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Intergenerational Social Exclusion, Silences, and the Transformation of Agency: An Oral History Approach

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Abstract

This oral history article, inspired by research conducted among minorities, explores the interrelations between intergenerational disadvantage, experience of social exclusion, and silence within family histories. During the fieldwork, 13 study participants shared their transgenerational family stories that shed light on intergenerational disadvantage, including substance abuse, trauma, violence, emotional coldness, neuropsychiatric characteristics, and mental health concerns. Study participants had experienced active and passive social exclusion, such as discrimination within service systems, exclusion from the job market, bullying, and discriminatory attitudes. They also believed that their previous generations had experienced social exclusion. This study shows that silence is often a result of the social exclusion experienced by people who deviate from the assumed norm and suffer from disadvantage. To protect themselves from social exclusion, people remain silent. Silence deepens social inequalities by keeping people in weak positions apart and preventing them from acting together to redress power dynamics. Today, however, there are more opportunities than in the past to work on silence and social exclusion, making it possible for these people to shift their positions from being others to being closer to the sources of power.

Keywords

agency positions; intergenerational disadvantages; oral history; silence; stories of occlusion; transgenerational family stories

1. Introduction

Parents’ low education, long-term reliance on last-resort social assistance, and problematic substance abuse predict intergenerational disadvantage (Kallio et al., 2016; Kauppinen et al., 2014; Vauhkonen et al., 2017).

However, becoming dependent on social benefits, failing to find employment, or falling into a cycle of substance abuse is likely the result of events that happened generations ago. Albeit more open to interpretation, a qualitative approach may complement statistical information on why disadvantage sometimes accumulates generation by generation. Drawing on the tradition of oral history (Leavy, 2011; Thompson & Bornat, 2017), I asked people to tell small transgenerational family stories. They are stories about the self as part of the generational chain, often retrieved from the family memory (Shore & Kauko, 2017), not reaching further back than three generations in the 19th century, that is, up to the great-grandparents. It is a piece of family lore that an individual can embed in their life story to create self-narrated stability in life (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2003; Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. viii). The research task was to examine the root causes of the current disadvantage that is faced. This study captures the less obvious and even faint explanations told and interpreted by people who suffer from intergenerational disadvantage and experience social exclusion.

Silence emerges when people are unable or unwilling to speak or do not believe they will be heard. Silence is constructive when, by keeping specific sensitive topics off-limits, it helps the doctor and the patient create trust in interactive situations or families stay together (Toerien & Jackson, 2019; Winter, 2019, p. 228). Sometimes, there are risks involved with being seen and heard, particularly when sensitive information related to vulnerable groups may be used against them. Then, silence may be a form of protection (Samuels, 2021, p. 511). For instance, the ancestors of Indigenous people have protected their offspring by remaining silent during assimilation policies (Blix et al., 2021; Matsumoto, 2016).

Silence is destructive when the justice system excludes people, such as people with disability, from courtrooms (Opotow et al., 2019). Sometimes, medical practices silence those with disabilities (Yoshida & Shanoudab, 2015), or museums give a selective version of history and exclude certain historical events, groups of people, and narratives (Mason & Sayner, 2017; Savolainen & Potinkara, 2021). Consequently, silenced and excluded people may internalize unfair treatment; it is as though people different from the “norm,” marginalized or otherized, do not have a chance of living a normal life (Lourens, 2016).

This article examines silences in the transgenerational family stories told by people with experiences of social exclusion due to intergenerational disadvantage. In what follows, I place social inclusion and exclusion (Isola et al., 2021; Leemann et al., 2022), power dynamics (McCartney et al., 2021), silence, and agency in dialogue (Reed & Weinman, 2019). Then, I describe the oral history approach (Leavy, 2011; Thompson & Bornat, 2017) as a methodological attempt to understand the complex interrelations between intergenerational disadvantage, the experience of social exclusion, and silence. The article concludes with a discussion concerning silence as a passive form of social exclusion and how it can be tackled in networks of agency.

2. Framework: Social Exclusion, Silences, and Positions of Agency

Social inclusion equals opportunities to acquire and exercise power in society, communities, and in one's own life. Active social exclusion comprises practices that leave people outside the financial, political, and social circles (Daly & Silver, 2008; Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994). Passive social exclusion involves practices that do not deliberately exclude people but do so regardless (Sen, 2000, p. 15). While social exclusion has been widely researched, more work is needed on the experience of social exclusion (Daly & Silver, 2008, p. 547).

The conceptualization of experiences of social inclusion, based mainly on qualitative poverty research, seeks to respond to this call by focusing on the feelings associated with social inclusion, such as that life is manageable and a sense of belonging and meaningfulness, as well as their perception that they have equal opportunities for participation (Isola et al., 2021; Leemann et al., 2022).

According to McCartney et al. (2021), sources of power include income and wealth, knowledge (education, knowledge production, and media), culture and beliefs (organized religions, cultural norms, and values), collective organizations (political institutions, workplaces, activism), the state, and positions in hierarchies. Having experience of social inclusion reflects being well-connected to the sources of power and having opportunities to exercise power. Conversely, experiences of social exclusion (the sense of non-belonging and meaninglessness, being unable to manage life, and having unequal opportunities for participation) reflect social exclusion practices, such as othering and discrimination. Power dynamics determine what is valued in society and who can access sources of power and attain positions of power. People ignore, silence, or talk negatively about devalued phenomena and groups of people, and by doing so, they simultaneously push others who are different from the expected norm into the silent margins of society to experience social exclusion (Fivush & Pasupathi, 2019; Taylor, 1982).

Fivush (2010) distinguishes between being silent and being silenced. While the former may actively defy those in power and their exclusionary practices (Fernandez, 2018; Weller, 2017), the latter signifies a loss of power—an unwilling loss of voice (Fivush, 2010; Weller, 2017). The exclusion from the sources of power, particularly from knowledge, may lead to what Fricker (1999, 2007) calls epistemic injustice, which precludes people from manifesting themselves and participating in public negotiations, as they lack adequate language. Language is also an instrument acquired from practical activity (Archer, 2000, p. 135), which is not developed further if people stay silent. Then, if they are unable to articulate their experiences, there is a risk that knowledge production about those less connected to sources of power will remain limited.

Not so long ago, at the beginning of the 20th century, assimilation policies, cisnormative order, and racial hygiene and eugenics as hegemonic structures excluded ethnic, gender, and disability minorities even from human rights. It happened in a manner that harmed people then and still harms their descendant's health and well-being today (Alaattinoğlu, 2023; Bar-On et al., 1998; Blix et al., 2021; Matsumoto, 2016; Priola et al., 2014). For instance, Indigenous people survived traumatic state violence by using coping mechanisms, such as avoidance and numbness, that merely hid their trauma and resulted in the transmission of a hidden burden within the family, impacting across generations (O'Neill et al., 2016). It is crucial to understand that historical power dynamics that discriminated against people in the past may continue to contribute to the accumulated disadvantage of the descendants today. However, understanding one's family history under a given historical situation is challenging if the pieces of the family stories have blurred out and lost—or occluded, as Wineburg et al. (2007, p. 66) describe the process. Occlusion occurs when a story can no longer be retrieved from the collective memory. In such cases, the following generations are left without material that they could use to understand themselves and to see opportunities (Fivush & Pasupathi, 2019).

Power, social exclusion, and silence meet in Isaac Ariail Reed and Michael Weinman's conceptualization of agency (Reed & Weinman, 2019). Agency is typically held as an individual property (Archer, 2000). The relational approach considers that agency depends on social relations (Burkitt, 2016; Emirbayer, 1997). Arendt (2018, p. 201) once stated that people acquire power when they live so close to each other that they

have the opportunity to take action together towards a shared project. Reed and Weinman (2019, pp. 10–12) further conceptualize agency by manifesting that agency is persuasive action on behalf of a (joint) project and to have the capacity to shake and change the world. It is intertwined with power and located in various projects (Toprak et al., 2019, p. 369). I interpret Reed and Weinman so that the project has a rector and an actor. Some people—the others—remain entirely outside the project or give it their silent approval (Reed & Weinman, 2019, p. 42). I name all rectors, actors, and others as agency positions.

The relationships between rectors, actors, and others form a composition in which power flows but where it accumulates, particularly for rectors but also to some extent for actors (Reed & Weinman, 2019, p. 14). As a rule, though, power is continuously redistributed everywhere in the chains of rector–actor–other relationships transforming agency positions; Reed and Weinman argue that this process of power redistribution allows previously less noticed issues, such as social problems or subjugated positions, to become objects of policy-making and change social structures eventually (Reed & Weinman, 2019, p. 44). It thus also allows for the improvement of people’s representation in democratic processes, such as by identifying and potentially solving their problems (Fraser, 2009).

Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ minorities, or children who are in the care of the state have managed to find ways to sources of power and transform their agency positions from being others to actors and rectors, for instance, by expressing themselves through storytelling and human-interest stories (Bietti et al., 2019; Blix et al., 2013; McCafferty & Mercado Garcia, 2023; Olson et al., 2021; Rieger et al., 2020). Gradually, representatives of these groups have taken and have been allowed to take representation in identifying and framing problems and proposing solutions from their perspectives despite or even because of their weak positions in society. This would not have been possible if they had been unable to come together first, then break the silence around the practices of othering, develop a shared language, produce knowledge from their experiences, and eventually resist discrimination together. By doing so, they have attached to at least one source of power: collective organizations (McCartney et al., 2021, p 30).

3. Oral History Approach

Silences escape exact words and numbers. As the explanative power of statistics and registers decreases, oral history may be a guide for understanding silences. Oral history is an anthropology-led yet multidisciplinary method that taps into processes, creates links between the micro and macro levels, connects public and private experience, complements historical documentation, and considers the study participant as a collaborative partner (Leavy, 2011, p. 16; Thompson & Bornat, 2017). The oral history knowledge is constructivist and inherently open to interpretation. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) characterize a narrative as a continuous process of editing and adjusting to given circumstances. Just as study participants adjusted to the stimulus I gave them, I reciprocally adapted to their stories and, in some cases, eventually joined their projects, where I then saw their agency transforming. In this way, a story is never fixed (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Reflexivity, an essential principle when working with minorities, incorporates listening, observing, and researching in a reciprocal relationship with participants, where both share something of themselves (Waller, 2018, p. 230). As some of the study participants acquired more information about their family history through genetic tests or parish registers, they again contacted me, and sometimes, we, as collaborative study partners, discussed the possible lines of interpretations (Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. 354; see also Breeze’s story below).

Thompson and Bornat (2017, p. 266) suggest that establishing an oral history project makes it possible to give history back to the people who are othered, discriminated, or marginalized. Finding hidden, occluded, or silenced stories and giving them a voice is valuable for those who want to understand themselves now and here as part of the intergenerational chains. Giving a past to people may also help them towards a future of their own making (Thompson & Bornat, 2017). In this sense, the oral history approach makes agency modification possible and is thus a practice of redistribution of power (Waller, 2018).

The call for interviews asked people to give an interview for a research project that studied the intergenerational accumulation of social inclusion and exclusion. A heterogeneous group of people ($N = 28$) were interviewed in 2020. Out of 28 interviews, I analyzed 13 (174 pages of transcribed text) in detail. These 13 interviews touched on disadvantages, social exclusion, and inter/transgenerational features of their families (neuropsychiatric symptoms, mental health issues, emotional coldness, substance abuse, or violence). In this sample, a typical interviewee was a woman whose family had faced difficulties over generations. Ten of 13 interviewees contacted me during my three-month fieldwork in 2020 in a child protection project, and three were reached by the snowball method. When a study participant expressed an interest in preparing for the interview, I provided the following questions:

- What stories do you remember about your family's history?
- What intergenerational traits can you recognize related to, for instance, emotional expressions, consumption habits, or choices of professions?
- Do you explain your life course in terms of what has happened to your family?
- Are there silences in your family that you want to understand better?

The interviews started with a question: What does the term generational chain spring to your mind? The interviews resembled collaborative remembering (Tan & Fay, 2011, p. 403), in which it was my role to listen and sometimes ask further questions, supporting the interviewees by nodding and repeating keywords as the story progressed. The interplay of memory and material, such as a soft toy given by a nanny, embroidered tablecloths a grandmother used, or the clatter of cutlery at dinner with grandparents, helped study participants trace back episodes from their childhood (Savolainen & Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016; Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. 201). Throughout the fieldwork, I acted openly as a researcher and shared insights into my research topic. These discussions have inevitably steered the study participants as, in the interviews, they felt encouraged to revisit themes, such as the stigma attached to difference, values in a society, and norms within religious communities that had come up in our earlier conversations. However, people reached by the snowball method also covered the same topics without being led to do so.

Three kinds of story types, which more or less followed the questions given in the call for interviews, emerged from each transgenerational family story told in the study:

1. Stories of exclusion and inclusion depicted the experiences related to the manageability of life, a sense of meaningfulness and belonging, and equal opportunities for participation—or lack of them.
2. In the stories of occlusion, study participants aimed to locate and understand silences in their transgenerational family stories.
3. Study participants interpreted their own and their preceding generations' agency in the stories of agency modifications.

Table 1 gathers background information on the participants' age, pseudonym, sample, family, and their interpretations of the intergenerational traits. A considerable number of the study participants' children in this sample had neurological or neuropsychiatric characteristics diagnosed by a psychiatrist, which gave study participants reason to consider the intergenerational nature of neuropsychiatric traits and neurological disorders (see Ghirardi et al., 2021).

Table 1. Background information about the interviewees.

Interviewee's name and sample	Age	Family members	Presumed intergenerational cause of the experiences of social exclusion	Transformations of agency/projects
Ajla Child protection project	middle-aged	spouse, children	neuropsychiatric traits, violence, substance abuse, physical abnormality	breaking the generational chains
April Child protection project	middle-aged	spouse, children	neurological and neuropsychiatric traits, substance abuse	civil action
Autumn Child protection project	young adult	children	sexual orientation, religion	breaking the generational chains
Blossom Child protection project	young adult	children	not known due to the early family placement	breaking the generational chains
Breeze Snowball sampling	middle-aged	spouse, children	neuropsychiatric and neurological traits, substance abuse	politics, improving the status of families with neurodivergence
Cascade Child protection project	middle-aged	children	neuropsychiatric traits	raising awareness of neurodivergence
Clove Child protection project	middle-aged	spouse, children	substance abuse, neuropsychiatric traits, ethnic minority	breaking the generational chains in one's own life
Coral Child protection project	young adult	spouse, children	traumas, substance abuse, neuropsychiatric traits, religion	raising common awareness of neuropsychiatric traits
Dawn Child protection project	elderly	children	self-diagnostic neuropsychiatric traits, substance abuse, violence	voluntary work in a non-governmental organization
Dove Snowball sampling	middle-aged		mental health issues, suicides	remembering differently from the rest of the family
Forest Pixie Snowball method	elderly	children	religion	art
Hazel Child protection project	middle-aged	children	ethnic minority, neuropsychiatric traits	recognizing and understanding silences in one's own life
Rowan Child protection project	middle-aged	children	emotional coldness	participating in the public debate

EU Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets the practices for the collection, processing, and protection of data. A statement of data privacy explained to interviewees how a personal register, including audio recordings, transcriptions, and consents, was handled. Data processing proceeded from recording to transcription and further to anonymizing the data and making it less specific; that is, I simplified, for instance, diagnoses into three broad categories: somatic illnesses, mental health issues, and neuropsychiatric characteristics. After this, I destroyed the recordings and the consent forms. I also prepared an ex-ante evaluation concerning the research process. As the data spanning various generations could have made the interviewees more easily identifiable, I decided not to archive the material.

I had to consider how to report the findings on the hereditary nature of neurodivergence and mental health problems. On the one hand, social scientists have been careful when defining any features as hereditary, as such definitions may stigmatize individuals and expose them to discriminatory practices (Meloni & Müller, 2018; see also Clove's story later in this article). On the other hand, the data ended up including several people with offspring diagnosed with neuropsychiatric traits who wanted to be heard with their characteristics as part of the generational chain and who were displeased with the misconceptions and silences surrounding the matter. Due to these reasons, I decided that it was ethically appropriate, particularly as data was carefully anonymized, to make the possible causes of the experiences of social exclusion more visible and to raise awareness of this topic.

4. Findings

Family stories were multidimensional, individual, and always interpretative, making organizing them challenging. However, they all encompassed all three subtypes of stories: stories of social exclusion and inclusion, stories of occlusions, and stories of agency modifications. In the following section, stories of the experiences of social inclusion involve a brief descriptive analysis of the contents. Stories of occlusions represent interpretations in the spirit of collaborative study partnership. In the case of agency modification, it is my interpretation as a researcher. Because the stories of social inclusion and agency overlapped, I describe the inclusion-related findings under the agency modifications.

4.1. *Stories of the Experiences of Social Exclusion*

The concept of the experience of social exclusion refers to a sense of non-belonging and meaninglessness, of being unable to manage life, and of having unequal opportunities for participation (Isola et al., 2021). In the transgenerational family stories, their experience of social exclusion was intertwined with feelings of being different, such as growing up in poverty, facing mental health issues in the family, experiencing or witnessing violence, and being bullied or excluded from social circumstances due to physical, ethnic, neuropsychiatric, or neurological characteristics that differed from the assumed norm. The study participants described many episodes of everyday experiences of social exclusion.

Hazel felt a sense of inferiority when professionals insensitively judged the home's cleanliness in the presence of a parent. April, in turn, described a deep-seated experience of social exclusion because institutionalized family care practices had excluded her from the labour market. She was confined to her home "without proper breather and social support," as she said. Dove, Autumn, and Forest Pixie's feelings of otherness were linked to not fitting into the mould of the grand family narrative, which aims to maintain

cohesion in a family (Shore & Kauko, 2017). Cascade and Coral were troubled by the lack of understanding of the needs of diverse learners at school. Rowan, as well as Hazel and Breeze, recognized both personal and structural social exclusion. The former included primarily social workers who approached them insensitively, and the latter the system that offered inappropriate services. Rowan stated: “A person treated with respect succeeds better in goals like substance rehabilitation compared to those being looked down upon.”

Clove’s story demonstrated social exclusion in its roughest form in the material. She and her children had been discriminated against in the service system, as they were regarded as hopeless cases due to the supposed transgenerational patterns:

Later, I ordered the paperwork concerning my child. It said something like “the mother comes from a poor family. Problems with attachment have continued from one generation to another.” They didn’t send my child for [a neuropsychiatric] examination, as they claimed that the problems were caused by intergenerational deprivation.

The family had failed to access the necessary services due to the cognitive bias of the professionals. According to them, it was an attachment disorder, which they interpreted as being too difficult to cure, that caused the problems (see also Meloni & Müller, 2018). Eventually, Clove’s child was diagnosed with neuropsychiatric characteristics, and they received support. Clove’s experience comes close to what April regretted: the public discourse that frames people with intergenerational disadvantage in representations of negativity, deficiency, and persistence makes it challenging to utilize the persuasive power people may have in order to transform their agency positions (Waller, 2018).

4.2. Occlusions in the Transgenerational Family Stories

Sometimes, and particularly when it comes to marginalized minorities, small transgenerational family stories include blurred, lost, and occluded pieces (Wineburg et al., 2007). Some participants pondered the societal reasons behind the occlusions in family stories. In the following, I recount Dove’s, Breeze’s, and Coral’s interpretations in more detail. Dove was a middle-aged and childless person whose family history included various actively silenced tragedies culminating in death. In order to understand the matter better, Dove started studying their family history, filling in the blanks and bridging the discontinuities. It started to become apparent to them that the ancestors had used their authority as rector even from beyond the grave, as they had “picked only one story” and “at the same time, controlled my understanding of the family history.” There was only one monotonous story available—“the path of diligence and suffering”—that was so pervasive that it seemed to veil something important, Dove thought.

Dove lacked concrete content to mend the inexplicable discontinuities and wanted to “push the fragmentary family story forward.” They explained that the story of suffering and industriousness had been necessary for the generation that had experienced the Civil War and two World Wars. Still, Dove wanted to make their own story—their agency project. In the interview, Dove vividly described a documentary they found about the 19th century history of mental hospitals. Converted into the language of agency positions, the documentary helped them move on from the position of other to that of the rector who makes a discovery. The following illustrates this:

People protect themselves. I am sure that someone [in our family] has also been protected by simply tolerating the difficult issues. I just watched a documentary about the island of Seili [a mental hospital]. Women who reacted to something were taken to Seili. It is not all that far from the current world....Even the researcher [in the documentary] was teary-eyed because people had been taken to Seili for the rest of their lives through no fault of their own. They had been, in a way, defined as mentally ill because they had reacted to something.

From the documentary, Dove gained the insight that perhaps there had been mental illness in the family. The historical compassion demonstrated by the researcher played an essential role as it convinced her of the fact that people had been treated unfairly. Then Dove returned their family's intergenerational speaking patterns of their deceased relatives:

I feel that they [relatives] haven't wanted or dared to tell what life has really been like. I've thought in a way that these peculiar defence mechanisms [denial] in the generations before me have worked for them, but for the generations after them, it has only caused harm through that closure. Denial. And it's unfair. I don't know how it could have gone differently, but in a way, what worked for them doesn't work for us anymore.

In this respect, Dove's narration comes close to what previous studies on Indigenous people have shown. Silence protects, yet it may deepen the vague experiences of social exclusion of the descendants (Blix et al., 2021; Fernandez, 2018; Matsumoto, 2016, p. 122).

Breeze is a middle-aged student, local politician, and mother of a large family in which all children have been diagnosed with some kind of developmental delay or neuropsychiatric characteristics. She was pleased to note that the topic of autism had appeared in the public discourse:

There is still not enough discussion about the intergenerational inheritance of neuropsychiatric characteristics. For me, it would be important to know that these features are passed on in the family. That they do not appear out of nowhere.

Breeze's great-grandfather had been registered as a vagrant in the late 19th century. Eventually, he settled down and founded a family, although according to the oral tradition, he occasionally ran away from his family. Since it was important for Breeze to seek confirmation of the neuropsychiatric characteristics running in the family, we went on archival trips to find records of her great-grandfather's periods in mental hospitals. Despite our efforts, we found nothing; but one day at the archive, Breeze started wondering about patient diaries with a separate column for "mental illnesses running in the family." One random entry from the year 1911 read as follows: "The parents are cousins to each other. The mother suffered from gloom in her youth. The father's father was a strange drunkard, an aunt from the father's side drank spirits then hung herself" (Lapinlahden keskuslaitoksen potilaspäiväkirjat, 1841–1922, translation by the author)

Retrospectively, that was when I joined Breeze's agency project as an investigative actor by exploring the underlying explanations for the column of hereditary mental illnesses. After social history investigations, we concluded that the column was linked with preventing social degeneration, a project in which psychiatry and social work engaged in the early 20th century. The doctrine of social degeneration posits that mental

degeneration worsens over four generations and ultimately leads to the extinction of the family branch (Huertas & Winston, 1992; Zeidman, 2020). As more and more people, often politicians and professionals, joined this project as actors, active social exclusion practices increased, such as internment and sterilization, against those who were different from the norm. The project also added new vocabulary, such as “retarded” and “degenerate” (Baynton, 2011, p. 44; Roll-Hansen, 1989). After almost 30 years, in 1940, the column for familial mental illnesses disappeared from the patient diaries. It happened at the same time when a liberal-democratic project gradually took over the fear of social degeneration (Meloni, 2016). Notably, victims of violation have still tended to remain silent (Alaattinoğlu, 2023).

Collaborative study partnership with Breeze produced a backdrop against which to examine the occlusions in the transgenerational family stories, on the one hand, and agency positions of the participants’ ancestors, on the other hand. As Dove presumed above, denial had probably worked as a defence mechanism to cope with the position of the other or a concrete means to shield oneself or a family member from potential violent interventions or unequal treatment by society or a community. Coral’s root story refers to this as well. She supposed that, in all likelihood, her grandparents had tried to solve some problems related to their experienced social exclusion by joining the Scandinavian revival movement. The ancestors then may have left the package of unresolved issues as a social legacy, as Coral, a neurodivergent but also traumatized person probably in the third generation, describes:

I guess it’s been a bit like that, if you think that the religious community has welcomed a broken person with open hearts and love. God has accepted them the way that they are. There was no need to analyze your problems; you could simply leave them behind. But then—boom boom boom—the problems were passed on to the generations that followed, and maybe they even became more difficult in some sense.

Based on Coral’s story, I interpreted that the religious community may have been a source of power for Coral’s grandparents, providing recognition and a sense of belonging, while the community outside has looked down on them (McCartney et al., 2021, p. 30). A religious community had redressed power inequality by addressing the actor’s position rather than considering them as *an* other.

In conclusion, participants interpreted that being different from the assumed norm had probably caused the intergenerational silences. Preceding generations may have faced loss of power but refused to take the role of *an* other by staying quiet. Hiding differences and joining approving communities may have brought people toward the sources of power, away from the position of the other, and toward the position of the actor (McCartney et al., 2021, p. 30). Religion, for example, has nurtured the otherized people, offering them equal status as actors. However, the probable root cause behind the social exclusionary practices is power inequality, which has remained muted. This has potentially increased occlusions in family stories. Silences and occlusions in family stories have kept people with similar experiences unaware and separated from each other. It may have deepened experiences of social exclusion in later generations, caused confusion, and removed the materials they need for self-understanding.

4.3. Modifications in Agency

Family histories implied that different projects emerged in each historical period. In the late 19th century, agency positions seemed to be shaped by religion, labour issues, cohesive societal norms, and fears of

social degeneration. During the early 20th century, transgenerational family stories implied reflections of the agency positions linked to, for instance, religion, spirituality, cohesive agricultural communities, and the labour movement. Few mentions touched on adult education in the labour movement. At the end of the 20th century, family stories revolved around private life, as participants reminisced about their parents' traits, such as professionalism, artisanship, creative efforts, and creativity. Stories once again transferred to the public sphere when it came to the present day. Study participants mainly dealt with agency positions acknowledging diversity. As actors, they engaged in projects that aimed to break the silence and ignorance related to neuropsychiatric characteristics, mental health issues, and the societal roots of social exclusion.

April, a parent of children with neuropsychiatric characteristics, was particularly annoyed about passive social exclusion emerging from the public discourse. She thought that the discourse, focusing solely on problems, strengthens prejudices and increases othering practices (see also Waller, 2018, p. 233). April claimed that we should also talk about social exclusion being rooted in society's narrow-mindedness, lack of understanding, and inability to acknowledge all types of people. She started the interview as follows:

When we talk about generational chains, we often talk about something negative. Just yesterday, I read an article about the generational experiences of mothers whose children had been taken into care. There had been violence in the family, and it had been passed on to the next generation and the one after that. I'm just wondering why there is no talk about intergenerational talents and skills passed on from one generation to another and refined along the way.

April was an exception in that her parents and grandparents were proud of the skills running in the family. Stories of intergenerational skills were rare in the material and often related to special powers. Dove and Ajla reminisced with pride that there were healers in their families. Cascade had taken her strong-willed great-grandmother as her role model, although she admitted that her strength was sometimes a bit over the top. It may have been a great-grandmother's attempt to gain recognition and power in her community:

I've been told that she was desperate to show that she was more religious than anyone else in the village. And everything had to always be in tip-top shape. Dear God, what kind of comparisons this must've led to in the community!

Hazel's stories were coloured with problems: substance abuse, a nomadic existence, and long-term placement of children out of home, among others. Her great-grandparents included art dealers and musicians. Having heard that, I asked if she was also creative. At that point, she made a connection with her true talent, which had been hidden amid her difficulties:

I remember now! I had a great rapport with my grandmother, who probably supported me throughout the difficulties of my wild youth....I used to go to some [labour class] competitions meant for workers with my granny when I was a child. I was a good singer. I had forgotten about all that. It's probably a skill that has been passed on through the family.

Ajla's descendants had been diagnosed with neuropsychiatric characteristics. Ajla herself was severely traumatized by her parents' substance abuse and the violence she had encountered. In addition to all this,

Ajla was physically abnormal. As a survival tactic, she had also resorted to substance abuse. When she browsed through her parents' photo albums after they had passed away and talked with her relatives, it turned out that the physical abnormality was hereditary and associated with an intergenerational experience of violence. Then, during an estate inventory with various relatives present, she discovered that her grandfather and his family had often moved from one town to another. Based on the oral tradition of those present, she found the probable reasons behind the frequent moves and explains them as follows:

[One relative] said that one of the grandparents had a temper and tended to get into arguments with people. Well, we suspected this was why they had moved so often. They had gotten into so many difficulties in places where they had stayed that the whole family had eventually decided to pack up and move to the next location. Eventually, the map was full of pins indicating where they had lived. So, that's their story.

The bits and pieces of documentation and family lore provided Ajla with an explanation that, likely, the ancestors did not comply with societal norms, resulting in negative social feedback. Disadvantage had probably also accumulated over the generations. Ajla started to resolve this issue as a part of her rehabilitation process, which constituted one of the first transformations from other to rector in her life. She freed and filled in the occluded parts in the generational chains by reading registers and using her imagination and her relatives' recollections. In her family history, she discovered skilled craftspeople, an ability to predict the future, industriousness, and, above all, good and ordinary things. It turned out that the deviation from the norm was not the only thing defining her as a person and determining her agency positions. Earlier, she had already been in the position of actor in her family's child protection matters by allowing the social worker to be a rector in supporting the family's well-being. Slowly, she became empowered enough to take on the role of rector in her project to break the chain of intergenerational social exclusion. Many other participants also took the rectorship when committing themselves to breaking the intergenerational cycle. "Since the social exclusion has taken generations to develop, it will also take generations to eliminate," Clove reminded.

5. Conclusions

Cultural values, norms, and expectations are prone to silencing those who differ from the assumed norm, do not share these values, or belong to an undervalued marginal. Silence (refraining from joining projects by those in power) might also be one of the few means to cope with experienced social exclusion owing to some difference or deviance (cf. Fernandez, 2018). This study shows that silence, particularly when not consciously chosen as an exercise of power, is a form of passive social exclusion, as it prevents people with similar experiences from joining together to form a source of power and thus take action to redress the inequalities that they face (Arendt, 2018; McCartney et al., 2021).

Even though consciously chosen, silence created by the previous generations has problematic consequences for those who follow. Ancestors had only a few courses to exercise power to protect their families, of which remaining silent was the most salient. Simultaneously, being silent has meant using power over the following family members. Staying quiet has hidden opportunities, hampered people's understanding of themselves, and caused them to lose words for experiences. In this manner, silence increases the epistemic injustice of the descendants (Fivush & Pasupathi, 2019; Fricker, 2007). Silence as a passive form of social exclusion may

deepen and even accumulate inequalities generation by generation. At worst, a muted past may mute the future.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, generations who had experienced social exclusion had limited means to modify their agency positions. Mainly, religious communities and agricultural communities provided somewhat conflicting sources of power for them. Descendants in the 21st century have more opportunities to transform their agency positions, make their silences heard, and join and act together to redress discouraging power dynamics. It results from changing power relations developed in the networks of agency positions during recent times.

When people who experience social exclusion share their experiences and realize that they are not alone in their silence, in other words, when they are not others, they are more capable of recognizing and processing silence. Public spaces and products, such as museums, cultural products, photo albums, and registers, among others, help fill in the blanks in their stories. Non-governmental organizations provide various projects to various people where they can promote objectives essential to them. The Internet, despite increasing polarization, brings people closer and connects those with similar experiences, providing peer support and platforms for persuading on behalf of change. The awareness of the majority that there are underprivileged groups arouses interest in them and makes room for their voices to be heard. In this sense, this study supports Reed and Weinman's (2019, p. 44) claim that, since agency flows in networks and power is thus inevitably distributed around them, it is also possible to bring the practices of social exclusion experienced by groups of underprivileged people into the political agenda in the long run. As Blix et al. (2013) maintain, individual life stories and public narratives affect each other. Suppose we allow people to tell their stories in public—alone and together—the power flows to them momentarily. Once they start a project, they accrue power more permanently. By considering power dynamics and injustices in communities or society, narratives can drive change.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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