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**TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA – CONTEXT AND  
REFLECTION OF CHANGES IN SCENIC SYMBOLIC WORK**

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*Abstract*

The present study aims at describing and analysing transgenerational trauma and identifying changes over the course of psychotherapeutic process. For that reason, Pessó Boyden psychomotor therapy (PBSP) is employed. Furthermore, its purpose is to point out the possibilities and competencies of social pedagogues regarding the use of elements and techniques of PBSP. This study discovered that in scenic symbolic work in PBSP, uncovering and becoming conscious of trauma repetition occurs, and a client gradually achieves self-acceptance and actively participates in cognitive, emotional, and behavioural changes. This progressively results in the client being able to integrate the traumatic experience into a personal history and step out of unconscious replication of family traumatisation. The social pedagogue is able to participate in the cognitive changes, primarily using PBSP theory, micro tracking and local placeholders.

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**Keywords:** Client, Trauma, Transgenerational Transmission, PBSP, Social Pedagogy



## 1. Introduction

Transgenerational transmission tends to be realised by emotional family dynamics. (Tóthová, 2011) What is meant by family here follows Trapková and Chvála (2009) who consider it a space of reproduction of language and meanings, in which generational replication is realised and intergenerational transmissions occur. As Tóthová argues, the transmission is caused among other aspects by the quality of emotional bond, social separation, anniversary syndrome, emotional severance, unhealed emotions as well as due to family communication dynamics (Tóthová, 2011). The author's practice also confirmed transgenerational transmission of family lines and patterns usually occurs unconsciously and above all, covertly. Within the transgenerational psychogenealogy framework, Schützenberger (1998) introduced the concept of ancestor syndrome (concealed devotion to past generations caused by unfinished aspects of emotional or psychosocial dynamics). Thus, she pointed out repetitive patterns of family traumatising and generational parallels. As this concept is supported by the present author's practice, it is considered crucial and decisive of the course of this research.

The theoretical concept of trauma draws on Praško et al. (2003), and Vizinová and Preiss (1999), who consider trauma a short- or long-term event that is exceptionally dangerous and catastrophic and would most likely deeply agitate anyone. According to the corresponding definition in Pesso Boyden psychomotor therapy, which is determining here, it is a physical and emotional reaction to dangerous stimuli that trigger undesirable consequences irresolvable by one's coping strategies. The concept of experienced intrusion is shared across both definitions. In the context of transgenerational trauma, the claim of van der Kolk (1997) is important that victims of trauma experience these feelings without understanding the connection to their causes.

Transgenerational trauma is approached from the PBSP angle as this method allows for a symbolic processing of trauma in a scenic symbolic space of a structure, in which trauma is experimentally integrated on cognitive, emotional and behavioural levels.

The Pesso Boyden psychomotor therapy originated in the USA; it gradually emerged in dance context as the method's late founders Albert Pesso and Diane Boyden-Pesso previously worked as dancers and dance pedagogues. (Perquin, 1997; Pesso, 1984; Pesso, Boyden-Pesso, & Vrtbovská, 2009) Initially, PBSP focused on non-verbal techniques and expression through movement and sounds. (Pesso, Boyden-Pesso, & Vrtbovská, 2009) Over the course of the method's formation, basic developmental needs of place, protection, nurturance, support and limits were identified. These requirements have to be fulfilled adequately by parent figures. The need of limits is considered framing, and is equally important for the present research; it provides a child with a so-called limited environment, within which it is in an ideal scenario aware of limits and experiences neither helplessness nor omnipotence. (Lebedová in Šamánková, 2012; Perquin, 1997; Pesso, Boyden-Pesso, & Vrtbovská, 2009) In the 1970s, a concept was developed of a so-called map, which according to Pesso and Boyden emerged over every individual's life and provided a set of behavioural patterns available throughout one's lifetime (Pesso, Boyden-Pesso, & Vrtbovská, 2009). In the context of transgenerational trauma, this map is transmitted between generations. Pesso, Boyden-Pesso and Vrtbovská (2009) claim that if this "old" map is formed by negative experiences, especially in childhood, in therapy it is possible to create, using a symbolic ideal parent, an alternative "new" map which fulfils the abovementioned needs in time, quality, degree and manner

required by a particular client. The PBSP method has been relatively actively developed; since the 1980s, new elements and concepts have been introduced – possibility sphere, fragment figures, pilot. (Pesso, Boyden-Pesso, & Vrtbovská, 2009) PBSP is practiced in both individual and group therapy.

The effect of PBSP in traumatised clients, specifically the existence of neurobiological changes of brain activity precipitated by PBSP was measured and confirmed using functional magnetic resonance imaging by Horáček et al. (2005). The present study acknowledges these results, and while recognising the limitations of qualitative research, perceives them as an impulse to contribute by findings collected in monitored psychotherapeutic process pertaining to a small number of clients in whom traumas occur repeatedly over several generations and constitute a part of personal and family history.

Currently, there are two trends in PBSP – procedural, which puts emphasis on client's particular topic, and biographical, in which the process invariantly includes a transparent rendition of previous generations' relations. Therefore, the biographical model frequently (and in a rather more calculated way) employs the so-called movies, which provide on a cognitive level an increased understanding of mutual relations of persons and events, and uncover unconscious behaviour patterns recurring over generations. Thus, the replication of traumatic experiences can be identified in therapy. In this respect, there are similarities to the genogram technique (Vymětal, 2004). On an emotional level, movies grant relief to a client. Over the course of a therapeutic session, the client perceives and experiences need fulfilment of close (traumatising) persons by symbolic ideal parents. Thus, the client's receptivity for interaction with symbolic ideal parents is unblocked, resulting in the saturation of the client's needs in a manner described above – in an ideal, i.e. fulfilling, not traumatising way.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Given the abovementioned possibility, the processing of intergenerational trauma using the Pesso Boyden Psychomotor System represents the research problem of the present study.

## **3. Research Questions**

Which changes occur in persons with a genetically transmitted trauma over the course of the PBSP on a cognitive, emotional and behavioural level? What are the clients' experiences of these changes?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

To describe and analyse uncovering and awareness of transgenerational trauma in client, and to identify cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes over the course of the PBSP therapy. From the point of view of helping professions, to point out the possibilities and competencies of social pedagogues regarding the use of elements and techniques of PBSP (in the context of intergenerational transmission of trauma).

Besides transgenerational recurrence of trauma, the criterion for research participants was reaching the age of young adulthood in which the ability to reflect the experiences of three generations of one family line is presupposed; Vágnerová (2000) gives the range of 20–35 years of age.

One of the aims is to highlight the potential and limitations of PBSP for a social pedagogue in direct contact with a traumatised client. It was specified in advance the study will identify those PBSP principles and techniques that can be used by a social pedagogue without a long-term self-experience PBSP training. This decision was made on the following basis: social pedagogues tend to work in non-profit institutions, low-threshold facilities for children and youth, surrogate parental care, mental health care centres, psychosocial help etc. There they encounter clients in difficult situations. It is therefore possible to assume meeting traumatised clients is not uncommon for them. Likewise it is expected they are able to work with such clients, at least as regards crisis intervention and counselling, and direct them towards further follow-up care. |

## **5. Research Methods**

Data processing is based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as it allows a more creative approach and greater freedom of research process in comparison to other methods (Willig, 2001). It is considered especially useful for analysis of deep experience in therapy as well as of in-depth narrative interviews. Employment of elements of IPA allows for a description and interpretation of the way in which an experiencing subject ascribes meaning to experience. The purpose is to understand client's lived experience as described in detail in Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006). The approach is based on three primary pillars of IPA. The focus is on particular clients' unique experiences of specific people in specific context and time. Following Smith (2004), the present study examines clients' understanding of their own experiences of phenomenon in question as well the way in which this understanding is formed. The problem is approached from an ideographical angle, therefore only one case at a time is investigated in detail (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

The present study made use of audio recordings, a limited number of video recordings, and numerous transcripts of therapeutic sessions. A following method was used. Data gained from the first client were transcribed, read and re-read; all attention was focused on one client. The text was searched for the important and remarkable aspects and annotated. The following stage concentrated on notes and developed emerging topics in order to arrive at an essential quality of respondent's experience. Psychological terminology, PBSP terminology, respondents' metaphors and quotations were used. This was followed by an investigation of connections and relations between individual topics; these were marked using numerical identifiers and pagination. Certain topics in one sphere were assigned a shared name and a list of broader topics with constituent topics was assembled. Only then analysis of another case using the same procedure began. In the final stage, patterns recurring across individual cases were examined. Throughout the research there was an emphasis on the issue of connections between the respondents' experiences and the possibility of a case explaining another one. The study also examined the possible presence of a principal shared topic that could provide a basis for a more theoretical analysis.

The primary intention of analysing a sample of 20 respondents (10 male, 10 female) was abandoned in spite of Fade's claim (2004) it is possible, as it would not be as important in this type of paper; it was in fact beneficial to examine only a few cases in detail. Given the rich and extensive materials from psychotherapeutic sessions, 3 males and 3 females were included in a detailed research. |

## 6. Findings

Re-reading materials from the first case (story and records of therapy of client Ella) provided a general notion of type of traumatising father figure, and manner of trauma transmission across generations. The consequences of genetically transmitted trauma for the client's personal and professional life as well as for her relationships were identified. Cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes manifested certain typology. In this stage, the researcher attempted to adopt the client's perspective in order to understand the quality of her experience.

Subsequently, the materials were provided with annotations and comments (examples in the left column of the table), out of which specific significances the client assigned to recurrent events in her lived experience emerged. These were the source of the so-called emerging topics (examples in the right column). In the middle column there are quotations of Ella's testimony. Given the present study's scope it is not possible to introduce the entire procedure in detail, therefore the table below only presents the quotations, comments and topics illustrating transgenerational trauma.

**Table 01.** Transgenerational trauma - Ella

Annotation and comments	Client's lived experiences	So-called emerging topics
Incompetent in relationship Partner = strict, critical I'm useless Partner makes fun of me even among other people Thrown off balance = can't fight back	Recently I've felt totally incompetent in my relationship. My partner is strict and he does not speak well of me, in fact he keeps criticising me. Sometimes I think about the reasons why he is still in this relationship with me when I'm so useless. He laughs at me when I do something that goes wrong and tells it to other people when we go out. I always throw me off balance, I can't fight back.	Significance of relationship with a partner Significance of partner's behaviour – absence of support Perception of self Exceeding limits Loose limits
Loser even at home Partner's behaviour = brother's behaviour Father hated when I talked Desire to speak Silence = ignored by father Didn't obey = slap	I used to be a loser even at home. This is exactly how my brother behaved to me and in fact he still does. And actually my dad always hated when I talked. I talked quite a lot – or wanted to. He often told me to be quiet already, but then he just ignored me completely. When I didn't obey and kept talking, he would slap me. Sometimes it was so hard I fell down.	Place at home Significance of matching behaviour of brother and partner Significance of relationship and father's behaviour Absence of support of communication (deficits vs. intrusion) Significance of silence and talk Significance of ignoring vs. slap as punishment
Be invisible and mute I shouldn't exist Father = doesn't respect me	Maybe he wished I were invisible and mute. Sometimes I felt I shouldn't have even existed. Or that he didn't respect me.	Right not to be seen and heard Absence of place and support

Other themes and their connections were identified. In the following stage, principal topics emerged.

Key topics were established below with regards to analysed cases of Marie and Alice. As a reference, their personal experiences are given here in short. Both Alice and Marie and a traumatising mother. Intrusion had a form of frequent beating in childhood, later, as they started attending school, traumatisation became verbal (criticism, disparaging, verbal abuse, restrictions etc.). Manners of traumatisation by Ella's father and Alice and Marie's mothers were roughly identical. Mothers' behaviour repeated the patterns inherited from their mothers. Ella's father copied the behaviour of his father with whom he was no longer in contact. Ella, Alice and Marie invented strategies of survival in the form of attempts to become a good person, partner, and employee. While this strategy proved successful in their professional careers and they held prestigious positions, they lacked confidence in personal life and they repeatedly encountered partners who were critical of them and disparaged their personality, profession, and job. The women either suffered in the relationships despite their best efforts to satisfy the partners or were left by their partners. Ella, Marie and Alice underwent therapy not because they were aware of transgenerational trauma but due to relationship problems in the present.

Names of principal topics reflect the respondents' essential experiences of transgenerational trauma and cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes: relationship problems as a motivation for change; family heritage; changes in relationship to significant others and oneself; experience of beneficial limits as a source of confidence of one's ability to control one's own life; freedom and creativity in behaviour.

Analysis of male respondents (Jan, Martin and Tomáš) suggested different experiences in terms of source of traumatisation and consequences in life. Given the exclusive occurrence of fathers as primary sources of traumatisation, trauma was transmitted in paternal family line only. The manner of traumatisation was identical but the consequences differed. While the women selected partners with similar personality traits as their traumatising mothers or fathers, the men tended towards partners representing the opposite of traumatising fathers. The male clients underwent therapy not because of relationship problems but due to a social anxiety manifested especially in professional and social spheres. While the women showed a significant, even unlimited desire to make efforts in the relationship, the men were afraid of the requirements associated e.g. with performance in professional life, their efforts were blocked by anxiety and they tended towards avoidance and somatisation (especially in digestive system). This led to an increase in anxiety in the long term, associated especially with the fear of loss of employment and social prestige.

For this reason, the first principal topic bears a different name: social anxiety as a motivation for change.

In order to establish the context of personal history and present symptomatology in therapy, the micro tracking technique was used; this means naming of emotions in the context of client's experience and naming of strategies clients uses. In order to increase awareness and understanding local placeholders were used to provide transparent models of experience of particular people. Movies technique was used when it was necessary to fulfil symbolically the needs of traumatising figures in their family history in order to prevent transmission of traumas to following generations. This granted the clients a significant relief and made it possible to saturate their own needs, which was realised using symbolic figures of ideal

parents who fulfilled client's needs in appropriate time and in the correct way. This interaction provided alternative, symbolic and above all fulfilling memories.

## 7. Conclusion

To summarise the research's preliminary conclusions, respondents did not differ significantly regarding sources of traumatisation. The women in the sample in question traumatised by mothers had weak and submissive fathers. In case of Ella, the mother was submissive. These clients preferred critical, traumatising male partners later in their life. Subconsciously they may have desired a strong and kind partner. The men were traumatised by their fathers and tended towards female partners representing an opposite of intrusion. Their trauma was reactivated at work and in their social lives; they also suffered from social anxiety.

During the PBSP process, both male and female respondents understood quickly the theory of trauma as well as the mechanisms of transgenerational transmission of behavioural patterns. Out of general information, they selected the details relevant for themselves and gradually gained understanding of their family story, the context and the sources of problems. This cognitive foundation provided a significant emotional relief and a decrease in uncertainty related to the perception that the repeated events will be further replicated regardless of their decision and awareness. They acknowledged changes in relationship with themselves and others, especially the traumatising persons, and rediscovered their worth; a potential they undertook to develop. They started to feel protected, and regained the notion of beneficial limits for themselves and in the context of their surroundings. They became able to decide and to act upon this decision.

In case of the small sample of the present study, it is possible to confirm that during scenic symbolic work using PBSP, uncovering and bringing repetition of trauma to consciousness occurs. Clients gradually become able to acknowledge they are active agents of cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes. As a result they are able to disrupt the unconscious repetition of family traumatisation. A social pedagogue is competent to participate in cognitive changes, primarily using education in PBSP theory, micro tracking and local placeholders. Instead of movies, which require therapeutic skills, it is possible to use genogram and help a client to understand family lines and recurring topics.

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