

# Genograms of Exile and Return Families in Croatia - A Medical Anthropological Approach

S. M. Špoljar-Vržina

Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb, Croatia

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents the most important results of an applied anthropological long-term study of the prolonged exile and return that many families are currently undergoing in Croatia. The results are elaborated with a special reflection upon two important overlapping issues concerning the methodological approach that was applied: firstly, it discusses the crucial questions which motivated the search for a tool that will not distort the experiences, reality and suffering of exile families; and secondly, it critically describes the application of the genogram (a tool borrowed from systemic family therapy) in the exile setting. This tool was not only useful in the clinical sense of psychotherapeutically helping the families, but was also a very flexible part of the methodology orientated towards evoking family history and providing valid knowledge about different family and living circumstances.*

## Introduction

At the beginning of this study, one of my first made contacts with those in their seventh year of exile was with a returnee from Vukovar. He confronted me with his comment, that to his knowledge, I as an anthropologist, was in the right place and time, while researching his way of living - »...*You know*«, he said, »...*we are the 'lost world', except that in the movie the reptiles get their island while we still have nothing*«. To this day, this metaphor pain-

fully resonates through the research I do. Although researchers cherish metaphors like these, that give them powerful confirmations to complex discourses on identity and belonging, in my own work these metaphors repeatedly remind me of the fact that we can never be alert enough to the existing feelings shared within a community, yet lived and felt through individuals we meet, whose voices might not be included in our project agendas. The truth we are confronted with is in fact a shared fragile silence, which in order to

be broken must provoke scientists to change their ways of inquiry and not exclude the problems they reach by isolating them. Only new tools used with that aim will provide spaces of healing we need to encompass in our professional support. If one looks to address the war affected communities and reach a level of trust he must start with respecting the spaces of silence and pain expressed in feelings of isolation.

### **Introductory remarks about the reasons for breaking the fragile silence – a case from Croatia**

Almost a decade will be reached in which Croatian specialists, caregivers and numerous professionals have combined their efforts in making a web of support for the displaced persons, refugees and not lastly returnees. In the early 90' these efforts were widely initiated and escorted by, at that time, much more experienced colleagues which provided us with the usual international stamina of dealing with the critical exile issues. Although Croatian experts were very proficient regarding all the health and humanitarian demands, none the less, the span of over nine troublesome years made us subject to the interest of a most diversified number of international professionals that wished to cover a territory rightly described as a hot spot of refugee world movements, joining in what the humanitarian aid critique by now describes as an illusive assumption about the needed support in a progressive movement from relief to rehabilitation to development<sup>1</sup>. The specifics of these international humanitarian and professional actions will be surely present for a long time in the analysis of a wide number of scientists. Thus, in turn, this definitely increases the responsibility of all of us that have served in solving the numerous problems from the »inside« (and still do!)

to present our work in such a detailed way that it enables a more precise body of knowledge for future use and orientation. Additionally, we must underline the fact that in the Croatian situation the refugees/displaced can not be apprehended in past tense. Although legally there might be a change of their status, statistically a diminishment of their numbers and geographically an illusion of the successful return to their homes. Sadly enough, although those in exile legally lost the criteria of being »IDP's« or »refugees« by becoming »returnees«, their (mental) health problems did not disappear, unlike the attention they receive from the international scientific, journalistic and overall humanitarian media. Exile is a process of great change, yet inbeded in the path of wider socio-economic problems it is definitely not a static continuum one goes through. If perceived as such it brings us close to the risk of repeating the traumatization of endless population labelling.

As it will be shown in detail, the usage of the genogram (borrowed from systemic family therapy) can be twofold and while helping the families in exile, it can also become a very elastic part of the methodology orientated towards providing valid knowledge about different living circumstances in exile (apprehended in the widest possible sense). In the presented study its application was the result of trying to reach and obtain a level of credibility that surpasses the flaws of the claimed anthropological »holism« (that more often than not becomes short of its promises), as well as a direct outcome of the conclusions gained within the framework of on-going studies incorporated into a joint goal of developing an anthropological approach towards those in exile<sup>2-5</sup>. In a final reflection one might conclude that the rethinking of our own methodology was parallel to the overall rethinking of the aims, means and methodological approaches one finds in the current debates of

the international forced migration research. In them, the main new found *spiritus rektor* comes from a new reached level of scientific self-reflexivness that births a growing awareness how problems of unsuccessful study agendas lay less in the unfulfilled data quests and challenges, but crucially more in the lack of self education that would make a difference in how we communicate with afflicted populations. Unfortunately, if we delve into the existing literature we quickly learn that this concern has been voiced for decades<sup>6-9</sup>. Through my work I have learned that there is no better position than that of an insider professional, to confirm these international concerns. However, it would not be enough to only become aware of the extent to which the results of many exile studies falsify the analyzed reality. It is necessary to conceive analytical frameworks in which the painful knowledge gathered from individuals is more important, than the answers gathered to nicely accommodate the demands of a representative sample, a fashionable scientific interest, or an (financially) imposed programme for the developing countries. The act of changing the research design inspires a question important for all-whether the tools we use provide the most valid possible knowledge and whether our willingness to exercise imagination and supersede fictitious barriers (of fundamental and applied research) are enough to gain insights into the many crucial but missed information of the individual and his social context. This paper as much as it is dedicated to showing the strengths and weaknesses of a genogram and its applicability in the context of exile circumstances, strives to enliven the debate of ways in which we can refresh our methodology agenda's and revive our already nominally existing (but obviously dormant) accountable approaches.

## **Background of the research framework**

The presented research is ongoing and placed within the long-term project of interconnected studies that, since the early nineties, had a goal of developing an anthropological approach towards those in exile. Consequently, as expected, these studies did gain the insight needed to create recommendations for protecting the mental health of individuals and their families, as well as observing the solutions of overcoming the problems that communities in Croatia are undergoing concerning long-term exile and return processes<sup>3,5,10-14</sup>. This long-term, yet geographically dispersed field research, made us more apprehensive and sensitive towards the difficulties that one encounters while addressing the exile populations<sup>15,16</sup>. One of the crucial conclusions regarding the self-critique of our research methodology was focused on the need for a continuous field research that would provide a more realistic presentation of the day to day family dynamics in exile. From 1994 onwards, the mentioned joint studies were conducted in a way that enabled the analysis of a number of exile populations within Croatia (primarily those settled in the wider area of Middle Dalmatia) enabling a fair presentation of the most socially intriguing facts, pertaining to socio-cultural and acculturative characteristics. While these results were viewed as important (especially for some international funders) the overall orientation of the research lacked the objective of being continuous in the sense of following the path of everyday life of exile. Finally, the onset of such a fieldwork happened in 1997. with an explicit aim of covering a number of still existing Centers in Zagreb, and was launched parallel to the initial phase of the pre-registration from refugees to

returnees (mainly to Vukovar in Eastern Croatia). To this date (December 2000) the families accommodated within the majority of these centers are treated as returnees to Vukovar.<sup>(\*)</sup>

In this context it is easy to imagine how dramatic the interviews conducted during the field research could become and why it was necessary to seek new innovative tools that would enhance our possibility to maintain both the accountability and ethical demands of very painful conversations. In the case of the presented study the use of the genogram method proved to be a very powerful tool in reaching the perplexed and intertwined levels of information, while avoiding the standard biases made in the exile interviewing<sup>16</sup>. Above all, the usage of the genogram enabled a learning process from those in exile, while diminishing the paternalistic approach of an outsider, that standard methodological procedures, based primarily on questionnaires, seldom retreat from. The usage of the genogram also enabled a necessary space of research that allowed the support, rather than abuse of the individual coping strategies.

### **The Applicability of the Genogram Method with Families in Exile**

The genogram is best explained by Guerin<sup>17</sup>, when presented as a »...a roadmap of the family relationship system«. In the broadest sense, while using a genogram we are able to map all lives major events. A step further in its usage takes us to the level where we are able to trace patterns of behavior and/or events that occurred in a family across generations and connect these happenings to present emotions<sup>18</sup>.<sup>(\*\*2)</sup> Before using the genogram one must apprehend that it is a highly clinical tool, developed within the framework of the family system therapy<sup>19</sup> as a three-generational family map and is mainly used for data-gathering and clinical family assessment in which it provides the crucial level of graphically organized mass of information that can yield the observance of certain patterns in the family system. A genogram orientates us upon the basic structure, family demographics, the functioning and relationships contained within a family<sup>20,21</sup>. One must not forget that this flexibility and wide range of use complicates the overall ethical standards in the applicability of this tool, yet it is

---

\* <sup>(1)</sup> In the autumn of 1991 (with the fall of the town of Vukovar) and later on in 1992, after the War reached Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia became a secure shelter and had a total of 663,473 persons settled in various parts of its territory (260,705 displaced persons and 402,768 refugees). The greatest number of Croatia's displaced persons, settled within the country and abroad, occurred in the middle of January, 1992 (700,000 persons) which was, according to the Statistical Census of 1991, more than 15% of Croatia's population. At the onset of this research, in September of 1997, there was still 218,749 persons registered as displaced or refugees, and the process of return for many just started, while in 1999 there was around 83,355 people living in circumstances of prolonged exile. The two-year UNTAES mandate in the Danube Region was completed on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1998, with the government's taking over the complete control over the responsibility for the Region. The return from and to the Region began in spring 1997, after the successful completion of county and municipal elections and the conclusion of the Agreement on two-way return to and from Danube Region (4/23/1997) between Croatian Government, UNTAES and UNHCR (Joint UNHCR/ODPR Workshop, Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees, 1998). Regardless of the paradox with which the people from Vukovar are faced, it is evident that the efforts of the International community in healing the War devastated communities are enormous.

\*\* <sup>(2)</sup> All this is reflected in the fact that the genogram is used by a wide range of clinical specialists and offers a powerful new dimension to the work of many academics, as well.

hoped that the majority of those that use it will use the genograms to the best of their knowledge and consciousness while also using its qualities of the self-exploratory domain (see the acknowledgment).<sup>(3)</sup>

Apart from the clinical usage of the genogram it has become also widely used in other areas of scientific enquiry. At this point it is valuable to emphasize a very interesting critique done by Krause<sup>25</sup> which confirms that the genogram method can not be understood just as a simple revival of the genealogical method. She recognizes that the usage of the genealogical method by anthropologists developed serious biases.<sup>(\*\*4)</sup> Strikingly so, the practitioners (especially family therapists and psychotherapists), alike other scientists saw little reason to look beyond their cultural limits. However, when they did, according to Krause, they often worked by the same assumptions as anthropologists did – without recognizing that the observed legitimate relationships might not always be the practical (usually overseen) ones of everyday life. Thus, Krause strongly suggests that a shorthand usage of a genogram might not be so powerful as when it is used with care, sensitivity and imagination in which we can expect to produce material that apart from its at-a-glance value<sup>26</sup> has also the possibility to uncover the concealed of practical relationships rather than just remain at the level of jotting the bare legitimate aspects. The corrective as-

pects based on prior experiences in the usage of genealogies and genograms oblige us to respect the fact that these tools represent more than just neat principles of organization and kinship, and definitely bring us nearer in the search of truthful reality presentation. We must not forget that, simultaneously, the genogram has sprung from a subfield of a very wide psychotherapeutic domain that did not avoid having many difficult controversies concerning its serious dehumanizing potentials. However, in the words of McLean<sup>27</sup> in order to transcend the potential abuses of the system theory model (within which the family system therapy developed) one must *»...retain family therapy's important insight about the relevance of the social context of pathology without losing sight of the feelings of the individual patient«*.

In the study about (mental) health of those in exile, there has only recently been a recognition of the complexity of research which requires that the tools we approach our populations with, be more sensitive to the expression of their problems in ways that standardized means of enquiry can not.<sup>25,28</sup> The usage of the genogram seems an ideal tool to achieve this task, yet it is scarcely used by those that have the necessary skills to use it, individually or in a team. To my knowledge, the only systematically recorded usage of a genogram, with families in exile, was done by Woodcock<sup>29</sup>. He used the genogram

\* <sup>(3)</sup> The effects of drawing and analyzing ones own genogram is, by Bradshaw (1995: 99)<sup>22</sup>, termed as dramatic as finding the »rosetta stone« since it enables the »deciphering« of the influence ones family history has in a course of a life time. Thus the standardized way of learning how to use the genogram includes a self-awareness about ones own data concerning the tool, as well as of the emotions one undergoes during its construction and analysis<sup>23</sup>. Although, the genogram as a training tool is mainly aimed at visualizing and understanding ones own family system, it can enhance the process of working through personal emotional family-of-origin issues<sup>24</sup>.

\*\* <sup>(4)</sup> According to Krause the lineal relationships were favoured, while the collateral (aunt, uncle/nephew, niece) and affinal (through marriage) ones, which could not easily be detected by the method, were ignored. It also enabled an often blindness for the phenomena not familiar to the Western society (like the treatment of »un-legitimate« offspring). All these problems of usage in anthropology, pointed to a serious bias of the method in which it encouraged a particular point of view (that of the researcher) while tended to disregard the one which informants themselves held. The genogram gives a chance for a reversal of this process.

while in the course of revitalizing some of the ethnic family rituals of refugees, in order to provide a firm basis necessary for shifting from a liminal state of exile into a phase of reconstruction. Although the work presented in this paper differs in its initial intent in comparison to that of Woodcock's, it is similar concerning the strive to enhance the individual coping skills and at the same time develop a collaborative approach with those undergoing exile and returnee processes. In such a way the willingness to share information can be more successfully adopted into the space of therapeutic and/or scientific work. Thus, although the presented genogram usage was not clinically oriented, it can be added to those studies that explore ways in which family oriented care/research are enhanced by its usage<sup>30</sup>.

### **Implementation of the Genogram Procedure into the Research Design and Necessary Methodological Adjustments**

In the fall of 1997, on the basis of the data which was obtained from the Government's Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees in Croatia, five Centers in Zagreb were chosen. The populations within those centers were living in them for the sixth year, since being expelled from the town of Vukovar (Eastern Slavonia) at the beginning of the War in 1991. In 1997 all of them were undergoing various phases of the process of return to the town of Vukovar, that by that time became a model for what is known as the peaceful reintegration process of the Danube region.

The sample of this study was conceived through a maximum variety sampling in which the main objective was to

avoid any possible context »stripping«, both on the level of social relationships in the selected centers, as well as families within them. Among the 90 registered Centers at that time (September, 1997), each of them had a unique history of becoming a refuge point. Every Center was lead by an official representative chosen either by the Government's Office or the occupants of the centers themselves. Thus, my weekly visits to the families of each chosen center begun in October of 1997, after making initial agreements with the centers officials and is continuously conducted to this day. Initially, the ten first contacted families remained the key-informant families of the centers I worked in, and those are the families I am still in contact with on a regular basis to this day. Namely, it was through the homes of key-informant families (one or two rooms) that the research agenda shaped up into encompassing full networks within each center. The onset of the study was although predicted by prior experiences, nonetheless very hard. In the beginning I spent hours of lingering around the corridors and public spots of the »centers« (mainly hotels), of which some were even half-operable. This was not a surprising situation, considering the fact that after seven years of displacement all the families were reluctant to contribute to any study that claims to »help« and/or »inform«. The families had a very intense resistance towards the interviewing, and the dynamic of working with them was variable, though in all cases extremely slow.<sup>(5)</sup> It is obligatory to say that I never used the genogram in the initial contacts with families, and it was only conducted with the families that had developed a relationship of trust with me

---

\* <sup>(5)</sup> This remains to be a very serious disadvantage in the usage of the genogram in scientific aims – it can not be used at times when one is in need of a technique for a quick approach, such as in the case of a rapid appraisal. At these times, less complicated techniques of recording relationships and connections can be used, but without a pretence of observing the full complexity of emotional contexts they are founded on.



and the presented aspects of the study. Better descriptions of these cautionary steps can be found in other publications dealing with the issues of family therapeutic approaches<sup>20,31,32</sup>.

Thus, the first phase of the study was orientated in gathering data and knowledge about the overall happenings in the micro-communities the families belonged to, as well as about the developments in the dynamic field of the process of return to Vukovar (Eastern Slavonia). In the course of a few months the majority of the families wished to work on a genogram and found the idea of great interest to them. The majority of the work with families was accompanied with a counseling of some sort, depending upon the encountered problems. For each family that had an initial genogram constructed, later on, many revisions of it were done. Concerning the timing of my visits, they were organized exclusively according to the families' initiative, as well as with respect towards their growing needs and wishes for my visiting, once the trust was obtained<sup>33</sup>. An example of a constructed genogram is given in Figure 1, showing the documented relationships during the initial period of the first year of interviews in one of the exile families.

The genogram method used within this study was only a part of a number of tools used within the qualitative methodological approach. The study was conducted through using unstructured interviews, participant observation, field notes, social network diagrams and other accessible documents provided by the key-informants. Regardless of this, the analysis showed that the genograms were an invaluable tool in the course of demanding interpretations. For every

family a number of genograms were made in various times of their exile/returnee process. Their construction was a question of the counseling (therapeutic)/documentation needs. Many times a blank sheet of paper was needed and, according to one of the interviewees-it was a symbolic way of saying »...I need to turn a new page in my life« to me as a counselor.

### **The supportive role of the genogram – between the »ritual« and the«health« Genogram<sup>(6)</sup>**

Any approach, and especially an anthropological one, reveals the problems of the community – with or without a deliberate agenda to do so. Experiences teach us that the conditions of mental well-being, one observes and is called upon to enhance, can not be divided from the wider social context of which *we* as researchers are part off. In the majority of cases developing an anthropological approach aimed at recommending potential ways of protecting the individual and family mental health in exile is a simultaneous attempt of finding potential solutions to overcoming the problems exile communities are undergoing. Therefore, it is not only that we are in a position of enhancing the communities we are addressing (and even a part of), but much more of enhancing the communities of our scientific thought, as well. Additionally, the problems regarding ethical dimensions of studying those in exile is best expressed through reflections made by colleagues such as Rosenwald<sup>34</sup> who emphasizes that the possible iatrogenic effects in one's research agenda is the outcome of the difficult relationship between the choice of methods one uses, the ethics of

---

\* <sup>(6)</sup> It would not be ethically right to present the case studies and other findings that resulted from these visits within a limited space. Therefore they will be presented in future publications. This paper analysis solely the experience of using the genogram in a setting of special needs and presents some overall important findings it enabled.

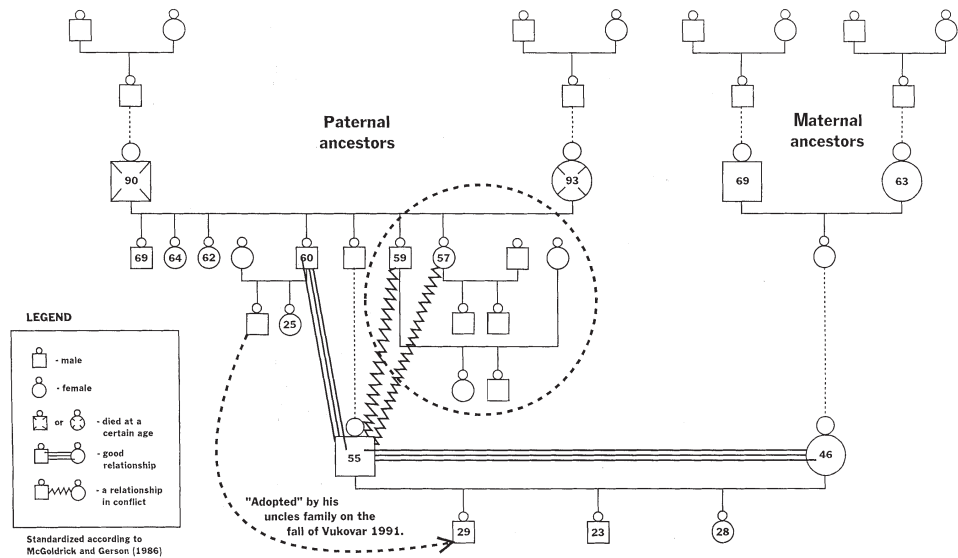


Fig. 1. Example of a constructed genogram done with a family in exile. The initial genogram shows two main areas of relationships that were observed in the first year of interviews, where the basic family relations were found to be good, while the War situations enhanced the conflict between the brothers and sisters in the wider family setting.

using them and the choice of our »subjects« in the mainstream research. In line with the critique Rosenwald brings out, today there is a need for methodological protocols that are sensitive in documenting both the state of our »subjects« as well as of our own scientific thought in relation to the »subjects« problems. In other words, if we are to heal the war torn exile/returnee communities we should definitely recognize that cultures and individuals are not to be implicitly used as »elements« of the multicultural and pluralistic equations that lead to the stable state of globality, justice and health for all. It is not enough to be culturally recognized and globally included. What should precede this »sensitiveness« is the knowledge that current research policies all preclude the economical healing, through emphasizing the exclusive importance of social and mental healing disconnected

from the social contexts of which we are all a part of. For instance the initial phase (1997) of this genogram study the majority of families from Vukovar were already living simultaneous destinies of prolonged exile and prolonged preparation for return. Even if they did return to their homes, their economical status of »..bare walls«, »...scarce furniture«, or »overgrown yards and gardens, with mines« helped to repeat their destiny of being (to say the least) striped of belongings, one more time. Today, three years later it is known that their economical problems are last to be changed, yet the fact that this is a constant source of further psycho-social and health worsening is unimportant and last on the list to be (interanationally) funded as a worthy problem that a project may address. As I emphasized in the prologue of this paper the paradox is even greater when we



learn that the people themselves are becoming aware that they are the »lost world« of scientists and professionals. In this respect the building of trust and respect through the work on the genograms gave both the examinees and myself a unique and most valuable experience of opening the many *spaces of silence* we felt must be worked on. The therapeutic effect was definitely reflected in the fact that there was a possibility to touch spaces of potential healing, as well as the question of what »the« return brings to the family in question and to the community *they wish* to belong to, in the economical sense. The objectives of the research while following the three areas that were addressed through family genogram conversations, gave three very different types of genograms:

1) *Fortifying the sense of individual and family history – »genograms of saved rituals«*

Since the genogram provides the necessary »historical« approach towards one's family its gradual use enables a return into the generational layers of the family, as well as collateral relationships. The best asset of this work is that while reconstructing a genogram one is easily put into a position of understanding that whatever problems might have occurred in the past decade of his or her life, all is part of a wider context that one's family history consists of<sup>29</sup>. The shared family knowledge (of many generations) that is gained in this way serves as a rich basis for further research of the present problems. In the case of families from Vukovar the main commonality appears to be the fact that all families share a very lively past in terms of migratory paths that their grandparents have made, and survived through it all.

2) *Turning the conversations into a dynamic process of multi-level*

*information exchange – »genograms of broken silence«*

Many times the topics addressed are to difficult to handle within a restricted approach of a questionnaire and the emotions that follow this type of interviews carry many situations of potential ignorance in the service of (miss) guided information seeking. In such a setting the possibility of doing harm through our questioning is enormous, and usually underestimated, as is the possibility of getting false information. The usage of a genogram reverses this process and positions the emotions to be of leading importance. It provides the necessary flexibility in time, and gives necessary pauses reserved for painful issues that need to be discussed, argued and cried about.

3) *Fortifying the sense of individual and family future – «genograms of sickness and health«*

The most important part of ones future is reflected in his wish for health and prosperity. The genogram, as a tool has the potential to conceive valid portrayals of a families emotional climate, its areas of conflicts and restrained relationships, but above all the good relationships and habits we can further work on. The greatest worth of this tool is precisely in its possibility to show us the domains we should change, while giving the means to enhance our fortification of beneficial factors and patterns for the future<sup>18</sup>, and most of all strongly support the solution-oriented conversations<sup>32</sup>. When talking about the future, the majority of people from Vukovar develop spontaneous conversations about their health issues and how they may be effected by the developments of their life in the future. In the conversations, that quickly become anamnestic, they often make the connection to the past events they were faced with and conclude with very generalizing statements of how they feel concerning

their health »...lupilo mi je na zdravlje« (.. it hit on my health) or »...sve me ovo izjelo« (..all this ate me away) or »...uništilo me« (it ruined me). Among all these negative metaphors, and apart from all other techniques of interviewing, the genogram leaves a space of creating and visualizing the more healthier future, by concentrating on ones strength and resilience, rather than a »plain« diagnosis.

### General Observations and Results

The obtained portrayal of the variability in coping styles of examinees confirms the fact that they should not be categorized as »stuck« in the roles of the exile-returnee simplistic »continuum«. Indeed, by visiting different centres I learned of the different »histories«, so to speak, of the ways that the inhabitants came to live there, and soon became aware of the fact that even these different »micro-historical« facts were significant in how the people perceived their past and future within the same town of Zagreb. These facts are never looked at, yet they can explain many failures in the lack of power over the return, reintegration and reconstruction processes. Whether they wish to return to Vukovar to be a part of the peaceful reintegration, or whether they wish to remain in the place of their exile were »linguistically« very differentiated descriptions, yet in the majority of times they were equalised options of the same state of economic desperation where legitimate positions have no meaning and bring no satisfactory emotions. Additionally, if one would not understand that the same situation of desperation can be drastically different from centre to centre, regardless of the legal status of return, one would obtain »brilliant« results of the overall willingness of returnees to return or vice versa. At the same time this would also be a falsification of reality. Thus, in the conduct

of the interviews it became a very normal sequence to weigh these learned facts of overall economic depression against the main »news« and information obtained within each centre, at that time. Certainly, through experiences from family therapy, one also learns that it is highly misleading to interpret symbols and meanings from general statements given by family members and families without a more complex investigation of the context from which they come from and in which they live. In family therapy it is well appreciated that »...the complexity of cognitive and emotional processes and their dynamic expression in past and present practice« can not be expressed through words and conversation adequately<sup>25</sup>.

In the course of the long-term follow-up through genograms it was possible to observe five factors heavily influencing the prolonged exile/return processes, that once more confirm the importance of recognizing that the proclaimed particular contexts (as for instance that of exile and return) are dependent on many individual, as well as group emotional experiences that pave the strive towards a link between past and present. On the basis of these five observed factors on the general level, pointers could be given for the construction of future projects, as well as for a fresh discourse about the returnee and his strength. Therefore, future investigations should definitely be addressed to the following issues:

- THE SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS OF »RETURNING HOME« seem to be truly different from those portrayed by numerous official supporters of the process. The decision, whether to return or not, seems to be governed by the individual and highly variable problems we all have, rather than by gender, age, education or many other populational qualifiers, as expected. It is true that rough divisions can be numerically traced<sup>35</sup>, but the

more important question is how much they represent the reality and dynamics of individual day to day decision-making. For instance, if a child is for the seventh year in a certain elementary or high school it is unrealistic to expect an enthusiasm about returning. Yet again, in many other cases the decision of returning involves making very different moves, governed by the specific characteristics of each child's educational situation. Future research on (inner) acculturation of these groups of prolonged exile will greatly enhance the possibility of family therapists to understand the change of the dominant value orientation patterns, of which the dynamics might be completely over-seen.

• **THE MENTAL HEALTH/MEDIA CYCLE.** The work on the genograms in many families was often interrupted by a need to comment on some current exile/return situation that was portrayed by the local and international media through identifiable hallmarks (usually being labeled by the return direction of the ethnicity involved). Many times they linked the »untruthful« coverage, by which they were bothered, with the onset of psychosomatic problems and a need to discuss these illnesses (mainly skin, gastrointestinal and neurological problems). As I learned latter on, this was the main reason that group or family television watching was seen as a major setback in routine living. The examinees observed that there were certain cycles of mental distraught that starts with the wife and husband or a group watching the news, while deliberately avoiding any loud opinion making. In a silence full of tension they would all dread the moment of the first made comment, since that would initiate becoming irritable and quarrelsome. Many figuratively described these »media-irritability« moments as simply becoming to one another the »ignition factor« of anxiety. The talks we would conduct over the

genograms had a positive effect on these types of problems. Namely, they were helpful in orientating one towards a more constructive way of dealing with hidden anger, since firstly being put in the position to identify to whom or what »the anger« was directed. If we translate these observations of family dynamics to the level of the media and its portrayal of exile circumstances it is apparent that there is a total lack of knowledge and concern about the detrimental effect media has upon specific populations undergoing the processes of exile/return<sup>9</sup>. This is also a very instructive example how even in the studies of mental health and coping we are not able to conduct a depoliticized investigation.

• **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POSITIVE FANTASIES** is often overlooked as one of the more important resilient factors in coping with prolonged exile. In-depth interviews can register, yet not easily analyze the significance of wishes for »...building the nicest house in the town« or »...having the most productive farm« and the culturally important metaphors that are built upon the significance of the past agrarian type of life (».....the beautiful 'seas' of wheat«). It is often forgotten that for the displaced from Slavonia no two pigs can be alike; no two horses as fast; and above all-that the quality of gatherings with friends and neighbors can not compare to what they used to be. Through working on a genogram we are in a position to capture many of these powerful elements that represent one's prior life in all its richness, as well as »culturally consonant metaphors«, that are not only interesting metaphors but powerful articulators in many delicate techniques of support<sup>36</sup>.

• **THE TIME PERSPECTIVE** a displaced/refugee/returnee has, is significantly linked to his mental well being<sup>37</sup>. The long-term aspect of this study enabled the confirmation of this. However, the

majority of the families were in the process of planing their futures, which overshadowed the otherwise important need to avoid nostalgia and perceive the atomistic temporal aspects of one's own life (where past, present and future are split). For this reason it is very important to acknowledge that not all of our interviewees necessarily share and perceive identical »time frames«. The returnees among themselves were very different in their ability to see the beneficial aspects of their return, although one would instantly hypothesize differently. Once more this confirmed that the genogram provides the ability to position an exile/returnee situation in the significant time frame<sup>38</sup>, of which the growing awareness can be beneficial to the family in question, as well as its pointing to the patterns of similarities in the overall decision-making.

• SECRETS AND CONFLICTS OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK appeared to be surprisingly significant in orientation towards the future. While working on the genograms, many interviewees were less willing to reveal the current conflicts within centres than those within their own families. In the later interviews, that would by chance, turn into a social gathering, the »secrets« were discussed regardless of my presence. Regardless of the extent to which this information seemed unimportant, at first, if looking backwards it was always powerfully reflected in the current dynamics of a family, its past memories and the »time frame« orientation for the future. In that sense the obtained »social network secrets« should be acknowledged as important as the »family secrets«, in the process of coping with prolonged exile or return.

## Conclusion

It seems as though that the research of »non-mainstream« populations is the

greatest test to which an agenda of research »holism« can be put up against<sup>39</sup>. The critical interpretative approach teaches us that the best we can do in honest revealing of many layers of meaning is to be cautious with the mainstream research practices<sup>40</sup>, as well as to be patient while awaiting a more integrative approach within medical anthropology—which would make use of the potential dialogue between critical medical anthropology and biocultural approaches within this field<sup>41</sup>. If translated into the domain of problems that exile research is currently confronted with, it is not enough to follow procedures, but to creatively participate in rethinking and changing them according to an imaginative side of research design which will best serve to testify about the reality of populations. Yet, to do this is precisely to join the everlasting debate of whether we are equipped to perceive human suffering out of the frames of the Cartesian dichotomy and its related oppositions we are secured (but, as it seems, also firmly restricted) by. At the end, when we achieve all of our critical statements in testifying our boldness to step aside of the uncreative (but secure) scientific mainstreams, the question still remains – have we enlightened or just moved by eloquency?<sup>42</sup> Have we passed the rights of entering into the domain of seeking the establishment of a »unified« anthropology of suffering and fear, as debated by Davis<sup>43</sup>, or merely add one more »embodiment« of a characteristic that we perceive culture-bound, to those false ones already existing, as debated by Pina-Cabral<sup>44</sup>? I believe that apprehending the full tension of academic debates hidden within these questions is the core to understanding the value of what Keesing<sup>45</sup> meant by orientating the research of cultural meanings towards »real humans«, as well as posing the important question of understanding who creates and defines »cultural meanings«.

Our debates can go in many ways, yet, as shown in the case of applying the genogram, it is best when they enhance the usage of new tools that can fortify our intent of the the first and foremost-to communicate without doing (more) harm. This, one might add, makes a crucial difference in research since building the relationship of trust should be abreast with the aim of gathering valid information, as well as its cornerstone.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is funded through the Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia (Project 019601). Firstly, my devotedness goes to the examinees that share their stories of life with me. The insights made in this paper would

not be the same without the intellectual support I received through the SSRC-MacArthur Foundation visiting scholar fellowship that enabled me to visit the Refugee Studies Programme, University of Oxford (1995/1996) and the Family Therapy Education/Training organized by the Polyclinic for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy of the Clinic for Psychological Medicine, University of Zagreb (currently undergoing the fifth year of training). I am grateful to all that dedicated their time while enhancing my knowledge through these programs. I remain continuously indebted to Professor Pavao Rudan (head of the Project and Director, Institute for Anthropological Research, Croatia) on his guidance and support.

### REFERENCES

1. MACRAE, J.: Dilemmas of post-conflict transition: Lessons from the health sector. (ODA, London, 1995). — 2. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA, SANJA M., MK. GILLILAND Performing the Past: the expression and Construction of Gender, Family and Group Identities in the Migration Narratives of Men and Women on the island of Hvar, Croatia, Unpublished manuscript, presented at the International Conference of Oral History. New York, New York, October 18, 1994. — 3. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA S. M., S. MARTIĆ-BIOČINA, MK. GILLILAND *Coll. Antropol.* 19: (1995) 113. — 4. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA S. M., S. MARTIĆ-BIOČINA, MK. GILLILAND, *Coll. Antropol.* 20 (1996) 293. — 5. RUDAN, P., G. HEYDEN, D. CARIĆ, S. ČOLIĆ, S. MARTIĆ-BIOČINA, V. RUDAN, A. SUJOLDŽIĆ, J. ŠANTIĆ, S. M. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA, MK. GILLILAND: The Study and Care of Displaced Persons and Refugee Families. (Croatian Anthropological Society, Zagreb, 1997). — 6. CHAMBERS, R.: Rural development: Putting the last first. (Longman, New York, 1983). — 7. CHAMBERS, R.: Whose reality counts? Putting the first last. (Intermediate technology publications, London, 1997). — 8. HARRELL-BOND, B.: Imposing Aid. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986). — 9. MITCHELL, J., H. SLIM, *Disasters* 15 (1991) 62. — 10. GILLILAND MK., S. M. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA, V. RUDAN, *Coll. Antropol.*, 19 (1995) 103. — 11. MARTIĆ-BIOČINA, S., S. M. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA, V. RUDAN, *Coll. Antropol.* 24 (1996) 301. — 12. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA S. M., Maintaining a Family

Identity in Exile – a Possible Silent Factor of Well Being. In: BENNETT, B., P. RUDAN (Eds.): Islands in transition. (Croatian Anthropological Society, Zagreb, 1998). — 13. ČOLIĆ S., A. SUJOLDŽIĆ, *Migracijske teme.* 11 (1995) 37. — 14. SUJOLDŽIĆ, A., *Coll. Antropol.*, 23 (1999) 273. — 15. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA, S. M., *Coll. Antropol.* 20 (1996) 159. — 16. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA, S. M., *The Medit. Soc. Sci. Rev.*, 2 (1997) 155. — 17. GUERIN, PHILIP J.: Family therapy. (Gardner Press, New York, 1976). — 18. MCGOLDRICK M., R. GERSON: Genograms in family assessment. (W. W. Norton Co., New York, 1985). — 19. BOWEN, M., Family therapy in clinical practice. (Jason Aronson, New York, 1978). — 20. DE MARIA, R., G. WEEKS, L. HOF: Focused genograms: Intergenerational assessment of individuals, couples, and families. (Brunner/Mazel, New York, 1999). — 21. ROGERS, R. C., M. MCGOLDRICK, *Journal of Family Practice.* 26 (1988) 407. — 22. BRADSHAW, J.: Family secrets. (Piatkus, New York, 1995). — 23. HARDY, K., T. A. LASZLOFFY, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy.* 21: (1995) 227. — 24. BAHR, K., *Family Relations* 39 (1990) 243. — 25. KRAUSE, IB.: Therapy across culture. (Sage, London, 1998). — 26. MCGOLDRICK M., R. GERSON, Genograms and the family life cycle. In: CARTER, B., M. MCGOLDRICK (Eds.): The changing family life cycle (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1989). — 27. MCLEAN, A., *Soc. Sci. Med.* 23 (1986) 179. — 28. ENGLUND, H., *Soc. Sci. Med.*, 46 (1998) 1165. — 29. WOODCOCK, J., *Journal*



- of Family Therapy. 17 (1995) 397. — 30. LIKE, R. C., J. ROGERS, M. MCGOLDRICK, Journal of family Practice. 26 (1988) 407. — 31. GARCIA-PRETO, N., Puerto Rican families. In: MCGOLDRICK, M., J. K. PEARCE, J. JOSEPH (Eds.): Ethnicity and Family Therapy (The Guildford Press, London, 1982). — 32. KUEHL, BRUCE P., Journal of Marital and Family Therapy. 21 (1995) 239. — 33. MOORE HINES P., N. BOYD-FRANKLIN, Black Families. In: MCGOLDRICK M., J. K. PEARCE, J. JOSEPH (Eds.): Ethnicity and family therapy. (The Guildford Press, London, 1982). — 34. ROSENWALD, C. G., Making whole-methods and ethics in mainstream and narrative psychology. In: JOSSELSOHN, R. (Ed.): Ethics and process (Sage, London, 1996). — 35. ROGIĆ, I., J. ESTERAJHER, Z. KNEZOVIĆ, V. LAMZA-POSAVEC, V. ŠAKIĆ: Progonstvo i Povratak. (Sysprint, Zagreb, 1995) (in Croat). — 36. MOITOZA, E., Portuguese families. In: MCGOLDRICK, M., J. K. PEARCE, J. JOSEPH (Eds.): Ethnicity and family therapy. (The Guildford Press, London, 1982). — 37. BEISER M., I. HYMAN, Am. J. Psychiatry. 154 (1997) 996. — 38. FRIEDMAN H., M. ROHRBAUGH, S. KRAKAUER, Fam. Proc.: (1988) 293. — 39. WELL, S., Human Organization. 54 (1995) 1. — 40. SCHEPER-HUGHES, N., Demography without numbers. In: KERTZER, I., D., T. FRICKE (Eds.): Anthropological demography: towards a new synthesis. (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997). — 41. BEAR, A. H., Soc.Sci. Med. 44 (1997) 1565. — 42. RABINOW, P., Current Anthropology 36 (1995) 409. — 43. DAVIS, J., Journal of Refugee Studies, 5 (1992) 149. — 44. DE PINA-CABRAL, J., In: LOPAŠIĆ, A., (Ed.): Mediterranean Societies: Tradition and change (Croatian Anthropological Society, Zagreb, 1994). — 45. KEESING, R. M., Current Anthropology. 28 (1987) 161.

*S. M. Špoljar-Vržina*

*Institute for Anthropological Research, Amruševa 8, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia*

## **GENOGRAMI OBITELJI U PROGNANIŠTVU I POVRATKU – MEDICINSKO ANTROPOLOŠKI PRISTUP**

### **SAŽETAK**

Ovaj rad prezentira najvažnije rezultate primjenjenog antropološkog istraživanja posvećenog produženom progonstvu i povratku, što ih trenutno prolaze mnoge obitelji u Republici Hrvatskoj. Prezentacija je pružena kroz posebno promišljanje o dva preklapajuća pitanja koja se odnose na primjenjeni metodološki pristup. Prvo se pitanje odnosi na razradu najvažnijih tema koja su motivirale traženje metodološkog sredstva koje neće iskriviti iskustva, realitet i patnje obitelji u progonstvu; dok drugo kritički prilazi upotrebi genograma (sredstvo »posuđeno« iz systemske obiteljske psihoterapije) u uvjetima progonstva. Genogram nije samo bio koristan u kliničkom psihoterapijskom smislu pri konzultacijama sa obiteljima, već je bio i fleksibilan dio u metodologiji orijentiranoj ka proučavanju obiteljske povijesti i pružanju saznanja o različitostima obiteljskog života u progonstvu.