Social work and democratic memory: socio-educational intervention in mourning processes and generational transmission of trauma

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Abstract

The field of democratic memory has scarcely been explored as a specific area of professional intervention within the disciplines of social work and social education. Unlike other countries, Spain's sole Democratic Memory Law dates back only to 2022, despite almost half a century having passed since the end of the dictatorship. One direct consequence of this persistent lack of recognition, justice and reparations for the victims is that it has denied families the opportunity to mourn, with trauma being passed down generationally to the present day. The goal of this research has been twofold: firstly, to conduct an exploratory investigation into the persistence of denied grief and its possible intergenerational transmission among the descendants of victims; and, secondly, to develop specific intervention proposals from the perspectives of social work and social pedagogy to address this unresolved mourning. Qualitative research was conducted through 23 in-depth interviews with 25 key informants residing in 11 towns across two Spanish regions, with a theme-based discourse analysis subsequently being performed. The findings confirm the persistence of denied grief and its intergenerational transmission, and six specific so-

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cio-educational intervention proposals are outlined. These proposals have the potential for implementation within the field of democratic memory, alongside professionals from other disciplines traditionally engaged in this area, though lacking the unique insights and competencies of social work.

Keywords: Democratic memory, denied grief, intergenerational transmission, Franco regime, socio-educational intervention.

1. Introduction

In Spain, democratic memory remains a relatively unexplored field for professional intervention within social work and related disciplines, such as social education. This is especially true regarding the resolution of unresolved grief, which is passed down through generations, affecting families and communities (Villagrán, 2016).

When death lacks tangible confirmation (due to the absence of the body), the loss becomes ambiguous, hindering emotional closure. Paradoxically, the *physical presence* of a body allows families to let go, overcome confusion and attain cognitive certainty about the death (Boss, 2001). “This state is not a psychological disorder; instead, it is a relational disturbance where grief remains blocked, preventing resolution. It is not an illness; rather, it is a source of overwhelming stress” (Papalia et al., 2012, p. 609). In the case of victims of the Franco dictatorship, this ambiguous loss was compounded by the prohibition of mourning rituals in public, family or community spaces during the prolonged dictatorship, as well as the subsequent total absence or lack of enablement of these rituals during the post-Franco era.

By denied grief we refer to a situation where loss is coupled with the inability to acknowledge or express mourning due to ideological and political reasons. Denied grief is therefore a mourning process obstructed by external circumstances beyond the control of those who experience the loss (whether ambiguous or not).

Trauma arises from “situations where an individual is exposed to scenes of actual or imminent death, severe physical injuries or sexual violence, either as a direct victim, someone close to the victim or a witness” (Figueroa et al., 2016, p. 643). Generational transmission of trauma refers to traumatic experiences passed from parents to children, often extending to grandchildren through their relationship with their parents (Faúndez and Cornejo, 2010).

Throughout life, all individuals encounter episodes of grief where loss and separation impact them according to the emotional intensity of the bond and its significance. Grief encompasses all the psychological processes —conscious and unconscious— triggered by the loss of a loved one, regardless of the outcome (Bowbly, 1997). It is a long, non-linear process, not governed by time but rather by actions taken to accept the loss and redirect energy toward a new way of living (Kübbler-Ross and Kessler, 2005).

In every human cultural tradition, the process of mourning the death of a loved one has been, and continues to be, expressed through various funeral rituals performed in family, community and social contexts. The opportunity to perform mourning rituals in public or collective spaces specifically designated for this purpose (e.g., burial sites in cemeteries) enables human communities to overcome the trauma of death. The Franco regime concealed the bodies of its victims in mass graves and roadside

ditches, meaning that, as well as suffering this loss, families were forbidden from conducting funeral rites. Thus, disappearance was coupled with the imposition of silence, repression and fear. Social isolation and the various forms of repression faced by widows and the families of disappeared victims aimed to erase the individual and collective memory. This created significant obstacles to emotional expression within families, leading to a lack of communication among individuals about these events. As well as being unable to grieve, families were denied this opportunity outright "resulting in direct emotional effects on approximately 440,000 individuals" (Armañanzas, 2012, p. 14).

A number of recent socio-educational research projects on democratic memory have primarily focused on aspects related to transitional justice (Casto, 2023), or historical education and its underdevelopment in curricula (Estepa, 2024; Martínez, 2023; Alonso, 2023; Bermúdez et al., 2020; Díez, 2020). Expanding beyond the socio-educational domain, there is greater scientific production, such as in gender studies linked to the repression and violence suffered by women under dictatorships (Barreto and Gómez, 2022; Castañeda et al., 2019; Barranquero, 2017; Valencia et al., 2016; Valji, 2012; González, 2012).

If we look beyond Spain's borders we find a more extensive array of publications internationally addressing socio-educational interventions on the memory of victims of terrorism and dictatorships, with most Spanish-language contributions focusing on Latin American countries such as Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Brazil and El Salvador (INFOD, 2019; Legaralde and Brugaletta, 2017; Granados, 2017; Guzmán and Mendía, 2013; Reátegui, 2021; Beristain and Moreno, 2011; Oiaguren and Soliño, 2010; Muñoz and Meza, 2004). Most of these socio-educational experiences are framed as civic pedagogies in a broader sense, rather than being directly related to social work as a profession, where disciplinary studies are scarce (Coca, 2017; Irañeta, 2018; Romero, 2023).

When it comes to grief and generational transmission of trauma, research predominantly originates from historiographical fields (L'Etno, 2024; Casanova, 2022; Mas, 2022; García and Gadea, 2021; Vásquez et al., 2020; Villasante, 2017; Cate-Arries, 2016; Casanova, 2015; Álvarez, 2007) and clinical fields (Laguna-Barnes, 2024; Ovejero, 2020; Volkan, 2018; Valverde, 2016; Morandi, 2012; Miñarro and Morandi, 2012; Beristain and Moreno, 2011; Gómez and Hernández, 2011; Ruiz, 2008 and 2011; Cabodevilla, 2007; Martín, 2003).

The need to explore professional intervention possibilities and alternatives from the perspective of the social work discipline is underscored by the fact that the vast majority of socio-educational publications on democratic or historical memory fall within the broader context of peace education, and indeed the fact that most professional interventions have been posited by or implemented within formal educational or schooling settings. This is particularly relevant in specific and underexplored aspects such as the resolution of denied grief and its generational transmission in contexts like Spain, where nearly half a century has passed since the

end of the dictatorship without victims having been able to exercise their right to truth, justice and reparation.

2. Justification and objectives

The absence of transitional justice in Spain has been a consistent issue since the end of the Franco dictatorship. This has been highlighted by numerous experts, including official reports from international organizations such as the United Nations (United Nations, 2005 and 2008; OHCHR, 2005 and 2015) and Amnesty International (2007 and 2013). Despite the 48 years that have passed since the end of the dictatorship, official data from the Ministry of Justice reveal that there are currently 2,567 mass graves in Spain, with an estimated number of more than 114,000 individuals still missing, their remains neither exhumed nor identified (Mas, 2022). This represents a severe violation of the right to truth, justice and reparations, as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Spain signed in 1976, making it legally binding. Spain's national and international legislative framework includes numerous legal grounds justifying the need for investigation. The most recent of these is Act 20/2022, of October 19, on Democratic Memory, which, for the first time, obliges the state to exhume disappeared victims and recognizes families' right to bury their loved ones with dignity. Given this, it is crucial to explore professional intervention alternatives in exhumation processes, in the resolution of denied grief (at personal, family and community levels) and in community-based social intervention. These efforts must aim to contribute to truth recognition, some degree of social reparation and the assurance of these events never happening again (since restorative justice falls under the remit of the judiciary).

The objective of this research is twofold: firstly, to explore the persistence of denied grief and its potential generational transmission among descendants of direct victims, identifying forms of grief expression that could benefit from professional support and accompaniment; and, secondly, to draw up specific proposals for professional interventions in grief resolution, both at the individual and family levels, as well as at the community and institutional levels, drawing inspiration from socio-cultural experiences carried out by professionals from other disciplines in Spain.

3. Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature. A total of 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 key informants, as two interviews included two participants each. Given the challenge of identifying participants from a small sub-group of the population, a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method was used until data saturation was reached. Participants included relatives of Franco regime victims, members of institutions and entities involved in socio-educational projects on democratic memory, active par-

ticipants in historical memory associations, and individuals involved in exhumation work. The table below details the profile of the interviewees.

Table 1. Profile of key informants interviewed

ID	Gender	Generation/ level	Location (interview site)	Profile	Age
E1	M and M	G3	Requena (Valencia)	Teachers	54 and 44
E2	F	G3	Valencia	Teacher (and relative)	32
E3	M	G3	Las Monjas-Venta del Moro (Valencia)	Relative	53
E4	F	G3	Las Monjas-Venta del Moro (Valencia)	Relative	47
E5	M	G3	Turís (Valencia)	Teacher (and relative)	45
E6	M	N/A	Valencia	President of victim association	70
E7	M	N/A	Valencia	Public employee	51
E8	M	N/A	Valencia	President of victim association	73
E9	F	G3	Requena (Valencia)	Relative	58
E10	F	G2 and G2	Cheste (Valencia)	Relative	85 and 87
E11	F	G3	Buñol (Valencia) Online	President of victim association and relative	69
E12	F and F	N/A	Buñol (Valencia)	Teachers	61 and 48
E13	M	N/A	L'Eliana (Valencia)	Teacher	54
E14	M	G3	Buñol (Valencia) Online	Relative	49
E15	F	G3	Requena (Valencia)	President of victim association and relative	60
E16	M	G3	Valencia	President of victim association and relative	66
E17	F	G3	La Canyada-Paterna (Valencia)	Relative	57
E18	F	G3	Alboraya (Valencia)	Relative	62

E19	M	G3	Albacete	President of victim association and relative	58
E20	F	G3	Albacete	Relative	57
E21	M	G4	Requena (Valencia)	Relative	35
E22	M and M	G2 and G3	Buñol (Valencia)	Relatives	74 and 48
E23	M	N/A	Paterna (Valencia)	Archaeologist	35

Source: compiled by the authors.

The interviews were conducted between December 2023 and April 2024 in 11 locations within two neighbouring autonomous communities of Spain. Each interview lasted an average of three hours. Informed consent was sought in writing beforehand and the research team signed an official confidentiality agreement as required by the Research Ethics Committee of the International Doctoral School at the University of Castile-La Mancha. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed prior to an analysis of the subject matter.

The research process began in October 2023 with a review of the state of the art being undertaken to lay out the theoretical framework and methodological design. Two pilot interviews were conducted to test and refine the interview script. These pilot interviews were incorporated into the final fieldwork since minimal adjustments were required. The final report was completed in May 2024 and in June the research findings and intervention proposals were critically reviewed by five experts (four Spanish academics specialising in social work and social education from the University of Valencia and the University of Castile-La Mancha, and one Argentine academic with expertise in social psychology from the University of Salta) with the aim of assessing the relevance, suitability and adequacy of these proposals.

4. Findings

By analysing the 23 interviews on the basis of the subject matter addressed therein, three key themes can be identified relating to denied grief and its generational transmission: the role of silence as a barrier to processing grief; the significance and value of photographs; and the impact of trauma and its intergenerational transmission.

Imposed silence as a barrier to processing grief

The disappearance of bodies in mass graves and roadside ditches was compounded by the prohibition of funeral rites for families. In other words, silence, repression and fear were imposed, giving rise to significant

obstacles for families to express their emotions. This resulted in a lack of communication or acknowledgment of these events.

> And I would often think, but how can it be, Dad, that Grandma never told you, 'They killed my brother, they executed my brother'? And she didn't (E17).

> She lost her husband, she lost her son, and I mean she wouldn't talk about it. She never talked about it. She buried it all with her, holding on, never releasing all those emotions inside (E22).

This imposed silence meant that the opportunity for processing and resolving grief was denied because families were unable to express their emotions or discuss what had happened.

> People weren't even allowed to openly express their grief; they had to carry it inside. At the time she had become older, always wearing black; always sad, and silent. The rest of her life was overshadowed because her husband had been taken, leaving her with nothing (E16).

The grieving process was suspended over time. Without a grave to visit, families were condemned to unresolved grief, caught in a past that never reached closure, perpetuating psychological suffering.

> I remember her at the edge of the mass grave, in a little corner on the right, saying, 'Oh, when will you come home? Oh, when will you come home? Someday you'll come home.' She wanted to bring him back to Meliana. Of course, she was still alive and wanted to bring him back, but she couldn't (E18).

> I remember my grandmother, always, always dressed in black, and since her brother disappeared, in black with her hair tied in a bun (E4).

> As soon as I could get there on my own, I started going to the cemetery wall from the age of 18. Every December 6, I would take a rose. I would sneak out of my house without a word, without telling anyone; imagine that, not even telling my father (E20).

The neglect of funeral rites, political and social abandonment, and individual, family and collective silence have kept grief in an unresolved state for decades.

The significance and value of photographs

Grieving women and widows became the keepers of memory. In their private spaces, such as bedroom drawers, they created genuine altars that honoured memory in the face of grief made insurmountable by the absence of the body.

> She kept his last letter with such care. My great-grandmother asked to be buried with all the letters he had written to her. And when they buried her, they buried her with all of them (E21).

Rare photographs served to preserve forbidden memories, offering a way to display family affection and provide the dignity to which people were entitled. Sometimes, other family members were unaware these photographs even existed.

> My grandmother would do this when she thought no one could see or hear her. I could hear her every night because I slept in the next room. I knew it was her ritual—every night she'd blow kisses, there were photographs or certain objects. Whatever they were, we never knew. But I always heard her, giving kisses; then putting the bag back under the mattress (E9).

Photographs acted as carriers of denied grief, serving as a bridge between the murdered or disappeared individual and the grieving person (usually a woman). The memories brining tears to their eyes, these women often felt a ritualistic need to touch and gaze upon these photographs.

> I still keep his room, and I still have many of his personal belongings. It's a bridge between him and you, a way to… well, show respect. Caring for his objects is a way to remember him, to keep him there (E19).

> The letter lists all the people in the mass grave. I wrote it myself on a typewriter when I was about 12, 13 or 14 years old. Of course, it had spelling mistakes, but I kept making that document so it wouldn't be lost. In fact, my father always carried it in his wallet, in his trouser pocket. It was the only thing he had of his father. Naturally, the paper became worn down over the years (E15).

Photographs, alongside other objects such as letters or locks of hair, preserved continuity between the time before and after the loss. These objects became invaluable treasures, especially for the working class who during that period had limited resources. These few images conveyed hidden memories to future generations, fostering a bond with the past and a deeper understanding of family experiences.

Photographs laid the foundation for post-memory, inherited by second- and third-generation descendants. These images conveyed narratives often concealed within families. Photos of murdered and disappeared relatives were kept in the most private and tucked away spaces of homes until, after the dictator's death, they began to occupy prominent positions, especially in places where families gathered together. The profound impact of the disappearances brought about an interruption within the grieving process passed down among generations, perpetuating suffering and uncertainty. As a result, grandchildren developed "invisible loyalties" across generations and inherited responsibilities. Caring for the deceased became a task associated with the reproductive domain, passed down to daughters,

who inherited the duty not to forget. Denied grief was transmitted from mothers to daughters.

> My mother had a portrait on her bedside table, another one hanging above her bed. She had a silver pendant with my father's photo, and one day someone snatched it from her. She cried so much. I told her, 'Mother, don't cry, I'll make you one in gold.' And then she had it in gold and always wore it (E10).

> Precisely, of course, you hear it from your grandmother, then your mother, then you notice a movement. And you say, 'There's something happening here.' And you decide to go all in (E18).

> That's why I kept doing this, for them—for my aunts, my mother and my grandmother—who always said, 'If only we could bring him back.' And at that moment, I thought, but how can I bring him back if he's buried in a mass grave, and we don't even know which one? (E11).

Grandmothers raised their children with the limited resources they had. It was largely the granddaughters who brought this history —hidden within the private realm of the family— into public memory, revealing to society that their grandparents had been murdered and remained missing.

The impact of psychosocial trauma and generational transmission

Silence was used as a means to try and shield subsequent generations from trauma, but this inadvertently gave rise to incomprehensible behaviours, non-verbal communication and emotions that lacked accompanying words, with these patterns persisting to the present day.

> She would lock herself in a room, and inside, the soldiers did whatever they wanted. I mean, they could just take anything they wanted (E11).

> They told my father, 'You'll be sent to the mill.' Then he came back and said, 'They won't send me there.' 'Why?' he was asked, and he replied, 'You'll see.' And sure enough, the boss said, 'If you had told me he was a communist, I wouldn't have put him in, and he won't be hired (E22).

> It must have been such a heavy blow—she came to Valencia, and they stole her baby. Imagine that. But, well, I don't even know my surname. I don't know his name or my grandfather's surname. Do we know roughly where he came from? I know they came to Valencia from Cantabria—well, he came to Valencia. They shot him at the Paterna wall along with many others (E14).

The silence surrounding these traumas led victims to avoid speaking about their experiences out of fear. Individually, they withdrew and suppressed their feelings of pain. As a result, they often refrained from exposing subsequent generations to the trauma:

> But to find out that I had an uncle who was persecuted? That he was in a mass grave and had been put on trial? That he was taken and executed? I didn't find out about that until 2018 (E17).

> The fact that my grandfather was in a concentration camp—that's something I only found out about much later. I don't know. There was a silence, even my father didn't know (E3).

Silence triggered incomprehensible behaviours, non-verbal communication (weeping, gestures, sighs) and emotions that were absent in verbal expression, perpetuating the trauma over time. Consequently, victims often felt guilty about sharing such horrific events with their families, while their children felt unable to ask questions about many aspects of their family's past:

> Of course, my grandmother, always... I would hear her, and it really stood out to me. She would sigh so much. My grandmother was always sighing. Everything for that poor woman came out in sighs, but she never said anything (E9).

> The first time my brother was taken to the mass grave in Paterna—you can't imagine how he cried. My mother said, 'I won't bring you here again,' and she didn't. He only went back later. But that first time, you can't imagine how much he cried (E10).

As a result, the trauma was transmitted across several generations, each affected in different ways, particularly the first, second and third generations.

The first generation, primarily widows, is known as "the unspeakable" generation, as they experienced the direct effects of trauma. Their emotions were overwhelming, and they remained silent, either because of the horrors they lived through or to protect their families.

> It was denial. Her mother—my great-grandmother—was silent, and my grandmother too. Not being able to bury them, not being able to grieve them, and then having to go on with life, choking back all that pain (E20).

> It turns out my eldest uncle, as a child, saw everything. He was the one who had to drag his father's body after he was killed—after they shot him in the head. He dragged him because, of course, they just left the bodies piled up there (E18).

The second generation, the children, is referred to as "the unnameable" generation. They inherited the legacy without explicit acknowledgment—an unconscious bequest of trauma and family memory.

> A small child doesn't understand. To a child, their father is their idol, their protector. Then add to that not being able to cry; not being able to ask; having to stay silent. I think that leaves a mark. Does it affect your character later in life? Yes, I believe it does (E9).

The third generation, the grandchildren, is called “the unimaginable” generation. They received their grandmothers’ legacy, taking on the responsibility of honouring their family’s memory through dignified burials. However, they are unable to fully comprehend what happened, as the direct connection to the original trauma has been lost.

> I can’t be impermeable to it. It affects you; it shapes how you think, how you act (E22).

> I’ve inherited so much of that legacy—perhaps more than my brother or other people. I carry it with me, and that’s why I believe we have to keep going and make sure society knows who they were. We have to shout their names and say they were good men (E20).

> You can see how the legacy skips a generation. It’s usually the grandchildren who take on the exhumation process and the search. That’s how it’s been passed down to them (E23).

It was not possible to interview any members of the fourth generation, as many family members believe the trauma feels too distant for them.

The process of mourning, both at the individual and family levels, as well as in institutional, community and social contexts, is crucial to overcoming trauma, both for the descendants of victims and for society as a whole. Without addressing these dimensions together, a democratic deficit will persist. The value of dialogue, storytelling and emotional expression in collective spaces is fundamental for creating public discourse among families, communities and society:

> They dance, make music, and paint. It’s a mix of arts that they perform in 10 minutes after completing their research. On one occasion, they portrayed the story of an exiled woman and her father who fled during the withdrawal. The girls re-created their journey escaping through the Pyrenees. We told them, ‘You have to invite the people whose stories you’re telling to come.’ The woman was in the audience. Imagine that. They gave her a bouquet of flowers. It was incredibly emotional because it was her story in the first person. It was very healing for her to see that someone cared about what had happened to her (E12).

> Of course, it helps all of us because, in a way, it’s a means of sharing it publicly, and doing so helps you too. It’s a kind of catharsis (E6).

Collective memory must be capable of addressing injustice. Indeed, while restitution for the first generation is no longer possible, it remains achievable for subsequent generations.

5. Discussion and proposals for action

Discussion

The operational definition of "denied grief" proposed in this study has been developed with the consideration that Boss' (2001) concept of "unresolved grief" caused by "ambiguous loss" excludes relatives of those disappeared through political violence. Similarly, the concept of "frozen grief" (Shatan, 2001) was also deemed unsuitable, as it refers to the inability of trauma survivors to experience emotions related to their losses. This denied or delayed grief describes situations where individuals show no signs of distress or pain following the loss of a loved one. In other words, this type of grief operates as a defence mechanism, akin to emotional anaesthesia, where the mind opts to suppress or "freeze" suffering, deferring it to another point in time. This description does not align with the situation of the individuals studied in this research, who were denied the opportunity to process their grief or engage in the rituals associated with mourning due to external factors of political repression and social control.

The evidence compiled in this research paper with respect to the role of silence as a trigger for denied grief and inability to process such mourning aligns with studies by Villasante (2017), Villagrán (2016), Armañanzas (2012) and Lewintal (2012). According to the latter, unresolved grief represents "a past that never quite concludes" (p. 119). Political and social neglect, along with the denial of funerary rites, has prevented the resolution of grief processes for decades. Making a person disappear, depriving their family of information and the ability to bury them, or honour their remains and bid farewell to their life —as Valverde (2016) asserts— is an extreme form of torture: "The disappeared are denied death. They are neither alive nor dead. What the disappeared leave behind is more than a scar or a wound: they leave time suspended, and grief cannot occur" (Valverde, 2016, p. 53). For families, knowing what happened and being able to bury their loved ones with dignity helps bring closure to their grief and allows them to "turn the page" on the past (Ovejero, 2020). Indeed, denied grief is closely tied to feelings of outrage and is deeply connected to a sense of injustice that has been transmitted across generations due to the unbearable nature of this loss (Cate-Arries, 2016).

This imposed silence also corresponds to what Scott (2003) refers to as "hidden transcripts" or "offstage discourse", which describes the behaviour of the subordinate in the presence of the dominant. This is particularly evident in women and mothers, who bore the "responsibility of the everyday" (Cabrero, 2006) or "the burden of daily survival" (Rosón and Medina, 2017). The "concealment" associated with imposed silence, as explained by Rosón and Medina, "could represent both an act of obedience and an act of defiance against the emotional regime of Francoism" (p. 416).

When it comes to the value and significance of photographs, the findings of this research confirm that photographs are transformed into

what Volkan (2018) describes as "linking objects", which provide continuity between the time before and after the loss and sustain intergenerational resistant memory (Laguna-Barnes, 2024). They help anchor the present by imbuing it with meaning. As Moreno (2020) highlights, it is essential to:

> understand the pairing of photography and domestic space. It is necessary to consider that the impossibility of conducting a funerary ritual due to the absence of the body forced families to replace the standard practices of burial with alternative rituals, subsumed within a perpetually restricted context—that of the home environment (p. 167).

Tisseron (2000) identifies photographs as essential objects in the grieving process because they facilitate acceptance while also functioning as relics, replacing the absent person. Rosón and Medina (2017) note that photographs often enabled families to emotionally process their losses without politically implicating themselves or drawing the attention of repressive forces. Photographs, therefore, reconstructed a sense of unity and belonging with absent loved ones. Additionally, imbued with deep emotional significance, photographs "potentially challenge forms of power and the emotional regimes that underpin them" (p. 420). They become what Piedras (2012) terms "subaltern documents"—materials from the past that have neither been destroyed nor archived but contain alternative histories laden with emotional weight that diverge from hegemonic narratives (cited by Rosón and Medina, p. 421). Photographs embody the presence of the body, serving as talismans of a past reality (Sontag, 1996). They are emotional treasures functioning as "emotional refuges" (Reddy, 2001) and as "domestic, everyday forms of emotional resistance" (Rosón and Medina, 2017).

When addressing the topic of psychosocial trauma and generational transmission, this research shows that victims avoided discussing their trauma due to fear. Laguna-Barnes (2024) highlights the fact that, on an individual level, victims withdrew or isolated their feelings of pain, while on a collective scale "alliances of denial" emerged, keeping society distant from its history. The guilt of passing horrific events down to their families coincided with children feeling unable to ask about various aspects of their family's past, as Valverde (2016) demonstrates. Contemporary society unconsciously carries the traumas of its ancestors. This phenomenon, known as generational transmission, is defined by Gómez and Hernández (2011) as:

> The chain of transmitted meanings passed down from generation to generation, encompassing ideals, myths, identifying models and discursive statements involving not only what is said but also what is omitted. These statements take on the force of mandates whose origins are unconscious. The unconscious seeks to surface through generational transmission. Impressions that cannot achieve symbolic representation, or those that exceed the mind's ability to process them, are passed down as an inheritance in their traumatic capacity (p. 483).

The evidence in relation to trauma transmission across various generations also aligns with other research studies, including those by Faúndez and Cornejo (2010), Ruiz (2011), Miñarro and Morandi (2012) and the recent paper by García and Gadea (2021). These studies identify two forms of connection to this transmission: one horizontal and synchronous in time; the other vertical and entirely asynchronous.

Proposals for action

Based on the findings of the research focussing on the resolution of grief and its generational transmission, and considering the ultimate aim of the study (to develop proposals for professional intervention within the realm of democratic memory), six socio-educational intervention proposals are described below. These proposals were rated most highly by experts who were asked to conduct a technical review of each one of our original initiatives.

1. **Dialogue-based gatherings inspired by graphic novels**. Graphic novels, such as *El abismo del olvido*, *María la Jabalina* and *La promesa* (among others) are used to foster the expression of emotions and to encourage critical reflection on their narratives. Through collective and dialogue-centred exchange, an enriching intergenerational learning context is created among participants who have read the comics.
2. **The genogram narrative as a thread of family history**. This approach aims to foster self-awareness by helping participants understand the reasons behind family interactions and relationships. It is crucial that participants are individuals currently grappling with these issues, as this creates a group where caregiving responsibilities and bonds are shared. To begin, participants acquire basic knowledge to construct their own genograms. Each participant then narrates the family history of a fellow participant. After the narration, the storyteller reflects on the emotions evoked by the story and shares these feelings with the group. This fosters a supportive and reflective environment, enabling collective understanding.
3. **Participatory action research through memory spaces**. This method engages individuals in their immediate geographical context by deploying a participatory action research (PAR) process. It begins with an experience-based introduction to memory spaces in the local community. These spaces may include: outdoor sites (trails, execution walls, mass graves, commemorative monoliths, *stolpersteine*, memorial plaques, etc.); indoor spaces (museums, memory centres, and repurposed prisons or concentration camps, etc.); and ephemeral spaces (temporary exhibitions such as those held at the L'Etno Museum in Valencia in 2023 and 2024, which have proven particularly valuable). The PAR process involves the following sequence: creating a his-

torical contextualisation, which begins with visits to memory sites to learn about the historical background; developing an understanding of local repression, which involves researching the local contexts through community engagement with local archives; developing proposals for community action, which entails encouraging participants to design initiatives to transform the social reality; returning knowledge to the community, which could involve fostering collective ownership of local history; and performing continuous assessment, ensuring the community reviews ongoing actions.

4. **Healing circles in rural areas**. Based on testimonies collected during the interviews, healing circles are proposed to address the challenges of breaking the silence entrenched by fear in rural environments. Victims' relatives gather in these circles to process their pain by narrating their experiences, listening to one another, and fostering an atmosphere of healing. This would involve understanding and expressing the suffering endured over the years, using words that had been previously buried and left unsaid. Additionally, it is crucial to include the descendants of perpetrators in a second phase. This allows for the recognition of the violence committed by their ancestors through the truth-telling process. Ultimately, the aim is to bring together the descendants of both victims and perpetrators to mitigate and share the pain collectively.
5. **"Stories against oblivion"**. This initiative involves creating a podcast to be broadcast via digital media, aiming to generate meaningful experiences and strengthen community bonds through intergenerational communication and cooperation, encouraging a shared educational experience. The initiative includes conducting interviews with families, delving deeply into human communication, uncovering buried words, and fostering an intergenerational understanding of emotions. The process addresses key aspects such as: when and how they first learned about what had happened to their ancestors; how denied grief was experienced within the family; and their reflections on the exhumation process and what it has meant to them.
6. **"Guardians of memory"**. This initiative highlights the emotional significance of objects preserved by widows as affective treasures. Using the group technique of a "public interview" with key individuals who have experienced the generational transmission of trauma and denied grief, the project explores: the context of political violence, investigating the historical backdrop of the overthrow, the war, the post-war period and the dictatorship, focussing on the repression of widows and women; and secondly, the role of objects in the home, discussing with participants the importance of these objects, their placement in the home, whether they remained with the family over

generations or were recovered during exhumations, and their current value as treasured possessions. The goal is to uncover the significance of these objects for the victims and to establish their function as bridges between the victims and their descendants, facilitating the processing of grief. Major insights are gathered in order to inspire artistic or other initiatives to disseminate the knowledge gained among society.

The implementation of these proposals remains pending. A systematic evaluation of their application is necessary to refine their design or to explore other social intervention projects related to democratic memory and the processing of grief. This aligns with the principles of social work as a profession rooted in human rights and social justice. By deploying socio-educational interventions, the aim is to foster collective awareness that enables society to close its open wounds and overcome the democratic shortcomings that remain unresolved in the country.

6. Conclusions

Despite the existence of a significant body of international and national legal frameworks —dating back to the late 1970s and coinciding with the period known as the "transition to democracy"— which compels the Spanish state to recognise (and guarantee the exercise of) the right of Franco regime victims to truth, justice and reparation, it was not until 2022 that the Democratic Memory Law was enacted. According to official data from the Ministry of the Interior, there are currently at least 2,567 mass graves, and an estimated 114,000 individuals remain missing in Spain. One direct consequence of this lack of transitional justice and reparation for victims is that families —particularly spouses, children, and grandchildren— have been unable to process and seek closure with regard to their grieving. This grief remains denied as long as it cannot be resolved with dignity, resulting in suffering that has often been unconsciously transmitted across generations.

The most significant findings of this research regarding denied grief and its transmission to the present day include the imposed silence, binding objects, and generational transmission of trauma. These findings formed the basis and justification for six specific disciplinary proposals for professional intervention to address the issue: dialogue-based gatherings inspired by graphic novels; the genogram narrative as a thread of family history; participatory action research through memory spaces; healing circles in rural areas; a podcast entitled "Stories against oblivion"; and "Guardians of memory".

The research set out in this paper highlights the potential of social work to play a significant professional role in addressing the need for Spanish society to process grief through specific action proposals. We firmly believe in the substantial contributions social work can make to the field of

democratic memory, particularly through the delivery of socio-educational interventions that provide professional support, accompaniment and empowerment to individuals, families, groups and communities in processes of social recognition, understanding and grief resolution. Initiatives for which there is broad scope include assisting victims' families during exhumation processes, working collaboratively with other professionals involved in memory-related activities and contributing to non-formal education initiatives. These efforts can foster critical awareness about events in our recent history, connect memory associations with educational and social institutions, and create intergenerational connections that generate communicative synergies based on transformative and critical dialogue. These actions, ultimately, aim to build a more emancipatory present.

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