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# Intergenerational transmission of trajectories of suffering in precarious environments

## Researching the younger generations' strategies of reinterpretation

### **Abstract:**

This article discusses some pivotal questions regarding processes of the intergenerational transmission of trajectories of suffering in precarious places: to what extent can such processes provide resources that foster agency, and to what extent do they rather constitute barriers to living one's own life? How much do intergenerational relations allow for certain reinterpretations while discouraging or inhibiting others? Which reinterpretations of the older generations' experiences appear legitimate in certain contexts, and which are rebuked by one's social environment?

In order to pursue these questions we present analyses of two very different cases that are based on two forms of data material – the life story of Emma, a woman in her 50s, and ethno-analytic group interviews with adolescents aged 14 to 20. Both cases are embedded in very different regional and political contexts: the former, in the French system of fostering institutions, and the latter a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank. Both constitute, however, cases of intergenerational transmission of trajectories of suffering. One objective of this article is to illustrate how the contrasting of such cases across different kinds of data and contexts can be heuristically useful for methodologically gauging the spectrum of the ubiquitous and sometimes paradoxical phenomena of intergenerational transmission, in order to further develop its conceptualization.

**Key words:** intergenerational transmission, precarious environments, narratives, generations, fostering, refugee camp.

## 1 Introduction

Intergenerational transmission is a ubiquitous phenomenon that has been discussed across disciplines such as psychoanalysis, sociology, psychology, history, and education. It comes into play when we debate questions of the very reproduction of society, the relationship between structure and agency therein, collective memory, the reproduction of social status and power relations, of historical and family narratives, of cultural practices etc. The objects or contents of these pro-

cesses can be manifold, and of a very different nature or essence. According to Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame (1988, pp.8-9), there is not just one sort of transmission, but many, and of very different objects or contents, i.e. “of behavior and attitude models, values and bans, linguistic resources, perceptive, cognitive, scholastic, communicational, affective, economic and legacy resources.” Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson – a sociologist and a historian in reference to the psychoanalyst Pierre Legendre – assert a universality of the desire for transmission in intergenerational relationships. Moreover, they emphasize that for the participants it is not so much the particular content, but the mere fact *that* something is passed on and “that transmission to children in itself constitutes a relationship transcending the limitations of human mortality,” (Bertaux/Thompson 1993, pp. 6-7). The latter emphasis on action versus content seems of particular importance for research on intergenerational transmission in precarious environments, where parents are economically not well off and socially excluded. In the same vein, Catherine Delcroix, in her study on intergenerational transmission in a marginalized neighborhood in Toulouse, asserts:

[It] is the act of transmission itself that is important over and above the content. In families with few or no resources, where there is no objective ‘capital’ to transmit, there are still the nontangible assets of moral values and love which, together with the family history, can give meaning to the current situation (...). Communicating family history can therefore enrich the minds of young people, whilst at the same time giving them an identity which is other than that associated with their rejection by schools, the labour market and by the way in which society in general shapes its discourse on ethnic minority youths. (Delcroix 1999, p. 187)

Delcroix emphasizes that, in many cases, the only resource parents in such precarious social environments can rely on “is of a subjective nature, composed of physical, psychological and moral energy together with their knowledge of social relations and sociability (...) which they have accumulated throughout the life course” (Delcroix 1999, p. 175). This, however, leads to the question of what happens with difficult, even traumatizing elements, which often characterize precarious family histories and life courses. Can they indeed be considered a resource on which youths can draw – or do they constitute an object that cannot be conveyed without overburdening the children? Is it at all useful for parents to relate life stories that reflect a trajectory of suffering (Schütze/Riemann 1991), a phase in life where they were not able to come to terms with the social reality that was inflicted upon them? But on the other hand, is it at all possible to *not* pass them on?

We discussed these questions during our participation in a French-German seminar on socialization, gender and migration between professors, researchers, and PhD candidates. This led us also to reflect on the concept of transmission and how it could help us understand the diverse phenomena we encountered during our fieldwork.

In the following text we refer to a dynamic notion of intergenerational transmission and not just a vertical or one-way relationship. According to Bernard Lahire, who studied the configurations that allow the transmission of parents’ cultural capital in working class families particularly in relation with school, we have to keep in mind that transmission depends on many exterior factors (Lahire, 1995, p. 274). In the two cases presented herein, this requires us to question any notion of transmission that neglects “the *work*, the *appropriation* and *construction* done by the ‘apprentice’ or the ‘heir’” (Lahire 1995, p. 277). To describe this process,

Inowlocki coined the term *generational work* in her research with families of former Jewish displaced persons, in which the middle and younger generation actively *produced* continuity by “trying to know and understand about oneself and one another through each other” (Inowlocki 2013, pp. 30, 41). She develops this concept in her analysis of scenes of personal interaction between family members, but even if this should not be possible anymore, the younger generations can still carry out generational work by reflecting and reinterpreting interactions with the older generations. We postulate with Déchaux, that there is an “elective link to the line” (Déchaux 2007, p. 92) that attributes an active role to the “heirs” in the reinterpretation of the content of what has been transmitted. But if it seems pertinent to question the notion of transmission in precarious environments, can we talk about what Attias-Donfut and Wolff (2009, p. 28) call “le désenchaînement des générations,” a generational rupture or disconnection with which the children of migrants are confronted, meaning they are “facing a destiny they have to construct all by themselves”?

The following analysis of two case studies (in part II.) will reveal some unexpected dynamics regarding the questions outlined above. We present two cases of intergenerational transmission of trajectories of suffering – or trauma<sup>1</sup> – in what can be called precarious environments, albeit in very different contexts: the French system of fostering institutions and a refugee camp in the West Bank. In both cases, the previous generation had migrated before our interviewees were born; but in the first case, the migration of the older generation is contextualized by French migration policies and the country’s economic need for labor power, while in the case situated in Palestine, the older generation fled out of fear of political violence or was in fact expelled. We are aware that both cases differ in more than in this aspect: the data material consists in the first case of an individual biographical interview, in the second case of consecutive group interviews. Moreover, the interviewees are of a very different age at the time of the interview: in the first case it is a woman of 58 years who by now is a mother herself; in the second case they are young people aged 14 to 21.

Given that our cases differ in a variety of aspects, our idea is not to compare our two cases in the strict sense, but rather to discuss them in their similarities and differences regarding processes of intergenerational transmission. This point of view allows us to understand the “how” rather than the “why” (Becker 1998) and to gain an understanding of the processes that are in the background of our two cases of intergenerational transmission in a precarious environment.

Furthermore, discussing these two cases side by side was at first merely helpful for finding out more about each respective individual case. But we soon realized that both cases have more in common than one would suspect at first sight by assessing their external criteria.

In the ensuing discussion (3) we will reflect upon the common structural dynamics and differences of both cases. However, we are aware that this discussion is testing the limits of casing and comparing. Therefore, in the conclusion (4) we will reflect upon the results but also upon more general questions of “comparability” and casing, and the pitfalls and opportunities that comparisons of such different cases imply.

## 2 Case studies

On the premise that “[...] a case becomes the opportunity to discover knowledge about how it is both specific to and representative of a larger phenomenon” (Wieviorka 1992, p. 170), we here present two case studies in which we found some interesting elements concerning the process of transmission. The first case study (2.1.) results from Sarra Chaïeb’s research project on the experiences of members of minority groups in foster institutions in France, and the second case (2.2.) from Christoph H. Schwarz’s (2014) research on adolescence in a Palestinian refugee camp. In order to better understand the cases, we will at first contextualize both and outline the general research question and methodology.

### 2.1 Case Study 1: Growing up in French child welfare.

By interviewing adults who were fostered during their childhood and adolescence, Sarra Chaïeb’s research tries to understand how members of ethnic or religious minority groups experienced their placement in two child protection organizations that are historically characterized by religion (Judaism and Catholicism). On the one hand, she asks how the two care institutions impact people’s life courses and their sense of belonging, in regard to the socialization in their families. On the other hand, based on interviews with professionals, she explores how individuals and also groups of individuals – groups of migrants, for example – influence or have influenced the evolution of the boundaries and the professional practices of these organizations. The interview with Emma<sup>2</sup> was one of those conducted in the exploratory phase of this research, and is one which exposes the main topics that also emerged throughout the subsequent interviews: the sense of belonging, the construction of socialization between the institution and the family and the contradictions this can cause, and the place of religion and ethnicity, among others.<sup>3</sup> The importance of this question is underlined by the growing concern regarding the evaluation of public policies, which tries to understand which resources can help fostered children and which constraints can burden them (Delcroix 2005). Despite the existing research on this question presenting a wide array of methodologies and samples, and even though it involves various disciplines and fields, a small number of recurrent issues crop up time and again (Frechon/Dumaret 2008; Chaïeb 2013): success at school, professional insertion, physical and mental health, and housing, as well as the impact of gender on placement trajectories (Bauer et al. 1993; Dumaret/Coppel-Batsch 1995; Frechon 2003; 2009; Dumaret, et al. 2009; Potin 2009, 2012; Stein/Dumaret 2011).

Compared to other countries (Thoburn/Chand/Procter 2005)<sup>4</sup>, the specific question of the fostered children’s cultural or religious background has only briefly been broached by French research (Gheorghiu 2002). We try to understand the way in which people see their placement trajectory after they have left care, to see how they have structured themselves in this context, in which resources they have found support (Castel, 1995), but also what type of socialization they have developed between their family and the institution in which they have been placed. Interpretations are thus based on their related memory. Using life stories seems to be the most appropriate way to understand these types of data. For Daniel Ber-

taux (2005, p. 36), “there is life story when a subject tells to another person, a researcher or not, any episode from his lived experience,” which allows us not to “impose a standardized interview” onto people, and to give them “the time and place to tell their own story,” (Burawoy 2003, p. 436). Formerly fostered persons enter in what D. Bertraux (2005, p. 21) calls “*categories de situation*” because it is the situation itself that is common; they all passed a certain phase of their life course being fostered.

Concerning the institutional situation, it seems obvious that the family, after a certain period of fostering, does not play the role of most important agent of socialization and intergenerational transmission anymore. Instead, the fostering institution appears to take the parents’ place in the everyday life of the children and youths. This idea leads to more questions: in the context of fostering, is there a sort of institutional intergenerational transmission, too? Does the transmission necessarily come from the family? What about the “plural kinship” (Cadoret 1995) in the framework of foster care? In our case, and referring to the conceptual considerations above, one might ask, which are the contents of intergenerational transmission that are appropriated by Emma? What would parents transmit to their children in a context of fostering? What is the link between transmission and re-appropriation in this case? These dimensions can be considered regarding the conflict and/or the idea of “plural socialization” (Lahire 1998) that foster children are more likely to face. The case presented in the following, Emma’s life story, is an example of such a life course.

### 2.1.1 Emma: Elements of her life course

Emma is a 58-year-old woman. She is married and lives with her husband in their house near Paris. They have three children who are between 20 and 30 years old. She has been a nurse since the age of 27.

Emma was fostered again and again during her youth, often during short periods when her mother gave birth to Emma’s brothers and sisters. Emma is the eldest of a family of eleven children, and was born in Tunisia when the country was still a French protectorate. Her mother is Kabyle Algerian. Her father, a Tunisian, fought for France during the Second World War, in which he was wounded. He arrived in France around 1955, when the country recruited immigrants as cheap workers. He was housed, among other immigrant workers, in southern French shanty towns, before he moved to the first public housing built for migrant workers. Emma and her mother, who had stayed in Tunisia until that time, rejoined him in France after 3 years. He subjected Emma to abuse and physical violence. Her mother did not intervene, as a result of which Emma felt betrayed by her. The successive pregnancies of her mother led to Emma’s frequent fostering, and by the age of 10, she had already been fostered for 2 to 4 years in a children’s house, because of poor housing and malnutrition at home, and to prevent tuberculosis.

From the age of 10 to 14 years, Emma lived in a placement institution. At the age of 15 she returned home, where she was again subjected to extreme violence by her father to the point where he tried to kill her. He also battered her brothers. But now, as an adolescent, she decided to press charges against him. In the trial, her father was sentenced to 30 years in prison, whereas she was transferred to another foster place, this time a religious institution. There, she was subjected to sexual abuse by a priest. Furthermore, she was always rejected by other children and continuously insulted as a “dirty Arab.” To escape from this situation, she de-

cided to run away from the foster institution just before she turned 21; she also attempted suicide, but survived. Her later meeting with a social worker allowed her to find a job. Later on she returned to school and graduated in nursing in 1980.

### 2.1.2 The transmission viewed as a constraint during fostering

In Emma's case, the difficulty concerning intergenerational transmission seems to be situated on two main levels: firstly, her story raises the question whether, inside her family, a family memory was actually developed and passed on. Secondly, which elements could be reinterpreted to keep a trace, an inheritance in this chaotic life course?

For a long time, Emma was ashamed of her family and of where she came from. At the beginning, all the suffering that her parents subjected her to did not allow her to refer to her family in any positive way. For Emma, everything seemed to be negative and destructive.

**Emma:** And after all these questions, there is everything that goes into pieces, and you ask yourself "Why all this?" You don't want to be a victim, you say to yourself, "I'm sick of all that, I have to assume," but you're always ashamed, it's very strong. I was sometimes making up a story, not to say where I come from. I was tempted to believe that my father was a big man in the army, that my mother was the daughter of a tribal chief, you know, just for fun, to think that they were nice people... After that, I told myself that it wasn't the point, anyway I would never be like that.

Here Emma expresses the shame she felt, and explains the temptation of trying to fend off this shame. This period seems to be difficult for her; she does not want to be in the line of her parents' descent. But even though the negligence, mistreatment and violence she experienced from her parents reappear in Emma's memory, she later on developed something in common with them, some specific memories which are mentioned in her talks. A part of what has been passed on to her was hard to accept for a while: her face, first name and surname are visible traces of what she represents for people. We can see in this interview extract that Emma had experiences of racist discrimination at different moments in her life course. The differentiated treatment (Cossée/Lada/Rigoni 2004; Chaïeb/Cossée 2013) she was confronted with – to be considered just as Arab while she just wanted to be "as the other," – can partially explain the reason why Emma has so much difficulty to accept herself as Arab.

**Emma:** [...] it's true, I always loved my job, it was all I could do to prove to humanity that I could do something good, because during all this time, even during the internships, people considered me a dirty Arab. In so far that I sometimes treat myself as a dirty Arab too although I never recognized myself as Arab. Quickly I changed my first name, when they asked where I come from. I couldn't say that I was Tunisian, because for me it was the reflection of my father and my mother [...] But it's true that I was thinking that maybe on my deathbed I will find the courage to take my maiden name again and use it with pride.

Thus, Emma sent a strong signal by changing her name and gaining some distance from her family history. After that, she explains the joy she felt when she took her husband's name, which made her life easier, in particular when she was looking for a job. She felt protected from people's opinions but also from what she disclosed about herself. Emma did not recognize herself in other people's regard and could not consider herself as a part of her parents' cultural origin.

The question of her parents' origin seems to be one of the most important and strong issues for Emma because it is central to her identity construction and her relation to others. It is impossible to override this set of problems, precisely for these two reasons. But how could one feel engaged in a positive intergenerational relation with one's parents, their values, traditions and general cultural frame, when these elements are distorted by a violent climate of mistreatment? Emma's speech reflects this ambivalence very well: on the one hand, the paradox consists in dismissing the elements that could lead to her origins, because she does not identify with them. On the other hand, she describes a possible "return to origins" – in this case reverting to her real first name – as an act of bravery.

### 2.1.3 The re-interpretation of fostering as a strategy to link with family transmission

In Emma's case, there seem to be two main aspects which come into play when she reinterprets what has been passed on: time and the necessity to draft her own life and her concept of self. Emma needed time to take a different look at how she suffered, and building her own family was significant for the reinterpretation of her life course. Studies on fostering often deal with the dimension of time: the more time has passed after leaving the care institution, the more people can take a global view on their fostering and develop resilience (Frechon/Dumaret 2008, p. 8; Stein 2006, p. 7).

Time is indeed an important factor in the interpretation of events that punctuated her life, and Emma succeeds in describing her life course from a positive point of view despite what she went through. For a long time, Emma felt resentment against her mother. Later, however, she speaks about the mother-daughter relationship as not very developed, but as playing an important role in her life course and the tenacity she found in herself:

**Emma:** I arrived after a tragedy, it was hard, but I hope... I think that she loved me. I don't know if she wanted me but nevertheless she took me in her arms. I think that someone who copes, who isn't mentally ill, who doesn't commit suicide, maybe such a person was, for the two or three first years of her life, touched, kissed, liked... for me, if you had that, you can come to terms with all uproar, you will always be better off than someone who didn't have that.

Here Emma manages to point out the positive elements that her parents passed on to her, or at least she can see something positive in these elements. According to her interpretation, the fact that she has been able to cope despite all the hardship counts as proof that the past cannot have been all bad, that at least in her early childhood her mother must have loved her and have cared for her. All these elements form part of the construction of family memory, even though the framework in which they evolve does not coincide with the norms of a "normal family." Time is fundamental for a possible construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of a family memory that is passed on, and it is "beyond the individual [that] fits in the movements of continuity and movements of rupture of families' story, in families' links, in forms of transmission and in the content of inheritance." There is also a necessary work for each of us, beginning from what was passed on, to arrive at "be yourself." The family memory, according to A. Muxel (2007, p. 10), has three functions: "a transmission function, in the continuity of a family story, and attached to perpetuate the particularisms" (2007, p. 13); "a regeneration [revivis-

cence] function which allows to stage memories of childhood time and family life” (2007, p. 23); “a reflexivity function: it consists in learning about family experience, have a distant view over the past, the circumstances and persons who made you, do a temporary making-up of oneself destiny” (2007, p. 30).

In Emma’s life course, the transmission and reflexivity functions go together, because she is in perpetual questioning of past events. It took a long time to accept what she experienced, the difficulties she went through, and the destructive relationship between her parents and herself. When she speaks about her brothers and sisters, she considers that they have not yet managed to take the plunge in the comprehension of this family story. For her, there are two steps of reconstruction: the search for a guilty person and the attempt to understand the reasons for what happened. The dimension of social supports and/or of people who play the role of resource in the life course is very important in Emma’s trajectory as a fostered person (Goyette 2006; Frechon/Goyette 2013). When she was young, Emma met adults who became significant others, such as her school teacher who took on an almost maternal relation towards her. The fact that Emma speaks about her teacher in a vocabulary of love, as the love she did not have from her mother, might indicate that this relation compensated for some of the lack of affection on her mother’s part.

Emma desperately seeks information about her parents and their life course. Paradoxically, it is the very lack of information that increasingly becomes a resource for her. After all these years of hatred towards her mother, today Emma believes that her current objective may be to avenge her mother as a woman. According to Emma, her mother never had a chance in life: she did not have the choice to marry or to control her body. Emma defines her life course as a struggle against injustice, especially against men, and feels involved in a mission:

**Emma:** [...] I am on trial. I had problems with all the men I met in my life... and then I put them on trial, so this means there is something wrong. I’m in a woman’s revolt against men. As if by chance, from my father, to the educators, clergy, employers, it’s always men, so maybe I rebel against that, or maybe it is the rebellion of my mother that she couldn’t realize so I’m stuck with all that.

Emma here tackles her *female rebellion* as the result of a mother-to-daughter transmission, even though this might not have been her mother’s conscious intention. She actively (re)constructs what her mother experienced as a woman, appropriating these experiences herself, applying them to her biographical process, and striving for continuity. Emma explains everything about her life story, her mother’s difficulty to be a subject of her own life, not just because she did not have intellectual resources, but because she did not have any access to the information that would have been useful in a precarious social and cultural context. Hence, she theorizes and attributes the basis of this rebellion to her mother. Emma, by contrast, succeeds in being independent. Even if she speaks a lot about her bad relationships with men in general, we can note that she found such a balance with her husband, with whom she feels independent; she seems to have escaped from a certain pattern of relationships. Another important departure from her mother’s story is her job, which in Emma’s narration is depicted as a particularly important resource for her independence and emancipation.

**Emma:** My real freedom, it was when I succeed to graduate at 27; before this moment, I was still under the yoke of authority ... the authority of the man from whom I rent my room, and the employer.[...] I keep all my work experience records, be-



cause it's really my pride to get recognition. Wherever I was, I did not have any value for people, an Arab, a thief, a violent person, so I showed off my abilities, because before they were buried. The more I succeeded, the more I found some self-esteem.

This case illustrates the concept of transmission and allows us to think of this notion as a dynamic one. As a case of an “extreme situation” of transmission (Bertaux 1997), it can challenge the notion and point to some new dimensions. We can see that Emma finds a dimension of transmission from her mother in her life course in spite of how her mother acted towards her. Taking an active part in re-interpretation seems to be very important in the case of transmission in this precarious environment.

## 2.2 Case Study 2: Growing up in a Palestinian refugee camp

This second case study is based on Christoph H. Schwarz' (2014) research on the structure of potential spaces of adolescence (King 2002) in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank. In the West Bank there are 19 of these camps, and another 40 Palestinian refugee camps are scattered throughout Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The socioeconomic and political situations in these camps differ from one another, depending on each camp's relation with the respective political regime and the juridical status it has granted the refugees. But despite the local differences all of these camps seem to provide particularly illustrative cases of the intergenerational transmission of a refugee identity and the concomitant political narrative.

The first generation of the inhabitants of the refugee camps shares a predominantly peasant background. Originally, the camps were established under the auspices of international humanitarian organizations in 1948 in order to give shelter to the approximately 750 000 refugees that fled or were expelled during the course of the first Arab-Israeli war, which in Jewish-Israeli discourse is called the *War of Independence*, whereas in the Arabic discourse it is referred to by the term *Nakba* (*catastrophe* in Arabic) (Sayigh 1979, pp. 6ff.; Bowker 2003, pp. 67ff.). However, using the term “camp” already seems misleading here, as it is usually associated with tents. Today, these camps can better be described as “concrete-structured slum neighborhoods on the peripheries of cities” (Morris 2004, p. 1), which in many cases are difficult to distinguish from the neighboring cities as they merge with their fringes. Nevertheless, three generations after the *Nakba*, the perpetual reference of the term “camp” is accurate insofar as it reflects the political and social paradox that the camp is still defined as a transitory space, and that expressions of the collective intention to “return” are omnipresent in murals and statements. In contradiction to this, however, there is the everyday individual need to come to terms with the current situation and the attempts to improve it, which finds its expression in the construction of three- or four-story apartment houses in the camps. This paradox also characterizes the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which can be considered an international institutional framework for passing on the refugee identity and the respective collective memory: UNRWA's definition of “Palestinian refugees” includes the children and grandchildren of those who had to flee in 1948, so that, due to the demographic development, the more time passes since the *Nakba* the more persons are defined

as Palestinian refugees. By now, the agency counts approximately 5 million Palestinian refugees (Schiff 1995; Bowker 2003; Schwarz 2012b).<sup>5</sup>

Some authors claim that the refugees' "livelihoods have stabilized after three generations and their basic living conditions resemble those of the host country populations" (Hanssen-Bauer/Blome Jacobsen 2007, p. 29). However, the living conditions in these densely populated areas are difficult, showing unemployment rates above the respective national average, albeit a higher-than-average quality of education provided in UNRWA schools; they constitute precarious environments with limited perspectives for inhabitants and for future generations. As other refugee camps worldwide, they have been in the center of armed confrontations again and again.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2.1 The affirmation of intergenerational continuity

The data material presented here is the result of ethno-analytic group interviews<sup>7</sup> conducted from 2008 to 2011 in one of the refugee camps in the West Bank, mostly with members of a youth folklore and theatre group. In their shows these youths combine political theatre with *dabka*, an ubiquitous Arab folk dance in the Levant. The cultural center where they practice – called Markaz<sup>8</sup> here – provides several community services and is at the same time a meeting point for international visitors who want to get an impression of the situation of Palestinian refugees – for example by taking guided tours through the camp – or who are engaging in projects of Palestine solidarity networks.

The participants in the first group interview were four boys and seven girls aged 15 to 19 years, together with their trainer, 20-year-old Adnan. In the beginning the youths were asked to talk about the history of their group, and how they got to know each other. The first one to answer was one of the girls, Yasmeeen (15), who introduced the group as the "fifth generation" of the Markaz Dabka Troupe. With this explicit reference to the term "generation" she directly located the group not only in the cultural center but also in a particular intergenerational relationship. It turned out later that the youths are being trained by the "fourth generation" of the group (of around 20 years of age, like Adnan) and they themselves act as trainers of the "sixth generation," that is, children of approximately 8–12 years of age. By this, they reproduce the transmission of the refugee identity and the militant struggle for "return" among the three generations of refugees, which one of the boys, 16-year-old Maher, described later in this interview:

**Maher:** And you know here, the revo-, the revolution, the struggle, it's moved from generation to generation. Yeah. (...) Yeah, the big man is give like his gun or his-, his thing to his child. And his child will do the same, you know? Like for me, my father told me that there is a revo-, revolution and don't forget Palestine and you have to struggle, you have to do something, and the situation here is... you have to do something. Because we live in a... a camp, we have friends in the prison, we have friends who's died, yeah. And –, and this thing do that –, that you have to ... to struggle, yeah.

Looking at structure and content of this passage from a perspective of Fritz Schütze's (1977, 1983) *text sort differentiation*<sup>9</sup>, Maher *reports* what his father told him about the ongoing "revolution," he does not contextualize this conversation in a particular situation. No particular place or point in time is mentioned, the interaction is less described as a relevant one-time experience than as everyday

practice; this, in turn, can be interpreted as an indicator of the ubiquity of the narrative in the camp. Moreover, Maher does not mention his own reaction to his father's demand, it does not appear as a vocal interaction but as a message that is received and accepted, giving the impression of a vertical, one-way direction of transmission. Accordingly, he presents an *argumentation*: "you have to struggle, you have to do something" because of the fact that they live in a camp, that "friends," supposedly of his own generation, died or were serving prison sentences – both presumably because of confrontations with the Israeli security forces. However, although the concrete means of "struggle" to which the group refers are not outlined so far, the demand to struggle here was described as an almost "natural" or logical result of the situation. Still, the argumentative form seems to indicate a certain social pressure to engage in the struggle, a pressure that is not only passed on by the older generation but also exerted within peer relationships.

This argumentative mode also characterized the following course of the interview, when Maher and Adnan took turns in presenting long statements, talking about the general situation at the checkpoints, the imprisonment of minors etc. Sometimes these statements also referred to their own practice as a *dabka* group, which the interviewer was able to attend later. In these shows, the youths combine folkloric dance and music with theatre playing, but the actors would not articulate any monologues or dialogues, or sing songs themselves, which might have given the performance or the enacted character a more individual or personal touch. Instead, the narration that went along with the show came from a recorded CD, just like the music, and the actors would dance and perform to it. The youths enacted the *Nakba* and the ongoing political and militant struggle against Israel. Moreover, they enacted the transmission of the mission to "return" from the older to the younger generation: in the respective scene, one of the actors would die as a martyr on stage and in his last words – again, from the CD, with underlying music – would confer to his son the mission to never give up the land and to fight for it, stating that it was the most precious and meaningful asset on earth – a mission the son willingly accepted and re-enacted, with the other actors rising, joining in, everybody raising their fists.

But in spite of this militant presentation the youths affirmed already in this first interview that "throwing stones" had not had the desired political effect, but had only put the youth at risk. In the same vein, Adnan had at one point distanced himself explicitly from suicide bombing – "I'm not with them!" he reiterated twice<sup>10</sup> – and declared that their mission as a youth group was to carry on the struggle "in a new way," by informing about the situation of the Palestinian refugees on an international level; and like this, he added, "the kids" would also "see other countries." In the following he went back to the issue of the tours Yasmeeen had mentioned in the beginning of the interview, and put them in a much more political context:

**Adnan:** For the new generation everything is, *that means*<sup>11</sup>, is changed. In the past you didn't have just one solution, just to fight. Now, I can –, by dabka troupe, I can change, I can by, uh, our education I can change, I can change by a lot of ways. Like for me and for them, we enter Markaz [CHS: Hmhm.], we enter the dabka troupe and I remember the-, the president of... ah, not the president, the president of –, ah... (...) For biiig –, for big center [presumably another cultural center, CHS], they told-, they told us (clears his throat), *I mean*, you are 16, aaah, 16 kids, you visited Canada just for three weeks and really, really, you change, you change... like the govern –, the Palestinian government in twenty years. (...) This

is the good thing. Not just to fight, not just to –, to –, told the people “We need that, and we need that and we need that.” I changed how the people, they think about us, there. This is the good thing, good. *I mean*, if the revo –, if the revolution happen again ... maybe I accept and I agree with them. But I must tell them there is a lot of ways.

Maher, in the passage cited earlier, referred to the term “generation” in order to stress the continuity in the process of intergenerational transmission of the struggle, whereas Adnan very clearly highlights the differences between generations when he states that for the new generation, “everything is changed”. He contrasts “the past”, when one could only fight, to the current situation and to his activities as a trainer for the *dabka* troupe. Moreover, he relates an encounter in which, as it seems, a president of another cultural center praises and compliments the group for its achievements through their cultural activity and their contribution to the national struggle. However, what starts as a situation of praise and compliment in Adnan’s narration soon turns into an act of argumentative justification: When the revolution “happens again,” Adnan has to decide if he “accepts and agrees with them” (without further explanation who he refers to as “them”). His acceptance on principle granted, he argues that “there is a lot of ways,” which he has described before as theatre playing and education. He thereby declares his essential identification with “the revolution” but at the same time the possibility – and the individual right – to choose *how* to support the struggle. Whereas Adnan describes the past shortly as a trajectory of suffering – characterized by a loss of control that leaves no option but “to fight” – the present seems to give more leeway for strategic reflection. Accordingly, one can assume that *dabka* serves indeed as another form of resistance in the asymmetric conflict with Israel, in the sense of claiming a cultural presence and continuity and advocating for the political project of “return.” On a psychological level, it might help the youths to deal with political violence they experienced directly (although none of that is mentioned here); moreover, it might serve as a means to deal with trajectory experiences of displacement that were passed on by the older generation. However, it becomes more and more obvious that their *dabka* practice also serves to broker intergenerational and inter-factional power relations within their own community, as the following paragraph will illustrate in more detail.

## 2.2.2 Adolescent strategies of re-interpretation

In the course of the subsequent interviews, which were conducted without Adnan, and mostly gender-separated, the youths were willing to talk about more personal questions, such as love or familial relations (Schwarz 2012a). Whereas in the first interview the camp community was presented as a family-like community showing solidarity to all of its members, in these subsequent interviews, boys as well as girls soon complained about the sexual repression and social control in the camp, stating that everybody would gossip and ruin the respective girl’s reputation, and that parents would react with severe punishment. They namely blamed the more conservative or religious factions in the camp as responsible for this situation, and described the *dabka* group and the cultural center as potential spaces in a hostile environment, and as the most important places where boys and girls could meet without being controlled (there are, by the way, hardly any co-educative schools in Palestine, and the UNRWA schools are no exception). All the youths expressed their hope that their own children might grow up without such social control, in

more “liberal” circumstances. They often referred to the situation of youths in the “Western” countries (Northern America, Europe) as a model. This, in turn, sheds new light on their symbolic militancy – because it is precisely their role as political representatives that allows them to travel as a gender-mixed adolescent group (only looked after by members of the third or fourth “generation” of the group) and in fact to create a temporary space beyond the crowded confinements of the camp without the social control of their parents or the conservative factions of the camp community. Taking into account that travels in general are a very adolescent motive, their trips to foreign countries and the contact with foreign cultures and life projects of other adolescents represent an important “potential space of adolescence” (King 2002), because it allows them a certain reflective distance from which to view the circumstances and moral values of their community, and Palestinian society in general.

In one of the later interviews, the girls also referred to what their grandparents had told them about the *Nakba*. They stressed that their grandparents had kept the keys to their houses to this day. Departing from this topic, they continued to discuss their own hopes for “return” in a much more skeptical way than as presented in their shows, or in the first interview:

**Jamila:** And they have the keys ‘til the –, (in a low voice) ‘til this day.

**CHS:** That’s what I was about to ask... do they still have the keys?

**Aziza/Jamila:** Yeah.

**Aziza:** But there’s no home (smiles) \ **[CHS: Alright.]** or no-, nothing there!  
It’s just the keys. (giggles)

**Jamila:** \ (smiles) It’s destroyed!

**CHS:** So talk to me about the keys. What –, what do they mean?

**Nadia:** Hope... That they...they have the keys of their homes, so... **[Jamila: ~~~]** they think that they will come back soon. **[CHS: Hmhm.]** They come back//

**Aziza:** Maybe not-, not-, eh, not-, ((ours)), *how do you say that?*

**Jamila:** Not ours.

**Aziza:** Not our hope, like.. *I mean*, the keys.. (clicks her tongue, smiles) I don’t know, because, ehm... (to another girl) *go ahead, speak!* (smiles) our Engl-, **[CHS: Speak in Arabic if you want.]** our grand –, grand –, *what?* **[Jamila: Parents.]** Yeah. They ju –, they just have the hope. I don’t have the hope, **[CHS: Hmhm.]** like them... I have but –, not like//

**Nadia:** Not the same hope like they do... they have. **[Aziza: Yeah.]**

In this passage, the hope to return is symbolized by the keys their parents or grandparents still keep – objects of memory that will be passed on to the younger generation, just like it is presented in political murals, slogans and songs, which campaign for the “right of return.” Here, however, the keys are presented as something that is not relevant for the girls’ situation as adolescents or for their life projects. At some point they even seem to ridicule and laugh about their grandparents’ hope, which might indicate that among themselves these hopes are also a target of a certain aggressiveness towards the older generation. This, in turn, is seen by some authors as characteristic of an adolescent detachment necessary to reach autonomy and construct one’s own life project (Blos 1962; Erdheim 1982; Bosse 1994). Apparently, there are two very different “hopes for return,” and their own project of return, which they so fervently defended in previous inter-

views, once more seems to differ a great deal from the old generation's concepts. But after this passage, the girls discussed in an argumentative manner that the connection of their grandparents to the villages was stronger because they had actually lived there. 14 year old Nadia – the youngest of the girls – in the end gave a conclusion, which, again, stressed generational differences, but was characterized by empathy for their grandparents and for their hopes described as futile before:

**Nadia:** They're old, they can't just, you know... ~~~ ((*leave it behind*))

**Jamila:** (giggles)

Here it seems like she wants to make the interviewer understand their grandparents' condition, while Jamila is still giggling. Then again, in a later passage Nadia stated:

**Nadia:** They told us to keep fighting, but there are ways of fighting, you know? Like, ahm, I don't have to hold a stone and throw it at them to say that I'm fighting. (...) Eh, we can study and learn (...) many things and this is how we... can fight. Or dancing dabka...

Statements like this one, which recall Adnan's argumentation cited above, came up quite often in the interviews, and were generally supported by the group, which indicates a high relevance for the speakers and a kind of collective strategy in situations of justification. Such argumentations implicitly indicate that the realization of each individual life project in one way or another has to refer to this collective narrative – otherwise, individuation would be considered betrayal. In her last statement, Nadia once more emphasizes that the youths refuse to stick to "traditional" ways of fighting, which – last but not least – might endanger their lives, their health and their freedom to a much greater extent than dancing *dabka*. Nadia does not mention more militant actions here, but her description is reminiscent of a general political situation that has long been characterized by the veneration for martyrs or *Intifada* fighters who are perpetually invoked as heroes and paragons in the Palestinian public. Here, this (self-) destructive kind of "fighting" is contrasted with the youths' ways of fighting: even before the mentioning of *dabka*, which is still a collective cultural practice that is directly linked to the construction of Palestinian traditions, Nadia refers to studying and learning, activities that can be used for a variety of reasons and for the realization of very individual life projects.

Taking into account that the whole "first generation" of the *dabka* troupe has migrated, and by now lives and works in foreign countries, one can conclude that the group might in some manner implicitly prepare for migration projects; the narrative of "return" in this case appears as a framework through which intergenerational (and inter-factional) conflicts are being brokered, and the youths' adolescent strategy in this framework is to appropriate and re-interpret the narrative. They are partly allowed to actually abandon the collective project of "return" if they pay tribute to it by actively reproducing and embodying it on a cultural and symbolic level.<sup>12</sup>

### 3 Discussion

The case studies presented here both offer examples of processes of intergenerational transmission of trajectory experiences in precarious places. During the analysis of the interviews it became clear that precariousness in these cases not only refers to economic aspects, but also to the fact that the interviewees grew up in places that are defined as anomalous by their societies and by themselves. Being in these places means that “something went wrong.” Therefore, our interviewees feel more compelled than others to deal with the question of where they come from, where they belong, and where they might go, and to retrospectively make sense of their family histories. With respect to the refugee camp and its dire conditions of living, one could assume that – in accordance with Delcroix (1999, 2009) – the narrative (or myth) of struggle and return is one of the few resources parents can pass on to their children. It allows them to make sense of the current situation and explain this very precariousness, and it might serve to symbolize how much more parents would have liked to pass on to their children: houses, homes and opportunities that now lie behind the Israeli border. If their children or grandchildren overtly turned them down by not accepting the narratives’ concomitant mission, it might be devastating for the elders. The aspects of this transmission are two-fold: on the symbolic level it refers to their parents’ identity constructions as Palestinian refugees and acknowledges their trajectory experiences of suffering; on an institutional level the narrative embodies their claims to UNRWA and to the international community, which provide important services in a precarious situation.

In the situation of fostered children in France, the question of transmission is crucial because of the role the institution of care plays, as it replaces the family, and because of the importance of the fostering institution in the life course. In Emma’s case, the family history that she (re-) constructed all by herself, and her fantasies about the relation to her mother in her early childhood years appear as biographical resources that enable her to make sense of her current situation, and to develop and maintain agency. Institutional violence she had to come to terms with during fostering led her to conceive herself as a fighter, and moreover, involved her in a political struggle for gender equality. Furthermore, some of the people who offered social support allowed her to (re-) construct herself. At first sight, the most important entity of intergenerational transmission in this case appears to be the foster institution that replaces the family. However, it was precisely by reconstructing her *family* narrative that Emma was enabled to gain a reflexive distance from this institution and to pursue a process of further individuation. Simultaneously, she engages in a process of politicization of her own case, as she deals with the power relations at the intersection of migration/racism and patriarchal oppression, and defines them as the central theme of her life story.

However, for our discussion, the most important difference between both cases seems to be the level of explicitness and grade of symbolization of transmission. These aspects obviously determine the respective strategies of the interviewees and the character of their generational work: in Emma’s case, the content of familial transmission appears unclear and has to be reconstructed all by herself, whereas in the case of the *dabka* group, the transmitted narrative permeates all aspects of life, imposes a very explicit political project onto the younger generation, and functions as a myth, in the sense that it offers ready-made explanations

for everyday life. Albeit very different in structure and context, in both cases the processes of intergenerational transmission and their respective grade of explicitness appear as both resources and obstacles and are pervaded by tensions and contradictions. Regarding the *dabka* group, the paradox apparently consists in the youths re-enacting and paying tribute to the myth, and the more they embody the project of return onstage, the more they are allowed to individuate and in fact diverge from both myth and collective project when it comes to their own life projects. In this sense, they use the narrative of return as a symbolic resource – not only in the struggle against Israel, but also in intergenerational and inter-factional conflict – in order to create and preserve a potential space of adolescence (King 2002). In Emma's story the lack of a common language, which does not allow verbal communication with her parents, and therefore at first appears to be an obstacle, is in retrospect used as a biographic resource, offering a certain leeway for active re-interpretation of the family history, which in turn is used to come to terms with the traumatizing foster experience. In both cases, re-interpretation is crucial in order to lead one's own life.

## 4 Conclusion

Together with Howard Becker and Charles Ragin (1992) we asked ourselves “*What is this a case of?*” We claim that these are cases of intergenerational transmission in precarious places, extreme cases in the sense that in the first the process of transmission is highly obscure and in the second it is highly explicit. The respective younger generation's strategies of appropriation of the content that was passed on differ according to this level of symbolization.

However, the somewhat abstract notion of “appropriation” and case structure only developed in the course of our discussion of the cases, and it would be difficult to do this “casing” beforehand, before speaking to the interviewees, or merely referring to exterior data. We at first had the impression that our cases differed a great deal when it came to a certain “common denominator” that was yet to be identified and theoretically conceptualized. So, going back even further, to the question “*What is a case?*” we would claim that, categorizing these cases as cases of intergenerational transmission results from the process of research and discussion itself, because of the relevance of the issue for our informants. Our informants implicitly outlined their respective strategies of re-interpretation to us and made use of the interview situation to reflect upon them. Regarding the methodology for the research on processes of intergenerational transmission, both life stories and ethno-analytic group interviews are examples of very open approaches of “data retrieval,” and it is precisely this openness that might allow interviewees not only to convey, but also to reflect on their experiences, which in turn might result in generational work, if they seek to produce continuity. In Emma's case, it seems that she made use of the research situation as a potential space in order to interpret or re-interpret experiences that were passed on to her, and to actively re-construct her life story. The intimacy of the life story approach allows Emma to constructively assert a posture of reflexivity. Life story telling allows looking at the process in action, and provides the possibility of understanding the “diachron-



ic dimension” (Bertaux 2005, p. 13) especially of life courses and how processes of intergenerational transmission are embedded therein. The case of the Palestinian youths illustrates the potential of open group interviews in researching how intergenerational transmissions are brokered in adolescent peer groups, and how group dynamics interfere with hegemonic discourses and individual as well as collective self-concepts. The weight of the violence suffered by former generations and of the collective myth built in reaction is obvious – however, it becomes also salient to what extent the dynamics of peer groups can constitute a resource for individual development. Here we cannot delve deeper into the development of the research relation, but also in this case the group used the consecutive talks in order to discuss norms that before seemed to be taken for granted. In this case, a political mission and a transmitted collective narrative resulting from an asymmetric military-political conflict are moreover used to broker a latent conflict between generations; apparently, processes of individuation are only possible if the latter conflict maintains its latent character.

Albeit very different regarding their data form, context, and age of the interviewees, both cases can serve as contrasting cases in order to map the field of intergenerational transmission of trajectories of suffering in precarious environments, and the coping strategies the following generations develop therein. A particular strength of explorative and qualitative research is to find “counter-intuitive cases,” cases that do not fit into the scheme we have expected so far. Heuristically, such a contrast of cases, which at first sight do not seem to have a lot in common, may help to illustrate the sometimes paradoxical dynamics of intergenerational transmission.

## Notes

- 1 It seems obvious that in the two cases discussed here the experiences passed on by the older generation were traumatic; in addition to that we assume that our interviewees suffered traumatic experiences later on in their biography and might continue to do so. However, the aim of this article is not to identify transgenerational traumatization or to clinically distinguish between those experiences passed on by the older generation and those that were actually experienced by the interviewees themselves. We assume that trauma was passed on, but that predicting results of this transmission would mean to ignore precisely the capacity of the younger generation to actively make sense of it. Therefore, our focus lies on the younger generation’s reinterpretations and their active role in dealing with what is passed on to them.
- 2 Her name was modified by the author in order to provide anonymity.
- 3 To briefly contextualize the field of French child welfare: according to ONED’s estimation, at the end of 2011, the number of minors supported by child welfare was approximately 275 000 and the number of young adults between 18 and 21 years old was about 21 000. Among all these children concerned by child protection measure, approximately 133 000 children are outplaced in foster families or in institution.
- 4 This question appears in the international European context. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) contains articles that relate to religion or ethnic origins (Articles 2–14–30).
- 5 This is a central difference between UNRWA’s and UNHCR’s definition of who is to be considered a refugee. According to UNHCR’s definition, this status cannot be passed on. UNHCR was founded in 1950, one year after UNRWA, and caters to all other refugees worldwide. This difference and a more detailed comparison between UNRWA and

UNHCR reveal an important shift of the international community's strategy to react to refugee crises. According to Benjamin Schiff, "UNRWA is surviving, because the conditions for its founding and perpetuation continue, but, as an international organization, it is an evolutionary dead end. It provides assistance vital to the Palestinian refugees and valuable lessons for other aid agencies, but the United Nations learned from its UNRWA experience never again to create an organization dedicated indefinitely to the care of a single refugee group." (Schiff 1995, p. 270)

- 6 That accounts not only for armed confrontations with Israeli forces in West Bank and Gaza, but also for the "War of the Camps" (1985–1987) in the course of the Lebanese civil war or, currently, the confrontations and the ensuing siege the Syrian army imposed on the Palestinian Refugee Camp Yarmouk in Damascus.
- 7 The methodology of ethno-analysis/ethno-hermeneutics was developed by Hans Bosse (1979) and combines the perspectives of ethno-psychoanalysis and group analysis. It focuses on the research situation, especially the group dynamics and research relationship developing therein (Bosse 1979, 1994, 1996, 2007; Schwarz 2010, 2014). However, in order to not complicate the contrast of this case with the first one, the interpretations presented in this article are mainly based on an adapted narrative analysis inspired by Fritz Schütze (1977, 1983) and Gerhard Riemann (1985, 1986).
- 8 All names of institutions and persons were replaced by pseudonyms, and all local references altered by the authors in order to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees.
- 9 The notion of narratives in this case study is applied in a twofold sense: with reference to empirical material, i.e. the interviews, we distinguish between narratives, descriptions and argumentations of the interviewed subjects in the sense of Fritz Schütze (1977, 1983) and Gerhard Riemann (1986, 1986). That means, an interviewee's personal, biographical narrative – which can also be the collective narrative of a group of interviewees who experienced certain events together – tells personal experiences of the subjects. Usually they are told as one-time experiences, that is, they are referred to as located in a particular time and place, relevant for one's further biographical development and having the quality of changing one's own perception of the world. This sometimes occurred in the group interviews but not in those passages that can best serve to illustrate the processes of intergenerational transmission, which is why they were not presented here. In contrast, when we speak for example of national narratives or master narratives (Hammack 2011), we don't speak about personal experience per se, but how personal experience is framed within the collective narrative with which one identifies. We touch upon collective memory on a higher level – that of an imagined community (Anderson 1983) instead of the memory of a group that is based on personal relations.
- 10 This statement was not in reaction to an explicit question by the interviewer but occurred in the course of his monologue.
- 11 Phrases or words in Arabic have been translated to English but appear in italic letters in order to demark the difference.
- 12 Therefore, the dabka group can indeed be seen as a potential space of adolescence (King 2002) that conditionally allows for individuation, in the sense of the reflexive development of an individual life project through the experimentation with new roles and the active quest for experiences in new environments.

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