lines of research, certain epigenetic mechanisms may all participate in it.³ The present study does not examine the depth-psychological process of genetic or clinical trauma transmission. Rather, it explores what kinds of recurring patterns, ruptures and emotional residues are made visible in family narratives, conflict-management styles and children’s family representations in relation to lived religiosity. The study presents the results of a qualitative investigation conducted among primary-school children and their parents. Its focus is on family transgenerational patterns, especially

² GOLDENBERG Herbert – GOLDENBERG Irene (2004): *Áttekintés a családról* (original title: *Family Therapy: An Overview*). Budapest, Animula Kiadó. 53-55.

³ YEHUDA Rachel – LEHRNER Amy (2018): Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: putative role of epigenetic mechanisms, In: *World Psychiatry*. 17/3. 243-257, 243-245.

conflict-management strategies, educational attitudes, the family background of aggression, children's representations of father and mother roles, and the role of religiosity as a factor in value-transmission. The central claim of the study is that children's behaviour and self-expression through drawings sensitively reflect the family's emotional climate. Child drawings are used here not as clinical diagnostic tools, but as interpretive signs that complement qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents.

The particular value of the study lies in its integration of three levels: parents' recollections concerning the grandparents' and parents' generations, the present-day marital and educational functioning of the family, and the family image expressed by children in drawings and conversations. This makes it possible to see not only what adults say about family functioning, but also how children perceive it.

2. Theoretical Framework: Family System, Learned Conflict and Children's Representations

2.1. Theological Foundation: Child, Family, Covenant and Grace

In Christian theological terms, transgenerational family patterns are not fateful "curses," but points of intersection between created relationality, the family order wounded by sin, covenantal responsibility and restoration made possible by grace. This theological clarification is important in order to avoid the simplified or deterministic language of "generational curse" (Exod 20:5-6; Deut 5:9-10). Scripture does speak about consequences that extend across generations, yet Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31:29-34 explicitly break a fatalistic interpretation: the child is not simply imprisoned by the sins of the parents.⁴ The Christian interpretive emphasis therefore falls not

⁴ See Kovács's summary remarks. KOVÁCS Szabolcs (2011): Az ószövetségi transzgenerációs konfliktus társadalmi-etikai és identitást meghatározó vonatkozása, In: *Studia Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*. Vol. 56. Iss. 1. 16-36.

on inherited determination, but on the new beginning made possible by grace. This can be summarized in four concise theological points. First, the theological framework of the present study begins from the claim that the child is not merely the object of family education, but a person who bears the image of God, who can be addressed and who is capable of response. Because of the dignity of createdness, the child cannot be regarded as an “unfinished adult”: the child has a voice, an inner world, spiritual sensitivity and agency.⁵ For this reason, children’s drawings and the explanations attached to them are not merely psychological supplementary data, but forms of self-expression in which the child speaks in a theologically serious way about the family, security, fear and God on the basis of lived experience. Secondly, in Christian-ethical terms, the family is not an idealized, flawless relational community, but the primary relational context of faith, love, conflict, injury and restoration. The theological basis of family relationships is created relationality: the human being bears the image of God not as an isolated individual, but as a person living in relationship.⁶ In the family, this relationality appears as covenantal responsibility: love is not merely an emotional state, but faithful turning toward the other, in which grace, empowerment and intimacy make it possible for wounded relationships to be reordered. Thus the family is not the place of conflictlessness, but the learning space in which one can discover that a relationship may be restored even after

⁵ DILLEN Annemie (2020): Children’s spirituality and theologising with children: the role of ‘context’, In: *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*. DOI: 10.1080/1364436X.2020.1843412, 1-2, 7-8; TAN Rosalind – PETALLAR Nativity A. – HEFFORD Lucy A. (eds.) (2022): *God’s Heart for Children: Practical Theology from Global Perspectives*. Carlisle, Langham Global Library, 16-17.

⁶ BALSWICK Jack O. – BALSWICK Judith K. (2014): *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*. Fourth Edition. Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 4-8; CASSON Ann – HOLMES Sarah – LOGAN Shelley – POWNEY Richard (2023): Rethinking the place of the family in the post-Covid church in the UK: an exploration of families’ engagement with church during and after Covid, In: *Practical Theology*. DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2023.2221587, 1-3.

conflict. Thirdly, it follows that religious socialization cannot be reduced to the transmission of faith knowledge or denominational customs. The family mediation of faith is a relational, narrative and ritual process: through the speech, prayer, celebration, conflict management, apologies and images of God of the parents, the child learns whether faith is a relational resource that provides security or rather an expectation-system that generates anxiety.⁷ The quality of religious transmission is therefore closely related to the warmth of the parent-child relationship, the safety of the family atmosphere, the consistency of religious practice, and whether the child is given room to formulate his or her own questions, doubts and responses. Fourth, at the same time, the theological interpretation of trauma and injury must not offer cheap explanations for suffering. Trauma is not identical with every painful experience; it is a rupture that may affect the body, memory, language, relationships and the image of God.⁸ The task of theological speech is therefore not to give a quick theodical answer or to hurry the wounded person toward reconciliation, but to bear witness to the reality of suffering, to create space for narration, and, in the language of grace, to help distinguish between sin, responsibility, woundedness and restoration.⁹ This is especially important in relation to transgenerational patterns, because family

⁷ KALLATSA Laura Elina – SPÄNNÄRI Jenni – TERVO-NIEMELÄ Kati (2023): Safety and Closeness in Religious Socialization: A Mixed Methods Study of Finnish Families, In: *Journal of Empirical Theology*. 36. 123-142, 125-128, 130-132; HOLMES Sarah E. (2021): *Do contemporary Christian families need the church? Examining the benefits of faith communities from parent and child perspectives*, In: *Practical Theology*. DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2021.1930698, 2-4.

⁸ KOVÁCS Szabolcs (2026): Trauma, Memory, and Spiritual Care: Pastoral Psychological Perspectives on Collective Healing. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*, 71/1. DOI: 10.24193/subbtref. 71.1.13. 271-293.

⁹ O'DONNELL Karen – CROSS Katie (2022): Introduction, In: O'DONNELL Karen – CROSS Katie (eds.): *Bearing Witness: Intersectional Perspectives on Trauma Theology*. London, SCM Press, 17-20; MCCLINTOCK Karen A. (2022): *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1-2, 123-125.

silences, shames and fears may continue not only as historical memories but also as bodily and spiritual reflexes.¹⁰

For the purposes of the present study this means that, in Christian theological terms, transgenerational family inheritance is not a fateful “generational curse,” but a relational reality that calls to responsibility and hope. The effect of the past is real, but not absolute. Grace does not mean denying the consequences of the past; it means the possibility that new family patterns may emerge through truth spoken aloud, apology, reparation, secure parental presence and the listening to the child’s voice. Religious value-transfer therefore becomes theologically credible when it does not regulate through fear, but makes perceptible the dignity of the child, the healability of family relationships and the liberating power of God’s grace.

2.2. The Family System as a Primary Context of Socialization: Conflicts and Children’s Representations

The family is the primary context of socialization in which the child learns how to connect, ask, protest, obey, become angry, reconcile and express love. The family system operates with its own rules, boundaries, roles and recurring interactions. For the child these patterns are not, for a long time, selectable options, but appear as the natural order of reality. What the child sees in the family is not only observed but also integrated and internalized. One of the most important channels of transgenerational transmission is social learning. According to Bandura’s theory, children do not learn exclusively through direct reward and punishment, but also through modelling: they observe the behaviour of significant adults and often repeat these forms of reaction in conflict situations.¹¹ Research on family violence in the Dutch context describes this process by showing that from the

¹⁰ KOVÁCS Szabolcs (2012): Gyermekvédelem az Ószövetségben. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*, 57/2, 99–118.

¹¹ BANDURA Albert (1971): *Social Learning Theory*. New York, General Learning Press. 6; KOTTA Ibolya (2020): *Fészkelődők. Érdekességek a kisiskoláskor pszichológiájából*. Kolozsvár, Kolozsvári Egyetemi Kiadó. 200.

spectacle of family aggression the child may also learn that the language of power and conflict is the demonstration of force, especially when control and fear become regulatory forces in the relationship between men and women.¹² If the child sees that anger appears in shouting, threat or silence, these easily become models for managing emotional tension. If, however, the child experiences that conflict can be spoken about, discussed, and closed through apology or reparation, relational tension is not necessarily integrated as a threat, but as a solvable situation. International meta-analyses show that intergenerational continuity in patterns of maltreatment or neglect can be demonstrated, but its extent is not deterministic. Assink and colleagues, on the basis of 84 studies and 285 effect sizes, found a medium overall effect, while emphasizing that methodological biases require interpretive caution.¹³ The meta-analysis by Madigan and colleagues, summarizing 142 studies and 227,918 parent-child dyads, likewise indicates that the association is significant but small to medium in strength; therefore the main question is not whether the past “repeats itself,” but what mechanisms maintain it and what protective factors are able to interrupt the cycle.¹⁴

In this context, aggression is not merely a disciplinary problem, but often a relational signal. Behind aggressive manifestations in childhood there may be frustration, a need for attention, a lack of

¹² STEKETEE Majone – DIJKSTRA Sietske – LÜNNEMANN Katinka (2017): Intergenerationele overdracht van geweld, Het doorbreken van patronen, In: VAN BEEK Krijn – STEKETEE Majone – VAN DOORN Lia – HAM Marcel (eds.): 1 op de 4. Kindermishandeling, een publiek probleem. Amsterdam, [publisher not indicated]. 35-53, 35-37.

¹³ ASSINK Mark – SPRUIT Anouk – SCHUTS Mendel – LINDAUER Ramón – VAN DER PUT Claudia E. – STAMS Geert-Jan J. M. (2018): The intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment: A three-level meta-analysis, In: *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 84. 131-145, 131-132.

¹⁴ MADIGAN Sheri – CYR Chantal – EIRICH Rachel – FEARON R. M. Pasco – LY Anh – RASH Christina – POOLE Julia C. – ALINK Lenneke R. A. (2019): Testing the cycle of maltreatment hypothesis: Meta-analytic evidence of the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, In: *Development and Psychopathology*. 31. 23-51, 23-24.

love, injured self-esteem or the repetition of a pathological conflict model observed in the family.¹⁵ The primary-school child already moves within an increasingly complex social network and in complex interpersonal situations, yet emotional regulation still strongly depends on the models heard and seen from adults. For this reason, an important pedagogical guideline can be formulated: it is not enough to react to visible child aggression; one must gain insight into the family experience, the conflict-management pattern and the sense of security that may stand behind it. Family-system research provides an especially important supplement here: parental childhood trauma does not affect the child in a direct, linear way, but through couple quality, negative interaction cycles and parental responses. Fitzgerald, London-Johnson and Gallus, in a study based on LONGSCAN data, found that verbal aggression predicted children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms, while negative couple quality proved to be the most important mediating mechanism between maternal trauma and children's mental difficulties.¹⁶ This observation directly relates to the present study: fear or a defensive position appearing in children's drawings may refer not merely to the personality or specific behavioural pattern of one parent, but to the emotional climate of the family relationship as a whole.

Children's drawings open a distinctive window into the inner world of the child. For primary-school children, drawing is not merely play, but also emotional communication. Through symbols and drawings children can express feelings, experiences, internal tensions, fears,

¹⁵ HORVÁTH SZABÓ Katalin (2001): Az agresszió kezelése. Tanári kézikönyv. Budapest, Szociális és Családügyi Minisztérium. 41-50; RANSCHBURG Jenő (2014): Az én... és a másik. A személyiség és a társas kapcsolatok fejlődése óvodáskorban. Kaposvár, Saxum Kiadó. 90.

¹⁶ FITZGERALD Michael – LONDON-JOHNSON Antoinette – GALLUS Kami L. (2020): Intergenerational transmission of trauma and family systems theory: an empirical investigation, In: *Journal of Family Therapy*. 42/3. 406-424, 406-409, 418.

desires and hierarchies that are more difficult to articulate verbally.¹⁷ International research on children's drawings suggests that family drawings may express the child's picture of family dynamics and of his or her place within the family; at the same time, drawings can only be interpreted carefully, together with the child's own explanations and other data.¹⁸ Goldner and Scharf analysed the family drawings of 222 children and found that drawings associated with secure attachment carried more positive personality and adjustment indicators, whereas drawings belonging to ambivalent and disorganized attachment categories pointed more toward adjustment difficulties.¹⁹ This does not turn the drawing into diagnostic proof, but it justifies treating the drawing as a sensitive expression of the child's internal family representations. Religiosity is not merely a cultural or moral factor in the transmission of family patterns, but a relational practice of theological significance. Faith as lived in the family conveys, at the same time, an image of God, an anthropology, an interpretation of sin and grace, a concept of authority, a language of forgiveness and the possibility of restoration after conflict. Therefore, the quality of religious education cannot be measured simply by the frequency of church attendance or the presence of prayer. The decisive question is whether the child experiences faith as a secure relational space or as a system that reinforces anxiety, performance pressure and control. Religious education does not merely mean the transmission of faith knowledge, but also the mediation of moral rules, family rituals, festive practices, forms of forgiveness and a world-interpretation that provides security. According to Vermeer's overview, the family is the basic context for the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices, and parental influence is particularly significant in

¹⁷ KOTTA (2020), 67-72; GYIMÓTH Gábor (2017): Rajz és lélek, alkotás és terápia. Bepillantás a művészetterápia világába. Budapest, Animula Kiadó. 15.

¹⁸ GOLDNER Limor – SCHARF Miri (2011): Children's Family Drawings: A Study of Attachment, Personality, and Adjustment, In: *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*. 28/1. 11-18, 11-12.

¹⁹ GOLDNER – SCHARF (2011), 11, 16-17.

religious socialization.²⁰ At the same time, the effect of religion within the family is not uniform: it may be connected to supportive, authoritative parenting and a positive parent-child relationship, but in certain contexts it may also be linked to expectations of conformity and discipline.²¹ The present study therefore does not speak about the generally “good” or “bad” effect of religiosity, but examines how faith appears as a family source of security, ritual and interpretive framework.

3. Methodology of the Study

The study was conducted in a Hungarian-speaking rural community in Transylvania, where the teacher who carried out the research has worked for several years. The social environment of the settlement can be relatively clearly circumscribed: most people are involved in agriculture, animal husbandry and related work. Communal and traditional religious practices continue to be present in the community. Roman Catholic and Reformed denominational backgrounds are both represented. Six primary-school children, pupils in grades III and IV, and their parents took part in the research. The children were between nine and eleven years old; the number of adult participants was twelve.²² The families came from the same national-cultural environment and had relatively stable material backgrounds. The denominational distribution of the children was as follows: three Reformed and three Roman Catholic pupils participated.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the adults. The questions focused on the marriages of grandparents, the parents' childhood family experiences, present marital communication,

²⁰ VERMEER Paul (2014): Religion and Family Life: An Overview of Current Research and Suggestions for Future Research, In: *Religions*. 5/2. 402-421, 402-404.

²¹ VERMEER (2014), 412-414.

²² BÍRÓ Ágota (2026): Agresszió és transzgenerációs mintázatok összefüggése kisiskolások körében. Kolozsvár, Babeş-Bolyai Tudományegyetem, Református Tanárképző és Zeneművészeti Kar, dissertation manuscript. 25-27.

conflict management, educational attitudes, the children's conflicts, and the role of religiosity observable within family relationships. The interviews lasted between 27 and 55 minutes, were conducted in a quiet, separate room, and were recorded anonymously and with the consent of the participants. Data processing was carried out with anonymized family codes: the letter assigned to each family was combined with abbreviations referring to female, male and child roles. The assessment with the children consisted of three drawing tasks and the interpretive supplementation attached to them. The first task was a floor plan of the family home, on which the children marked where family members spend most of their time, which places in the home are dear to them, and where or in which room they perceive tension. The second task was the "enchanted family drawing": every family member, including the drawing child, was represented as an animal. The task was followed by a conversation about why the child chose precisely that animal, what characteristics it has, which animals are close to or far from each other, which is the wildest, and whether the others are afraid of it. The third drawing explored the child's understanding of his or her relationship with God.

Methodologically, the study is not representative in the sense of quantitative measurement, but exploratory and descriptive. The assessment is linked to a single settlement and to a small sample; therefore its results cannot be generalized to a broad population. Its value lies in the dense, case-like qualitative material that it provides for interpreting family patterns. The methodological limits of the research must therefore not be concealed but consciously acknowledged. The analysis of the drawings is not interpreted as projective diagnosis, but as children's family representations appearing alongside the interviews.

4. Results: Transgenerational Patterns in Family Narratives and Drawings

4.1. Family as Positive Continuity

One of the strongest positive patterns in the interviews is family-centredness. Across the grandparental, parental and current families, the value of children, grandchildren, holidays, shared work, being together and care appears repeatedly. Several respondents named the grandchildren as the grandparents' shared joy.²³ Others emphasized family gatherings, holidays or shared work. Among parents recalling their childhood, several said that joy appeared most clearly when "the family was together," when they gathered, or when holidays "went well."²⁴ This pattern continues in the present families as well. Most participants describe their own family as loving, cohesive, good or happy. These formulations do not mean that the families are free of conflict; rather, they show that staying together, caring and responsibility for children function as basic values. In transgenerational analysis, therefore, one must not attend only to injuries. Family inheritance may also contain protective factors: capacity for work, perseverance, a sense of community, religious rituals, festive belonging and joy experienced with children and grandchildren. This is consistent with the international research direction according to which protective factors must always be examined alongside family vulnerability. Madigan and colleagues explicitly emphasize that secure, stable and caring relationships can mitigate transgenerational risks of maltreatment.²⁵ In the present research, family cohesion, the maintenance of holidays and parents' desire to provide their children

²³ "Always the grandchildren. [...] I would say the grandchildren were their greatest joy." "I think they found joy in their children, and later in the grandchildren."

²⁴ "What I saw in them was the joy of family." "I think joy was always when the family was together." "When we gathered together. [...] It was a very good feeling to be together." "Well, the holidays, those went very well."

²⁵ MADIGAN – CYR – EIRICH – FEARON – LY – RASH – POOLE – ALINK (2019), 40-41.

with a better emotional background than the one some of them received appear as such protective factors.

4.2. Conflict Management as a Learned and Transmitted Pattern

Based on the parental interviews, one recurring model of conflict management is “discussion” and “quick settlement.” Several respondents remember the grandparents as people who were not quarrelsome, chose their words carefully, argued perhaps, but did not destroy one another.²⁶ In present families, the language used in the grandparental pattern often returns: “we discuss it,” “we sit down,” “we do not drag it out,” “we make peace quickly.”²⁷ Several parents explicitly formulate the relationship between the family of origin and their own family functioning: “Well, we resolve conflicts in a similar way, through conversation.” “Yes, it is similar in that we try to discuss and solve things.” “They did it similarly too [...] they sat down and discussed what should be done.” Yet positive continuity is not equally deep in every family. In some cases, “quick closure” seems to be genuine reconciliation; in others it is rather emotional avoidance. Answers such as “it will pass,” “we do not talk about it,” “I keep silent,” or “time will solve it” suggest that a conflict may be formally closed without naming emotions, assuming responsibility or making reparation.²⁸ Negative patterns do not necessarily repeat themselves,

²⁶ Several respondents describe the grandparents’ conflict management as peaceful, restrained or quickly settled: “They were not the quarrelling type. I never saw a serious argument. They chose their words carefully and did not say anything hurtful to each other.” “They argued, but they did not quarrel. They could discuss things.” “They always managed to solve things; it did not turn into a quarrel, they rather settled it between themselves.”

²⁷ “Very important. My husband and I talk a lot; we try to solve every problem through discussion.” “We always discuss things. Communication is important.” “Usually we discuss it. Sometimes there is an argument, but then we sit down and solve it.”

²⁸ “I was raised by my grandmother. My parents separated, I stayed with my mother, but my mother drank.” “We heard a lot of quarrelling; my father drank. They divorced too.” “The boys fought, and my grandmother and I curled up on the bed. I remember crying a lot.”

but often become counter-patterns.²⁹ In respondents with more burdened family backgrounds, alcohol misuse, divorce, fear, silence, poverty or harsher communication appear. Even when consciously avoided, their effects influence children's behaviour and emotional involvement. Research on family-system trauma transmission supports this distinction. According to Fitzgerald and colleagues, negative couple quality - control, disengagement, hostile control and rejection - may create a family context that affects the child's internal and external symptoms through parental responses.³⁰

In the present study we observe that in families where parents described conflicts as "not deep," children's drawings nevertheless often displayed fear-related or defensive motifs. This warns us that a conflict interpreted by adults as mild may leave a stronger emotional imprint in the child's inner world. Consequently, transgenerational transmission appears not only in concrete educational rules but also in emotional reflexes: anger, a strong sense of justice, stubbornness, touchiness or withdrawal.

4.3. The Negative Pattern as Counter-Pattern

One of the most important findings of the research is that negative family inheritance does not always repeat itself unchanged. In the childhood families of several respondents, alcohol misuse, divorce, poverty, fear, silence, taking sides, early caregiving roles or excessive strictness appeared. At the same time, these experiences often became counter-patterns. Some parents explicitly state that they do not want to behave as they were treated; they do not want to pass on fear,

²⁹ "When I saw at home how my stepmother behaved, I decided that I would never behave that way." "Well, there is a difference, because I try to discuss it as soon as possible, not like in their case, where they did not speak to each other." "I do not want to be like my mother."

³⁰ FITZGERALD – LONDON-JOHNSON – GALLUS (2020), 407-409.

harshness or emotional abandonment.³¹ This dynamic is related to one of the important insights of the Dutch literature: the generational transmission of domestic violence and aggression is a real risk, but most of those affected do not carry forward the spiral of violence unchanged. According to Steketee, Dijkstra and Lünemann, the majority of maltreated children do not become perpetrators as adults. The question, therefore, is not only whether repetition according to transgenerational pattern occurs, but also how the mechanisms of interruption can be understood.³² In the present research this can be observed when parents mediate, try to talk, want to move closer to their children, or attempt to soften a strict paternal pattern through love and dialogue.³³ Other responses clearly show that parents know that children perceive adult conflicts.³⁴ At the same time, conscious awareness of a negative parental pattern is not always sufficient. A parent may know what he or she does not want to repeat, yet may not possess a ready model for how to respond differently. Assink and colleagues also highlight that parents with a wounded childhood background often know which parental practices they do not want to apply, but may need support in order to develop more sensitive and

³¹ “My husband keeps telling me that in certain situations I react like my father.” “Sometimes during an argument I notice as if I were hearing my mother.” “I also have firm opinions, like my father. That is why our style is similar during an argument.” They often recognize such continuing traits in the children as well: “My daughter also has a strong sense of justice, like my father.” “My son resembles both his father and me. He tries to show himself strong, but he also breaks down quickly.” “Yes, they resemble me and also my father. Emotionally and in anger too.”

³² STEKETEE – DIJKSTRA – LÜNNEMANN (2017), 35-36.

³³ “I try to explain to him that he should not be angry; problems must be solved.” “I try to mediate between them so that they understand each other.” “We tell them things, for example that they should not quarrel but discuss matters nicely.”

³⁴ “It happened that the younger child even cried when we were arguing. By now we both try to pay attention to handling these situations more gently.” “They hear when we argue at home [...] they also perceive it, and we try to restrain ourselves.”

secure parent-child interactions.³⁵ This is particularly important in the present sample as well: in several families the intention to change is strong, but the children's drawings still carry the emotional residues of old tensions.

4.4. Emotional Reflexes: Anger, Silence and Sense of Justice

Transgenerational transmission appears not only in concrete educational rules, but also in emotional reflexes. Several parents recognize in themselves the reaction of one of their ancestors: they react like their father, speak like their mother, or carry the same strong sense of justice, stubbornness or touchiness.³⁶ In the children, parents frequently recognize traits that live on: a strong sense of justice, sudden anger, withdrawal or defensive hardness.³⁷ Moré's German-language study describes this phenomenon with the concept of *Gefühlserbschaft*, "emotional inheritance." Unconscious transmission is present not only in therapeutic situations but also in the general functioning of human relationships: in dreams, fantasies, self-image,

³⁵ ASSINK – SPRUIT – SCHUTS – LINDAUER – VAN DER PUT – STAMS (2018), 142.

³⁶ KOVÁCS Szabolcs (2024): Az erőszak, a dominanciaigény és az áldozatállító hatásmechanizmus individuális és társadalmi vonatkozása. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*, 69/2, 275–297; See more: FAZAKAS Sándor (2018): Új erkölcsi imperatívusz: Ne szégyenkezz... és senkit meg ne szégyeníts! A szégyen teológiai értelmezése és szociáletikai relevanciája. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*, 63/1, 19–37.

³⁷ "They rather clash with each other, especially during learning. They are impatient. I tell them to be a little patient, to help one another, but if they are not doing the same thing, then it becomes an argument. They are often loud, they shout, and I find this hard to bear. My ears even hurt from it. This remained in me from childhood. If something does not work well, I rather go out; I do not want to listen to it. I feel the same in other families too; I do not like loud conflicts." "The younger child is very stubborn and has a strong sense of justice, which is also characteristic of me. If he feels he is right, he does not give in."

emotional reactions and unconscious actions.³⁸ At the same time, Moré emphasizes that this is not determinism. The degree and form of transmission depend on individual vulnerability, environmental possibilities, compensatory experiences, and whether the person is able to formulate his or her own story as a coherent whole.³⁹

This idea is particularly fruitful for interpreting the present research. When a parent says that he or she “only wants peace,” or apologizes even when not at fault, this is not merely conflict avoidance, but often an adult response to childhood fear. Likewise, when a child draws himself or herself as a biting, defensive animal, this is not necessarily an aggressive character trait, but may be an indication of the position occupied within the emotional space of the home.

4.5. Father Figures: Protection, Authority and Fear

The strongest common motif in the children's drawings is the father as a strong animal. In several families the children depict the father as a tiger, lion or whale. The meaning is not uniform. In a more supportive family climate, the father's strength is protective: he is brave, protects everyone and is a stable point. In more burdened family systems, however, strength takes on a shade of fear: “everyone is afraid” of the father-animal, the whale “can swallow” the other, and the mother figure is also afraid of the lion. These animal symbols cannot be interpreted mechanically. The tiger, lion or whale does not by itself signify abuse. What is decisive is what the child says about it: whether the others fear it, whether it protects the family, whether it is dangerous, whether it is distant or close, and what relationship it has to the mother and child figures. The drawings are important precisely because the child does not formulate theoretical family dynamics, but shows in images how he or she perceives the relationships among strength, fear, security and closeness.

³⁸ MORE Angéla (2013): Die unbewusste Weitergabe von Traumata und Schuldverstrickungen an nachfolgende Generationen, In: *Journal für Psychologie*. 21/2. 1-34, 1-4.

³⁹ MORE (2013), 3-4, 25-26.

The Dutch research is especially relevant here. According to Steketee and colleagues, fathers who exercise intimate partner violence or strong control often show a more authoritarian parenting style, leave less space for the children, and place their own opinion in the foreground.⁴⁰ The families in the present study cannot be identified with such severe patterns of violence. Nevertheless, the parallel is important: fear connected to the father figure can appear in children's drawings even alongside milder family conflicts. This shifts pedagogical attention away from accusation and toward a more delicate emotional perception: what does the child experience when, according to the parents, "it is only an argument"?

4.6. Mother Images: Care and Overburdening

Mother figures mostly appear as gentle, caring and adaptive animals: butterfly, horse, fish, teddy bear, rabbit, cat. These symbols often carry closeness, softness and emotional availability. Yet in some drawings the mother is afraid, subordinated to the dominant party (the father figure), or appears as a figure whom the child also sees as endangered. This indicates the duality of the female role: the mother is both an emotional point of security and an overburdened person who carries conflict. In the interviews, this duality is confirmed at several points. In the parental generation, many mothers organized the daily tasks of the family, adapted, mediated and bore the burden of work and childrearing. In the present families as well, it is often the mother who watches the children's emotional state more sensitively, mediates among siblings or initiates restoration after conflict. This is a positive resource, but it also involves risk: if maintaining family peace falls upon a single person, it can easily lead to over-mediation, self-abandonment or repressed anger. Trauma and family-system literature therefore emphasizes the significance of the parental subsystem as a whole. It is not enough to rely on the emotional work of one parent; for the child's sense of security, the parents need to assume shared responsibility for managing conflicts, and the task of reconciliation

⁴⁰ STEKETEE – DIJKSTRA – LÜNNEMANN (2017), 47-48.

should not be carried by only one party.⁴¹ In the present sample, the children in several cases move toward the mother, but this in itself does not resolve the ambivalence attached to the father figure. Here the female role shows a transgenerational duality: on the one hand, the maternal pattern of care and adaptation appears; on the other, the image of a mother carrying repressed tension or eruptive anger is also sometimes present.

4.7. Religiosity as Value-Transmission and Source of Security

In the families examined, religiosity appears primarily in the form of family rituals, prayer, church attendance, holidays and moral conversations.⁴² In the grandparental generation, religion often functioned as a natural order: Sunday church attendance, the sanctification of holidays, prayer, and the interruption of work.⁴³ In the present generation, institutional practice has become less frequent in several families, yet personal relationship with God, moral guidance and spiritual security remain important.⁴⁴ The children's drawings also complemented the interviews here. Children who received religious upbringing depicted Jesus, heaven or angels in greater detail and with richer symbolism. Among children from less religiously practicing families, the drawings and accounts contained fewer religious elements. This is not a value judgment, but an indication that religious imagination and language also develop through family

⁴¹ FITZGERALD – LONDON-JOHNSON – GALLUS (2020), 421-422.

⁴² GORBAI Gabriella Márta (2017): Vallások nevelés és a gyermekkép alakulása a reformáció korában – Feladatok akkor és most. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*, 62/1, 174–184.

⁴³ “Actually, on both sides the grandparents and the parents were religious, but my father even more so. Sunday was sacred; they were always in church.” “Yes, they were religious. They went to church, kept the holidays. They believed in God.” “For my maternal grandmother it was good, I think. My mother also inherited from her that she prayed so much.” “They also went to church as long as my grandfather could. My grandmother went regularly too. Even now, at the age of 83, she still goes.”

⁴⁴ “Yes, we are religious. I am Reformed, my wife and daughter are Catholic. I am not saying every Sunday, but we do go to church.”

mediation. The positive effect of religious education is most visible when it is not merely an external requirement, but a relational resource: common prayer, forgiveness, moral conversation, a sense of security and the expression of love. If, however, religiosity appears exclusively as performance or fear, it may rather increase anxiety. The lesson of Vermeer's overview is that the relationship between religion and family functioning must always be examined in a differentiated way: the transmission of faith is one question, and the way religion affects the quality of family relationships is another.⁴⁵ In the material examined, the emphasis is mostly on faith as a resource for family cohesion and moral orientation.

5. Discussion: Four Forms of Transgenerational Transmission

On the basis of the empirical material, four forms of transgenerational transmission can be distinguished. The first is positive continuity. This includes love of family, the maintenance of holidays, a responsible attitude toward work, care, and the transmission of communal and religious values. These patterns do not merely repeat themselves; they also provide stabilizing power for families.⁴⁶ The second form is the continuation and transmission of wounded patterns. Alcohol misuse, divorce, fear, strictness, silence, the absence of apology, taking sides or emotional unavailability do not completely disappear in several families. They may appear in changed form, but they continue to live in conflict management, the exercise of power or the difficulty of naming emotions. The third form is the counter-pattern. Several parents consciously do not want to pass on what they received. They do not want to be a father like their own father; they do not want to be

⁴⁵ VERMEER (2014), 402-404, 412-414.

⁴⁶ "I teach her and try to pass on my faith to her. I tell her the teachings of Jesus, which help her. Many things come to her mind even during religion class. With my daughter too, I believe that God guides her." "We also try to go to church and raise the children in faith." "We do not always get to church because of many commitments, but we try to raise the children so that they know and follow good values." "My husband is a presbyter; we pray together every evening with the children too."

a mother like their own mother; they do not want their children to be afraid, silent or left alone. This self-reflection is extremely important because it opens the possibility of change. The fourth form is the emotional residue. This is the most difficult to notice. The parent already thinks differently on a conscious level, but in a stressful situation the old reflex nevertheless moves: the voice is raised, silence is chosen, resentment appears, over-mediation begins, offense is taken, or the parent insists on being right at all costs.⁴⁷ The children's drawings are particularly sensitive to these emotional residues. The drawings do not show only what the family theoretically thinks about itself, but also what the child experiences within the family field.

According to the international literature, these four forms do not function in isolation but alongside one another. Meta-analyses of the cycle of maltreatment demonstrate the risk, but with equal emphasis they also call attention to the fact that the process is not deterministic. Interruption may be supported by a secure relational network, a supportive partner, therapeutic processing, the development of parental sensitivity and the possibility that the child gains a voice in interpreting the family story.⁴⁸ The most important lesson of the study is therefore that transgenerational patterns do not determine, but they do influence. The past is not a closed fate, but an inheritance to be interpreted. Recognition, conversation, apology, parental self-reflection and taking the child's emotional experience seriously can modify the direction of transmission.

⁴⁷ "I am the bad one, the 'bogeyman,' because if something happens, I react sooner. I shout sooner, call them to account, my anger rises sooner. Often it happens that my husband is not there at the beginning of the argument, he does not hear the essence, but he still takes the children's side. So of course I am the bad one." "Well, if I hurt my partner, or say what hurts me, afterwards I regret it and try so that he will not be angry; I did not want to say that, it just slipped out of my mouth. I know I hurt him with it, but somehow I try to make it right." "I stand up for what I think is right, I am very stubborn and I hold on to anger."

⁴⁸ MADIGAN – CYR – EIRICH – FEARON – LY – RASH – POOLE – ALINK (2019), 40-42; LÜNNEMANN Katinka – PELS Trees (2013): Van generatie op generatie. Een literatuurstudie naar het doorbreken van geweld en de rol van opvoeding. Utrecht, Verwey-Jonker Instituut. 29-34, 47-50.

6. Pedagogical and Pastoral Care Implications

From a pedagogical perspective, the research draws attention to the fact that children's school behaviour is often preceded by a family emotional history. The aggressive, withdrawn, hypersensitive or stubborn child is not merely a "difficult-to-manage" pupil, but a person who arrives at school with conflict models brought from his or her family world. The task of the teacher is not to diagnose the family, but to interpret the child's signals sensitively. The use of children's drawings can be especially helpful in this work if they are used not as instruments of judgment but as conversation-opening tools. The question is not what a tiger, lion or lamb "surely means," but what the child says about it: whom the child fears, to whom he or she wants to be close, who protects, who hurts, who remains silent, who is loud, and where the child feels safe. In this way, the drawing provides an opportunity to listen to the child's own narrative. This corresponds to the methodological caution of child-drawing research, according to which the family drawing may express the child's family representation, but must always be interpreted together with the child's age, explanation and wider context.⁴⁹

From a pastoral care perspective, the study shows that the processing of family patterns may be not only a psychological but also a spiritual question. In religious families, faith can provide security, a language of forgiveness and moral orientation, but only if it operates not from fear and performance pressure, but from grace, connection and the telling of truth. In supporting families, therefore, it may be important to explore past patterns gently: what did we receive, what do we want to pass on, what should be interrupted, and what new family language can be developed for conflicts? For parents, one of the most important practical implications is that conflict is not harmful in itself. For the child, what matters more is whether restoration can be seen. If parents are able to name their feelings, apologize, make reparation, and make understandable for the child that the relationship remains safe after the conflict, then conflict does not become a destructive but a teaching experience.

⁴⁹ GOLDNER – SCHARF (2011), 11-12, 17.

7. Further Research Conclusions and Recommendations

As a small-sample qualitative exploratory study, the present research formulates valuable hypotheses, but further empirical studies are needed. The first recommendation is a mixed-methods study on a larger sample. Semi-structured interviews should be complemented with standardized instruments in the dimensions of parenting style, family communication, attachment security, child behaviour and religious socialization. This would make it possible to transform the qualitative patterns of the present study into statistically testable hypotheses. As a second recommendation, a longitudinal study would be justified. The essence of transgenerational transmission is a temporal process; therefore a single snapshot cannot grasp how family conflict management and the child's emotional representation change over time. It would be especially important to follow the same children for several years: how do their drawings, conflict-management strategies, school relationships and religious images change if family communication changes? A third research direction is the targeted study of the father role. In the present material, father figures appear as strong animals that carry the possibility of both protection and fear. Future research should examine separately how fathers understand their own authority, how children experience paternal strictness or protection, and how paternal authority can be lived not as a fear-based but as a secure framework. Dutch research also points out that professional interventions often address mothers, while paternal responsibility and paternal self-reflection receive less attention.⁵⁰ A fourth recommendation is the methodological strengthening of the child's voice. In studies on family conflicts, the child is often an observed subject, but more rarely an interpreting speaker. The combination of drawing, story-making, dramatic play and child interviews would make it possible for the child to appear not merely as a "symptom," but as an interpreter of his or her own family world.⁵¹

⁵⁰ STEKETEE – DIJKSTRA – LÜNNEMANN (2017), 40-42.

⁵¹ HÉZSER Gábor (2018): Familienrekonstruktion – eine Methode der systemischen Seelsorge und der Seelsorgeausbildung. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica Studia*, 63/1, 145–154.

Lünnemann and Pels emphasize that children often find it difficult to speak about tensions at home and experience shame and ambivalence, yet they need support and listening.⁵² Fifth, it would be worth developing preventive programmes in schools and congregations. These should not aim at stigmatizing families, but at teaching the language of conflict: naming emotions, apology, reparation, managing sibling conflicts, supporting parent-child conversations, and, in religious families, interpreting grace and forgiveness relationally rather than moralistically. The goal is not the conflict-free family, but a family in which restoration after conflict is visible and learnable. Sixth, the more differentiated study of religious socialization is necessary. In the present research, religiosity mostly appeared as a protective and value-mediating factor, but international literature shows that the relationship between religion and education is not uniform. It would be important to examine separately the relationships among personal faith, institutional religious practice, family rituals, disciplinary principles, guilt, forgiveness and the image of God.⁵³ A particularly promising research question is how children's images of God are related to the father and mother images experienced within the family.

Finally, future studies require great ethical care. The investigation of transgenerational patterns can easily evoke shame or defensiveness in families. The researcher therefore needs to work from a non-accusatory, resource-oriented perspective: the task is not to prove that "the family is at fault," but to understand how what has so far functioned as a silent inheritance can become recognizable and transformable.

⁵² LÜNNEMANN – PELS (2013), 43-50; STEKETEE – DIJKSTRA – LÜNNEMANN (2017), 49-50.

⁵³ NÉMETH Dávid (2016): Istenképek és istenreprezentáció. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*, 2016/2, 143–165.

8. Conclusion

The study indicates that family transgenerational patterns are perceptible already in primary-school age. Parental interviews and children's drawings together show that family conflict management is not simply a technique, but an emotional inheritance. Where conversation, mediation, love and work ethic dominated in the family of origin, present families more frequently show a tendency toward discussion-based functioning. Where alcohol misuse, divorce, fear, silence, taking sides or harsh communication were present, their traces often continue in transformed forms. The most important result of the research, however, is not the observation that injuries repeat, but the recognition of the possibility of change. Several parents consciously try to interrupt negative patterns and provide their children with a different family climate. This effort is a real source of hope. At the same time, the children's drawings warn that the emotional residues of the past may still be perceived even when parents already want to function differently.

The tiger, whale and lion appearing in children's representations of fathers carry the possibility of both protection and fear. Mother symbols mostly show care, closeness and gentleness, but the mother is often also present as an overburdened, adaptive figure or as one carrying repressed tension. Religiosity appears as a positive force of value-transmission, especially when it becomes a personal source of security and not merely an external rule.

Overall, the family is a relational space in which the past lives on, but not necessarily unchanged. Recognizing transgenerational patterns offers the possibility for positive inheritances to be strengthened, while burdened patterns may gradually be transformed through conscious work, conversation, apology, authentic parental presence and pedagogical sensitivity.

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