

‘Enemy of the People’: Family identity as Social Cure and Curse dynamics in contexts of  
human rights violations

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**Abstract**

Although Social Cure research shows the importance of family identification in one’s ability to cope with stress, there remains little understanding of family responses to human rights violations. This is the first study to explore the role of family identity in the collective experience of such violations: meanings ascribed to suffering, family coping strategies, and family-based understandings of justice. Semi-structured interviews ( $N=27$ ) with Albanian dictatorship survivors were analysed using Social Identity Theory informed thematic analysis. The accounts reveal Social Cure processes at work, whereby family groups facilitated shared meaning-making, uncertainty reduction, continuity, resilience-building, collective self-esteem, and support, enhanced through common fate experiences. As well as being curative, families were contexts for Social Curse processes, as relatives shared suffering and consequences collectively, whilst also experiencing intergenerational injustice and trauma. Although seeking and achieving justice remains important, the preservation of family identity is one of the triumphs in these stories of suffering.

Keywords: trauma; justice; family identity; Social Cure; Social Curse; dictatorship.

## Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War (WWII), over half of all countries have experienced prolonged and mass human rights violations (hereafter ‘violations’) due to major armed conflict or autocratic/dictatorial regimes (Marshall & Cole, 2008). These violations include extreme life events and denial of civil/political rights; the human cost of such acts is hard to measure, and spans generations (Kemp, 2016; Merrouche, 2011). Researchers have tried to understand the psychological impact of such violations, and factors that may foster survivors’ resilience and/or vulnerability (Johnson & Thomson, 2008; Pitman et al., 2008). This research takes a predominantly intra-/interpersonal focus, often ignoring the relevance of the social context within which violations occur (Silove, 1999; Summerfield, 2008), and the fact that coping strategies are often inherently social (Slavin, Rainer, McCreary, & Gowda, 1991). Indeed, people experiencing violations frequently gain much-needed resources from their social group memberships (e.g., their family group; Lee & Anh, 2012), but such groups may also be a source of stress (Swartzman, Sani, & Munro, 2016), and even simultaneously supportive and stressful (Kellezi, Bowe, Wakefield, McNamara & Bosworth, 2019). Hence, there is a need for a theoretical approach that can conceptualise the complex interactions within social groups in stressful contexts: a perspective offered by the Social Identity Approach (SIA; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

### Groups as Cure

A central SIA premise is that group identification is an essential part of the human experience (Tajfel, 1981). Identification refers to the sense of self derived from groups we identify with, which, when internalised, influences behaviour, thought, and emotions. Growing evidence demonstrates that group identification buffers the negative effects of stress (Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018; Jetten et al., 2017) and extreme life events

(Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009; Kellezi, Reicher, & Cassidy, 2009; Muldoon et al., 2017). Group identification can impact on primary appraisal (i.e., whether a situation is deemed threatening, e.g., Levine & Reicher, 1996) and secondary appraisal (i.e., one's ability to deal with a stressor using internal (e.g., coping) and external (e.g., support) resources; Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These processes lie at the core of the literature expounding the way in which social identities enhance or damage members' wellbeing, named 'The Social Cure' (Haslam, Jetten & Haslam, 2012; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, Haslam, 2009;) and 'The Social Curse' (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), respectively (for recent respective reviews see Jetten et al., 2017; Wakefield, Bowe, Kellezi, McNamara, & Stevenson, 2019).

Social Cure processes pertain to the health and well-being benefits derived from group membership. These benefits are strongest when members subjectively identify with their group (rather than just experiencing contact), creating a sense of belonging, connection, and commitment to the group and its values (e.g. family, Sani, Herrera, Wakefield, Boroch, & Gulyas, 2012). Benefits are also stronger in high esteem groups (DeMarco & Newheiser, 2019). These feelings enhance health/wellbeing through numerous processes. For instance, stronger group identification leads to more mutual and positive support exchange (Haslam et al., 2005; Haslam, et al, 2018), and expectations that support will be forthcoming when needed; in part through members' sense of common fate (Drury, Brown, González & Miranda, 2016). Such support can influence appraisal of potentially distressing situations and can foster a sense of efficacy to deal with stressors (Haslam, et al., 2005). For example, crowd identification can reduce safety-related concerns with overcrowding by fostering the belief that the crowd will be supportive (Alnabulsi & Drury, 2014). The SIA analysis of support thus goes beyond the interpersonally-focused support literature by revealing the important role played by group membership in determining when, how, and from whom

support is most beneficial, as well as the important implications of this collective support for members' wellbeing (Haslam et al., 2019). Social identity research also provides evidence of the transformative power of group memberships during distress. For example, stronger identification can enhance one's ability to cope with stressors (Drury, 2018), increase perceived personal control (Greenway et al., 2015), encourage members of a low-status group to act collectively to reduce inequality (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), and even lead to positive psychological outcomes following trauma (Muldoon et al., 2019).

Social Cure research shows that the ability to maintain group memberships and social connections, including family (Kaur & Kearney, 2013; Miller, Wakefield, & Sani, 2017) when experiencing significant life events, a process outlined in the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC: Jetten & Pachana, 2012), can provide a sense of continuity and temporal endurance (Smeekes, Verkuyten, Celebi, Acarturk, & Onkun, 2017) as well as a renewed appreciation of social identity resources (Muldoon et al., 2019).

### **Groups as Curse**

Group membership can also be a source of Social Curse, defined as intergroup/intragroup processes which harm health and wellbeing directly or indirectly (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; Wakefield et al., 2019). Social Curse research at the intergroup level highlights the negative impact of intergroup stigma/discrimination on wellbeing and on people's capacity to deal with stressors (Kellezi et al., 2019; Stevenson, McNamara & Muldoon, 2014). DeMarco and Newheiser (2019) argue that such negative effects derive from the inability of in-groups to properly satisfy psychological needs. However, this negative impact can be reversed, in part, by the benefits derived from group social support (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999), and sense of purpose resulting from group identification (Celebi, Verguyten & Bagci, 2017). At intragroup level, Curse processes relate to group members being excluded/punished when perceived to have violated group norms

(Kellezi & Reicher, 2014), group norms encouraging problematic behaviour (e.g., binge-drinking; Livingstone, Young & Manstead, 2011), and stressors derived from sharing ingroup suffering (Kellezi et al., 2019). The Social Curse can maintain and increase intergroup divisions, create new intragroup divisions, reduce the likelihood of seeking/receiving much-needed ingroup help, and/or undermine coping resources (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; 2019; Stevenson et al., 2014; Bowe et al., 2019; for a review see Wakefield et al., 2019).

While Social Curse processes are usually explored in the context of human rights violations/inequality/trauma, the occurrence of Social Cure processes in such contexts remains under-studied and thus under-appreciated, as is the interplay between Cure and Curse processes. This interplay refers to the same group identity (e.g. family member or detainee) becoming a source of both Social Cure and Social Curse within the same context, based on the different mechanisms at play (e.g. support versus shared emotional burden; Kellezi et al., 2019). In the next section we outline Social Cure and Curse research that is directly relevant to understanding extreme life events.

### **Group Identity and Experiences of Extreme Life Events**

Group identification can determine the frequency of exposure and perceived severity of extreme life events, such as mass human rights violations. At the core of many such violations is the deliberate assault on what the person represents and values, with the aim of dehumanising, degrading and isolating them from families/communities, and perpetuating fear, uncertainty, and distrust, destroying social cohesion (Patel, Kellezi & Williams, 2014). For example, gender-based violence during conflict (e.g., war-time rape) is identity-motivated (Sideris, 2003): used to violate and express power, but also to destroy valued social fabric. The gendered identity components of these acts affect their perceived severity and lead to further victimisation (Kellezi & Reicher, 2014). This latter research found that perceptions of war-time rape in Kosovo were demarcated by the twofold negativity ('double

insult') of the experience: it was perceived as traumatic due to its forceful nature, but also because it violated valued Kosovar norms of female 'sexual purity', undermining the survivors' national identity membership, and promoting damaging intragroup Social Curse processes, such as stigmatisation, exclusion and withholding of support.

On the contrary, extreme events that are experienced as identity-affirming (e.g., a parent protecting their children during war) are associated with pride and can be integrated into valued social norms/narratives, serving as Social Cure (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012). Thus, while the group-related nature of extreme events has negative implications for people's lives, being able to identify with a group (or multiple groups, e.g. nation, family, survivor of trauma) can provide many resources that help cope with and make sense of violations. Multiple-group membership is clearly established in SIA as is the fact that all of these groups could be influential for health and wellbeing and enable Social Cure and/or Curse processes (Jetten et al., 2015). However, for most people, there is one fundamental social group that is likely to be prevalent and remain salient during mass community-based human rights violations: the family.

### **Family Relationships and Family Identification in Social Cure and Curse Literature**

While the family shares key features with other social groups (e.g., being a collective with shared norms/values, rather than the sum of individual members), it is the 'first group' for the majority of people, one to which they tend to have lifelong membership (Klein & White, 1996), commonly the most critical foundation for wellbeing. However, the mechanisms of Social Cure (e.g., belonging, support, meaning making, continuity, and efficacy) and Curse (e.g. loss, exclusion, shared emotional pain, discrimination) within family groups are shared with other groups, as evidenced by growing literature. Social Cure research shows that family identification is associated with greater life satisfaction (Sani et al., 2012)

and collective continuity (Herrera et al., 2011), and lower depression, stress (Sani et al., 2012), post-traumatic stress (Swartzman et al., 2016), psychological distress (Miller, Wakefield, & Sani, 2015), paranoid ideation (Sani, Wakefield, Herrera, & Zeybek, 2017), loneliness and sleep problems (Wakefield et al., 2020), and financial distress (Stevenson et al., 2020). This is due to the family's fundamental influence in most people's lives, and the important role family support and family identification play in buffering the impact of stress and discrimination (Rodriguez, 2019; Tummala-Nara, 2012; Wei, 2013). Families also enhance wellbeing through participation, inclusion, and belonging, fostered through partaking in events such as family meals, celebrations, and holidays (Hanke et al., 2016).

There is also growing recognition in the Social Cure literature of the way in which families protect members by providing a source of self-continuity: family membership affords a sense of 'collective continuity' when the family is perceived as an enduring entity moving through time (Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008). Sani et al., (2008) showed that collective continuity can be a source of resilience in times of distress; it also enhances intragroup connections, group pride, and group purpose. Families also provide continuity via traditions and culture, which are positively associated with family functioning and psychological well-being (Herrera, et al., 2011). Sharing family stories facilitates the passing of experiences and narratives from one generation to the next (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008). This sharing is beneficial for children's sense of self, providing a historical context and helping situate them within family narratives, thus furnishing them with a sense of place, safety, and family identity.

There is also evidence that family dynamics can transform and be transformed during stressful times. Acero, Cano-Prous, Castellanos, Martin-Lanas and Canga-Armayor (2017) show how an individual's illness increased family identification by experiencing the illness



collectively. Thus, family can be integral in helping people cope with extreme life events, especially in family-oriented cultures (Acero et al., 2017; Torres & Santiago, 2018).

However, just as collective processes within families (and groups in general) can enhance wellbeing, they can also lead to vulnerability: for instance, low family cohesion (i.e., lack of family support/inclusion) predicts greater PTSD symptoms among maltreated youth (Kaur & Kearney, 2013). Parental exposure to trauma can also promote depression and perceived discrimination in the next generation, making them more reactive to stressors (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2011) and likely to face additional stressors (Bombay Matheson & Anisman, 2014). This highlights the potential for the family, as a social group, to be a source of extreme event-related Social Curse processes, leading to negative consequences. For example, social exclusion can follow the experience of identity-violating extreme life events, leading to outcomes such as broken relationships, withholding of social/financial support, lack of recognition of one's suffering, and exclusion from family/community events; ultimately creating feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and injustice (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012, 2014).

Research has also shown that the family's exposure to the individual's stressors can add to the distress of all members (Llamas, 2018). Kellezi and colleagues' (2019) Social Cure and Curse research with immigration detainees who struggle with the perceived societal illegitimacy of their extremely stressful experiences reveals such processes: though families could be valuable sources of support and coping, some participants did not seek help from their families for fear of burdening loved ones with their suffering, and indeed were concerned with the suffering they were inevitably causing to their families. For rape survivors whose 'honour' was strongly linked to that of the family, experience of gender-based violence in war was perceived as shameful to them and family members who could not protect them (Kellezi & Reicher, 2014). While the Social Cure and Curse approaches

outlined above are increasingly concerned with experiences of extreme events and injustice (both of which lie at the core of violations), the role of family identification on the impact of and responses to such experiences remains unstudied despite its potential centrality to experiences.

### **The Present Research**

SIA research thus suggests that whilst the family is an important group, it can be the source of both benefits and costs during times of distress, at times simultaneously. The precise role of the family in mediating the experiences of shared extreme life events and injustice, especially in the long-term, remains unclear and understudied in the Cure/Curse literature, as is the interplay between Cure and Curse. It is likely that this critical social group is even more pivotal in cultural contexts where the family is culturally revered, as well as in contexts where the targeted individual's family is likely to experience the same suffering/injustice as the individual. We thus take a SIA approach in investigating the role played by the family in affecting how people experience, appraise, and cope with human rights violations in a location where both these cultural contexts apply: dictatorial Albania.

### **The Research Context**

Like neighbouring countries, Albania faced violations following the establishment of the communist dictatorship (hereafter 'dictatorship') after WWII, which lasted until the early 1990s (Fevziu, 2016). An estimated 6,000 people were killed and 100,000 (around 5% of the population) imprisoned/interned. Three decades after the dictatorship's end, many families remain unaware of loved ones' fates (Hosken & Kasapi, 2017). The dictatorship denied citizens their political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, but the harshest punishment - denial of right to life and freedom - was reserved for those considered a threat

to the dictatorship. Such individuals were labelled ‘enemies of the people’, defining them as a threat to the existence of Albania itself. One could be labelled an ‘enemy’ for trivial reasons, or for representing political/religious ideologies deemed to be inappropriate (Pllumi, 1995).

Once an ‘enemy’ was targeted, their families also suffered violations such as denial of the right to education, work, healthcare, and free movement (Kellezi, Guxholli & Stevenson, 2018; Qazimi, Hoxha, Runa, Doci, Kamski, & Kurti, 2017). The *Encyclopaedia of the Victims of the Communist Terror* (2017) documents whole families being banished to remote and economically-deprived villages. The family-focused nature of the punishment was especially affecting for two reasons. First, because Albania was a collectivist society where family-based support is highly valued, and denying/undermining these links was a cruelly-effective punishment. Second, preservation of family reputation and social standing in front of other community members was vital in Albanian culture (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), so ‘blacklisting’ an entire family through punishment had severe cultural implications. The extent of the suffering caused by these family-oriented punishments and violations is unclear, but an appreciation of the role of family ties, provided by the SIA, is required in order to fully understand the experiences and consequences of dictatorial crimes.

The present study focuses on such issues by taking a human rights approach to health which focuses on economic, social and cultural rights as well as political and civil rights determining health. These include freedom from arbitrary interference with family life, right to participate in cultural, civil and political life of community/nation without oppression or discrimination, accessibility to power, decision-making, and redress. The Albanian dictatorial context enables exploration of how family identity dynamics influence, and are influenced by, extreme life events and injustice through violation of human. The extent to which the family group can facilitate coping and meaning-making in such contexts will be investigated, as will the long-term Social Cure and Curse effects reverberating across generations in the

aftermath. Using semi-structured interviews, the present study investigated three research questions:

1. How were participants' experiences of state-perpetrated punishment shaped by their family membership, as well as the locatedness of their families within their local communities?
2. What resources and resilience did family identity and family dynamics provide participants in their attempts to cope with and resist punishment?
3. How did the unique properties of family identities serve to perpetuate and transmit feelings of injustice and lack of redress over time?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 survivors of dictatorship crimes (widely recognised as a 'persecuted class'). The participants had experienced (either personally or via close family members) imprisonment, internment, and/or violation of civil, political, social, economic, or cultural rights (for participants' details, see Table 1). Participants were recruited through the Albanian Institute of the Study of the Crimes and Consequences of Communism, personal contact and snowballing. The interviews were conducted in Albanian by the first two authors and a research assistant. The study was approved by Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee and was guided by APA (2017) and BPS (2018) ethical guidelines. Decisions relating to ethical, methodological, and researcher characteristics, were guided by the COREQ quality assurance checklist (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

## **Analytic Technique**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using SIA theoretically-guided thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). The analysis was contextualist, acknowledging individual meaning-making (essentialist approach) and social context (constructionist approach). It aimed to identify key themes across participants (repeated patterns of meaning), thus capturing important ideas relevant to the research questions (i.e., family resources used to cope with violations). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step rigorous procedure. The entire data corpus was coded (semantic and latent meanings captured). Only data relating directly to the research questions were used in this analysis. The aim was to provide rich descriptions of theoretically important themes (necessary for this under-studied topic), rather than providing a general overview of the whole dataset. Identification of codes took an inductive, data-driven approach in relation to novel features of the data and a deductive approach in response to data relating to theory (e.g., mechanisms of Social Cure/Curse). The first author familiarised herself with the data (step 1) through reading field-notes and transcripts and listening to audio-recordings several times while taking notes about potential codes (e.g., collective efficacy). Initial wide-ranging codes that were data-driven (e.g., humiliation) and theory-driven (e.g., meaning-making) were then generated (step 2) from the whole dataset using NVivo software. Codes were sorted into candidate themes (step 3), including extracts that both supported and/or contradicted the general arguments of that theme (e.g., family separation/maintenance of relationships). A theme identified a unique, novel, and research question-relevant pattern that was repeated across various participants. The identified themes were then reviewed (step 4) rigorously through discussion with the wider research team. This stage aimed to identify coherent yet distinguishable themes, as well as establish broad over-arching themes and narrower sub-themes. Once a thematic map was identified and agreed, themes were refined

and labelled (step 5), through discussion and approval by all authors. The final step (step 6) involved choosing which extracts to present in the manuscript in order to illustrate each theme/sub-theme appropriately and embedding them in the narrative of the manuscript. Ellipses (...) indicate when an extract has been edited for brevity, and extracts are preceded by participant pseudonyms. Age and gender are also included.

## **Reflections**

The research topic was potentially distressing, so all the interviewers had a psychology/psychiatry background to enable them to address potential participant distress. Several participants reported a strong desire and responsibility to inform current debate and research, perceiving the interview process as a form of justice through which they could document their truth and have their experiences validated (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017; Patel, et al., 2014). Indeed, SIA research explains how the centrality of a particular identity (e.g., a justice-seeker) increases willingness to engage with that activity (Haslam et al., 2019); in this case seeking justice and documenting the trauma.

Two out of the three interviewers come from persecuted families, and all three interviewers lived their childhood during the Albanian dictatorship. This identity-related motivation for collaboration based on common group membership (e.g., between participant and researcher) enabled establishing trust and enhanced willingness to participate (Haslam et al., 2019) as well as enhanced perception of one's suffering being understood (Kellezi et al., 2019).

## **Results**

Three primary themes were identified (see Table 2). The first relates to the collective and familial nature of the punishment at the core of the human rights violations. The second

relates to family responses to the human rights violations during the dictatorship, and the third to the intergenerational appraisal and response to the human rights violations.

(TABLE 3)

### **Theme 1: The Collective Nature of Human Rights Violations**

Theme 1 explores how these violations were (and still are) perceived and experienced through the lens of family identity. Subtheme 1 examines how families were explicitly targeted by the dictatorship, and subtheme 2 how communities then punished these families.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Families as Targets**

Many participants believed their persecution was identity-motivated due to their/a family-member's political beliefs, education, or economic/social position, which ultimately led to the whole family being targeted. Participants explained this family-based chain of persecution:

#### **Extract 1**

Mira: "This [her father's views] was not liked by the Communist Party.(...) So, he suffered all his life for this. It is because of this that our family treatment started. We were interned to [city] and stayed there for 45 years. We had to study Marxism and Leninism, and the Workers' Party ideology every year and we had to study the big victories of the Workers Party against its enemies.(...) every year I had to suffer the de-masking of my father's name.(...) they caused psychological damage from especially the young age, in children. So, a 15-year-old girl had to face a hostile public environment, where all her friends are telling her that her father is the enemy. I was not allowed to study at university as the daughter of the enemy.(...) When we got married, they banished us to a village as we were not good enough for the city.(...)"

both my children were born in the village and I had no material conditions to look after them.” (69 years, Female)

Mira’s account highlights the suffering/denial of rights that several generations experienced because of shared group identity. The initial ‘threat’ (Mira’s father) was punished, but by punishing the wider family, the dictatorship could hold power over generations, through ensuring they experienced social isolation and powerlessness. Several of these rights violations permeate the autobiography of family members like Mira. Collectively, they undermine perceived family continuity (Sani et al., 2008) through denying the family their anticipated future and replacing it with a new narrative, which Mira defines by the yearly revisiting of her father’s ‘crimes’, and the negative impact on her career, prosperity, and children. Similarly, gender-based violence in war aims to deny the group its prosperous future and role in society (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012).

Mira’s account of suffering highlights the deep psychological impact of shared fate and suffering, exacerbated by purposeful public humiliation. Family members were forced to listen to antagonistic language about their ancestors/relatives. Other accounts support this purposeful punishment ‘*in A-level exams being forced to talk about the congress where father was punished*’ (Bora). The impact of familial (and other groups) denigration and denouncement remains under investigated in SIA research, which typically focusses on non-family-based discrimination. Nonetheless, the SIA would predict that denigration/denouncement may foster strategies of individual mobility, allowing members to protect themselves by distancing from the target family member (Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990). However, accounts such as Mira’s describing a life-long narrative of group-mediated punishment suggest strong and impermeable family bonds, making public denigration especially painful and humiliating. Like Mira, most participants talked about how persecution experiences have impacted their own children, highlighting the



trauma's intergenerational nature. Parents reported how difficult it was to watch powerlessly as their children suffered:

### **Extract 2**

Bardhyl: "The horrible thing was for the parent rather than for me, as a parent, rather than myself. Do you understand? That I thought, yes, I have had it, but him (his son), what was his fault?" (76 years, Male)

As Bardhyl's experience illustrates, the collective nature of the trauma weighed heavily on parents who could not fulfil their normative protector role. Bardhyl describes how difficult it was to accept that one's child is being persecuted for something for which they have no responsibility. Mira's account (extract 1) also hinted at this collective sense of reduced parental efficacy: not only are parents unable to protect their children, but they also observe how their own parents were unable to protect them (see also extract 5) leading to collective lack of efficacy (Kellezi et al., 2019). Whilst this sub-theme outlines the collective nature of suffering, the next discusses the collective nature of the punishment.

### **Sub-theme 1.2: Community Punishment of Families**

Punishment was enacted in every aspect of life, including exclusion and/or attack from the community. In a traditional communal culture, where joy and grief are shared with others, breakdown in social interactions between the 'enemy' family and the wider community was particularly painful. This highlights the harshness of the dictatorship and its impact on communities (a type of collective trauma), as community members ostracised 'enemy' families to prevent their own persecution or due to willing compliance. However,

the focus of this study is on the experience of the family suffering enacted by the community.

Gezim explains how his family's community relations were affected:

### **Extract 3**

Gezim: "Certainly, we did not go for the New Year to celebrate like that, go to each-other [families], we were banned. 'No, you're ruining my reputation', they would say."

Interviewer: "Could you not go to your relatives?"

Gezim: "Absolutely."

Interviewer: "Did they come to you?"

Gezim: "Those that were like me, yes."

Interviewer: "Persecuted?"

Gezim: "Persecuted. Not the other families. Neither were other families coming to us. For example, if my dad died, the members of the village would not attend the funeral because it was a criminal family. A criminal had died. I just buried my father with my brother and two sisters and two brothers-in-law. They [community] didn't come, no one came. Even on the street when you would pass the villagers, they did not express condolences at all, at all. (66 years, Male)

Like Gezim, many participants describe how families were societally ostracised, forcing them to consider carefully with whom to associate, thereby creating intra-community distrust. Gezim's account highlights the family's exclusion from celebrations (New Year is Albania's biggest celebration), and he recalls funerals where even the dead remained

‘enemies’. Dead ancestors (just like family and community) are highly respected in Albania, making the exclusion even more problematic, and negatively influencing the meaning-making (appraisal) around the exclusion. By forcing communities to punish/isolate ‘enemy’ families, the dictatorship created divisions within the community, and fostered clear intergroup boundaries (‘enemy’ vs. ‘non-enemy’ families), which were enforced across generations, even after death. This supports other research evidencing the impact of community alienation on people’s experiences of trauma. For instance, although in a different context and reflecting different dynamics, experiences of community alienation contributed to traumatic responses among Aboriginal children placed in Indian residential schools (Bombay et al., 2014). A sense of common fate and community identity are important prerequisites for intragroup support provision (Drury, 2018). Thus, in the Albanian context, community exclusion denied families access to the community resources and community identity continuity needed for coping with the dictatorship. This potentially added to their negative appraisals of events, thereby creating a Social Curse of ‘double suffering’ (cf. Kellezi & Reicher, 2014)<sup>i</sup>. Ultimately, collective identity mediates participants’ experiences of suffering: first, because punishment is explicitly targeted at the whole family, and thus affects the experiences of contemporary and future family members; and, secondly, because these families are then excluded from other important groups, especially their community.

## **Theme 2: Family Responses to Distress and Human Rights Violations**

Theme 2 focuses on how families responded to violations. It involves two sub-themes, which respectively examine how families were (or were not) able to maintain intragroup connections, and how family members were able to support each-other during the violations.

### **Sub-theme 2:1 Maintaining Family Connections: Splitting or resisting**

Participants frequently spoke of family transformation and adaptation during the dictatorship. Following a family member being labelled as an ‘enemy’, relations were transformed, sometimes resulting in family separation due to enforced physical distancing, prohibited contact, or choice. Nonetheless, there were also cases where bonds were maintained, despite the potential consequences:

#### **Extract 4**

Flora: “Everyone would freeze when they learned that, for example, someone was accused<sup>ii</sup>, suppose, uncle, what will happen to us now?” It did not matter if he lived in a separate home. In two generations, three generations they would persecute you.(...) My father's brother was in prison.(...) as a result, my mother did not see her people in [name of country], but also her father’s family abandoned her because they had a high position in Albania and couldn’t come close even if they loved her very much. Her brother would visit the city and come and see her for 30 minutes in the dark in secret.”  
(70 years, Female)

Like all participants, Flora speaks of fear (‘everyone would freeze’) surrounding families being labelled as ‘enemy’, thus making association with one’s family a continuous threat: a Social Curse. Flora describes (without attributing any blame) her grandfather’s family’s decision to separate from her mother, despite having ‘loved her very much’, because of the consequences for the family and loss of their ‘high position’. Those with high status were concerned with maintaining their group status, collective self-esteem and access to rights/material resources. Thus, separation avoided spreading this Social Curse across the family. However, it was not always possible for family members to engage in this social

identity strategy of transforming intragroup relations into intergroup interactions by separation from one's 'enemy' family. Punishments were enforced across the intergenerational wider family (see extract 1 and 2), leading to a shared sense of common fate, which is discussed in the next sub-theme. In all cases, fear became embedded in family relations, leading most to live in continuous uncertainty, and turning once-valued family connections into potential Social Curses. Separations are particularly problematic in a context where people need support in order to cope with distress as outlined in the SIMIC application to trauma (Kellezi et al., 2019; Muldoon et al., 2019). In such situations, important sources of wellbeing enhancement, such as family support (Stevenson et al., 2020), belongingness (Celebi et al., 2017), collective efficacy (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), and collective meaning-making (Kellezi et al., 2009) are purposefully denied/undermined. Making the decision to separate or maintain contact involved people having to weigh the benefits of support and connection against the costs of the tangible threat to them/their families, thus highlighting the complex interplay between Cure and Curse processes. Nonetheless, the fact that some people chose separation in order to escape shared punishment highlights the dictatorship's success in breaking family bonds.

Flora's account also illustrates some of her family's choice to maintain familial relationships, and the risky ways in which this was sometimes achieved (e.g., Flora's uncle visiting in secret, after dark) thus revealing that the value of connection outweighed the costs of threat for some individuals. In this context, resistance is a group response enabled by collective bonds and identification. Maintaining meaningful family connection provides a resource for enacting shared resistance (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), thereby functioning as a useful tool for facilitating adjustment during periods of uncertainty. It is also possible that this context of uncertainty, distress, and purposeful targeting of families promoted stronger familial identification, as individuals attempted to reduce feelings of uncertainty via increased

group identification (Hogg, Siegel, & Hohman, 2011). Thus, although interactions may have altered, where maintained, family relations rendered attempts to separate families ineffective, in some cases leading to closer bonds and enabling social support, collective efficacy, and collective meaning-making of narratives surrounding resistance and survival, as we shall explore in the next sub-theme.

### **Sub-theme 2.2 Family as Social Cure**

At a time when the outside world was unpredictable, threatening, and unjust, holding onto one's family identity was a way of feeling secure. Many participants described how their families provided them with principles and values at a time when the world around them seemed to have none. Thus, families served as a source of meaning and value across generations. Nonetheless, families faced difficult choices regarding how to explain the dictatorship to children, and to prepare them for what was to come:

#### **Extract 5**

Gezim: "He [father] fed us love. In addition to love, he told us the truth. 'It is not true, what's been taught to you, for many stories. But you have no right to say that it is not. You know for yourself. But in school you say what the book says.(...) We were forbidden to go to the mosque, to go to church, absolutely.(...) And he taught us to deal with suffering. He would bring us in the middle of the rain and say, 'Let's do this, we'll work this part of the land as it should be(...) 'I am sorry my children, but this job should be done.' i.e., all the work related to the fact that when you grow up you will have my fate, the prison, so we should not surrender before the suffering.'" (66 years, Male)

### **Extract 6**

Bora: “The first thing my parents told me was "Keep your mouth shut, do not look, do not listen. Understand? Do not talk, pretend you don't see, pretend you don't hear, and you will be fine.” (51 years, Female)

These accounts describe the daily suffering and fear experienced by families, but also the strength of the family and its role in guiding meaning-making. Gezim (extract 5) describes how his father prepared his children for the suffering to come and guided their understandings and interpretations of the truth, whilst instructing them on how to be seen to maintain alternative ‘accepted’ views in public. These family interactions also sustained their coping and endurance of their shared fate (e.g., not to give up, be physically prepared, but also work honestly ‘as it should be done’). Similarly, Bora (extract 6) describes how her parents guided her and reassured her (‘you will be fine’) about coping with potential challenges. Both participants deem this truthful information-sharing to be essential to sustain their survival and coping abilities. Their parents trusted them enough to share this knowledge with them, despite the risks of doing so. Gezim’s account also highlights the removal of other potential sources of meaning and support, such as religion, which made parental guidance and familial connections even more important. There are several Social Cure processes in the accounts: family group bonds provide the context for the delivery of various types of social support (including instructional, instrumental, and emotional support), and serve as a valuable source of knowledge (for meaning-making and coping). This highlights the family’s role in providing collective efficacy and reassurance in a context where less risky identities (e.g., community or religion) were not psychologically available (Hogg et al., 2011).

Family also satisfied identity needs that were denied to citizens by the state/community, by for example, providing shared hope that change would come:

**Extract 7**

Gjokë: “We had faith in change, we were motivated by suffering from all that one day would change, we had the motive that would change the system.(...) we had such an awareness that whatever the change was going to be, we would not be vengeful to them [the communists](...) So, we had a family motive, a family awareness, that everything would change.” (65 years, Male)

Family served as a source of shared narrative, consistency, and meaning (hope for change), and these persistent and consensual features of the group narrative created a sense of control for members. The family was at the centre of Gjokë’s account because the dictatorship was defined and interpreted through the sense of ‘we-ness’ (we had faith, we suffered, we had motive, we had awareness). This highlights how family identification enhanced beliefs and hope about the future, whilst also revealing further instruction on coping (i.e., non-vengeance). These accounts point towards intra-family Social Cure processes: meaning, hope, and support are provided in response to shared common fate; a narrative for the suffering which also reduces the uncertainty about the dictatorship and their future. Importantly, this understanding of the suffering is passed on across generations through the sharing of family narratives/stories of hope, maintaining and transmitting the group’s cultural continuity and values (e.g. non-vengeance) (Fivush et al., 2008; Herrera et al., 2011).



Theme 2 explored how families could be transformed into a type of Social Curse such that fear of persecution led to separation and the loss of much-needed family resources. On the other hand (arguably as a response to attempts to remove sources of resilience), prevailing family identities remained significant and beneficial, and were a means of communicating and sharing knowledge, meaning, efficacy, hope, and coping strategies, as well as reducing uncertainty. These diverse benefits are essential in a context of violations, where there is a multitude of distresses, limited resources, reduced efficacy, and the knowledge of purposeful harm. The experience of enduring violations, such as persecution/exclusion from social and economic life based on family identity, led to both Social Cure and Social Curse-based family responses.

### **Theme 3: Family Narratives and Intergenerational Experience of Distress and Human Rights Violations**

Theme 3 explores the intergenerational aspects of these violations. It involves two sub-themes, which respectively examine how the familial nature of the punishment led to positive and/or problematic family narratives, and how these later generations now feel responsible for gaining justice for their ancestors.

#### **Sub-theme 3.1. Family narratives of the suffering**

Despite the context of family-identity based fear and suffering, the predominant narrative among the first (and subsequent) persecuted generations was not of blame and anger towards the 'enemy' family member, but of pride:

### **Extract 8**

Drin: “My grandfather, (...)knew the law very well, it was in the 1944 to the 1950s it was the cream of all intelligence, whether religious, court, or officer, what they were who were in jail at those times, and my grandfather as a judge(...) There were the whole cream [of society]. They [the communists] wiped this cream. They killed, cut, did them, alienated them.” (41 years, Male)

Participants like Drin expressed their awareness of family targeting, and the often-principled actions that their ancestors took against the dictatorship. Across the generations, participants expressed their admiration and pride for their family group, and how previous generations contributed to the nation which led to their persecution. Participants were thus able to ascribe some positive meaning to their family’s suffering through the pride derived from their group membership, and their belief that their ancestors behaved according to valued group norms by resisting the dictatorship. However, here it also serves to a) positively re-appraise the suffering, in stark contrast to the many possible (and concurrent) negative appraisals relating to purposeful harm or b) fight against the dictatorship’s efforts to undermine the family identity.

Simultaneously, however, participants’ views regarding the suffering experienced by their family during the dictatorship remain negative, in part because of targeted denial of economic, educational and political development. While there is preoccupation with the suffering and how senseless it was, there is even more preoccupation with how their ability to achieve economic, political and social redress once the system fell was purposefully undermined:

### **Extract 9**

Bora: “In 1991 [end of dictatorship], this group [the persecuted families] found themselves totally unprepared. This was all well planned. What this means is that we were unqualified, we were uneducated, we had nothing, we were poor. We were confiscated from the beginning(...) So, in 1991 this class found themselves exhausted, totally unprepared. We were uneducated, we were poor, we were hopeless(...). And most of them today see it as their solution to emigrate and at least their children can live a normal reality and escape the crime scene, psychologically distance from the crime scene, it helps psychologically to be more serene and healthy.” (51 years, Female).

Bora’s account (like many others) speaks more widely about where these persecuted families now find themselves: unable to obtain redress or justice. It highlights the dictatorship’s deliberate cultivation of this familial powerlessness and lack of collective efficacy; actions which have affected the families so dramatically that they have abandoned attempts to obtain justice. Instead, some choose to migrate in order to escape the intergenerational Social Curse, thus establishing some psychological acceptance and wellbeing for themselves and their children. Such accounts reinforce the cultural preoccupation with (and perceived value of) the family unit, as parents attempt to improve the lives of their children through making difficult/life-changing decisions (e.g., migration). Moreover, there is a strong sense of the family (and its individual members) being unable to achieve justice, which seems to contradict the benefits (e.g., efficacy) derived from family identification discussed earlier.

### **Sub-theme 3.2: Intergenerational Responsibility for Justice**

As discussed in subtheme 3.1., an essential part of the participants' suffering narratives (especially given the purposeful nature of their victimisation) related to justice and redress. Social identity processes lie at the heart of these narratives because for many participants, family identity and valued family norms defined their understanding of different justice components such as remembrance, revenge, veracity, forgiveness, and blame attribution. Social identity processes were also essential in transmitting narratives across generations. Participants discussed the importance of remembering their collective past, with some emphasising the need for their own children to be knowledgeable of their family's suffering:

#### **Extract 10**

Gezim: "Many erase the crimes (...) every Albanian family that has suffered in the dictatorship has the crimes as a Bible or as a sacred, sacred, non-encroach-able. (...) My children know what tortures have been done to their father, their grandfather. They, my children, know what torture my uncle has endured." (66 years, Male)

The responsibility of not forgetting was clearly reflected in participants' knowledge about their ancestors' persecution. In SIA terms, the preservation and transmission of identity contents is essential for the maintenance of collective continuity, by situating group members within the family historical narrative (Sani et al., 2008). Shared knowledge about intergenerational family history has also been linked with stronger familial bonds, as shared stories allow family narratives to be passed across generations, thereby enabling the younger generation to derive a sense of their place in the family group (Fivush et al., 2008). Some of the younger participants (30 and 39 years old who were infants/not born during the

dictatorship) could cite dates of birth and marriage of the previous 3-4 generations, employment and other details, and reasons for imprisonment and execution. This reflected a strong sense of pride and cultivated knowledge about familial history and ancestors passed through generations. These accounts also emphasise the strong intergenerational connections that families maintain in the present. This is expected in the context of suffering, where one can feel alone and poorly understood, and where shared understanding can become a source of meaning-making (Celebi, et al., 2017; Kellezi et al., 2019) and, as such, a Social Cure. However, such links to one's ancestors can also be a burden, as it would seem subsequent generations are affected by Social Curse processes via their need for justice in the name of their family, the pain of intragroup emotions, the loss of collective efficacy and, as we will see later, intergroup distrust/antagonism (Brancombe et al., 1999). Thus, for the old and new generations of survivors, justice is not complete, which negatively impacts their ability to establish a coherent trauma narrative which is essential for recovery (Van der Kolk, 2014). This Social Curse of shared group pain and burden can negatively impact post-traumatic meaning-making.

Moreover, family identity was so central to the experience of the violations that it also guided definitions/understandings of justice. For instance, many participants argued that family ties prevent justice being served, as perpetrators' children now hold political/governmental power:

**Extract 11**

Eda: "The judges [of the time] have all died. They were my father's age. But their children, their young generation, are now in power." (73 years, Female)

From a social identity perspective, while there is evidence that outgroup responsibility is passed on to new generations (c.f., Branscombe & Doosje, 2004), it is not considered a personal responsibility. Eda is unhappy that perpetrators' children currently hold public office because this interferes with the justice processes by maintaining the power imbalances that were inherent during the dictatorship<sup>iii</sup>. Participants also argue that the intergenerational preservation of the dictatorship's toxic ideology through perpetrators' children now holding office maintains intergroup threat:

**Extract 12**

Erza: "While these [communists in power] are confused, they continue with violence; they try to solve everything with force. There is the defect of our society and why we will never progress: he [communist] has passed it [ideology] on to his son, son of son, narrated to his grandson, so generations go by. And one who thinks he can do differently; his father will reign him back." (78 years, Female)

Erza's account demonstrates how parents' ideologies and control ('reign back') extend across time to children, thus maintaining intergroup fear, distrust, and threat. It is likely that the family-mediated enduring consensus regarding the perceived threat from perpetrators makes the experience more threatening, and stressors seem more severe, thus promoting negative appraisal and serving as a Social Curse. The concern is that negative ideology, such as perceiving force/violence as a legitimate way to achieve goals (a trait frequently attributed to dictatorships) has been passed down through generations, thereby preventing a fair and just future for Albania. Here, the perpetrators' families are treated as homogenous, especially since they threaten the positive identity of the participants' own family groups by denying them justice: another common observation from the SIA literature

(Branscombe & Wann, 1994). The intergenerational transmission of blame is thus manifold. It is a threat to justice ever being achieved, as ‘sons protect their fathers’, but it is also a threat to democracy and future safety ‘*we will never progress*’. Extensive social identity research on intergroup conflict has established how fear, threat, and uncertainty are hard to address, and persist over time (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004). Our data shows how important justice is for each generation, and how understandings of the experiences are influenced by cultural and historical contexts relevant to individuals and their families. Moreover, achieving justice is likely to put additional Social Cure processes into motion, such as collective efficacy, feeling that one (and one’s family) is respected by wider society, and having one’s suffering acknowledged and validated all beneficial for coping with trauma (Fontana & Rosenheck, 1994; Hautamaki & Coleman, 2001; Johnson et al., 1997; Maercker & Muller, 2004).

## **Discussion**

This study explored how family identities shaped experiences of and responses to human rights violations. Several Social Cure and Curse processes took place, often following each other, or coexisting simultaneously.

### **Social Curse Processes**

The accounts reveal Social Curse processes at work, as relatives of ‘enemies’ had their rights negated and were targeted, thereby experiencing constant fear, humiliation, and suffering. The Albanian context provides an example of calculated and sustained efforts often undertaken by perpetrators of violations. In this context, the suppression of ‘enemies of the state’ by the dictatorship was a cold, calculated, and cruel strategy, which deployed the cultural characteristics of the population against itself. Systematically and deliberately, it used familial connections to punish, isolate, and exclude those accused of political dissent. By targeting the loved ones of suspected dissenters, it aimed, and was able, to crush the

familial bonds that might support opposition, and used the local community to ostracise and alienate those associated with its victims. While many political theorists have attempted to explain the complex effects of such state violence, the present paper provides evidence that the SIA can provide a comprehensive and coherent interpretation of victims' experiences: in a very real sense, the dictatorship was demonstrably a master of the 'Social Curse'.

Our analysis of family members' accounts of their experiences attests to the effectiveness of these strategies. The targeting of suspects' families was brutally effective in punishing alleged perpetrators. Sharing a family membership often left individuals vulnerable to this form of persecution, as the punishment of their loved ones added to their own pain vicariously. Forcing family members to denounce the alleged dissenters further served to divide their family units. Indeed, within a society characterised by traditional family values, escape from this damaged identity was nearly impossible. In line with research by Kellezi and Reicher (2012, 2014) the targeting of a valued and central identity (i.e. families) served to divide and isolate individuals from those who could otherwise provide resources in order to help them interpret/cope with these traumatic events.

Our participants' reports of their experiences within the broader community indicated a second level of social violence. The public humiliation of denouncing one's own family members (e.g. in school lessons) was compounded by longstanding cross-generational stigmatisation, whereby affected individuals were excluded from the shared bonds/rituals of communal life. This provides evidence that perceived collective continuity (which is usually considered to have a positive effect) can also be damaging. This finding is in line with continuity work showing how guilt for past war crimes can be attributed to current group members when perceived collective continuity is high (Licata, Klein, Saade, Azzi & Branscombe, 2012; Warner, Kent & Kiddoo, 2016).



The participants described the pain of exclusion derived from loss of contact, but also from not being able to share joyful and sad moments in culturally appropriate ways. The present research thus highlights that expulsion from the community is especially problematic in a context where life is defined by community participation. Notably the key points at which individuals should have been supported and embedded within their communities became points of painful exclusion. Against a background of research attesting to the cumulative benefits of multiple group membership (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes & Haslam, 2009) the stigmatisation and exclusion from multiple groups within the community presents an enhanced Social Curse impact. The current work sheds fresh light on how such exclusion can affect individuals at key junctures across the course of their lifespan. On first inspection, then, it would appear that the dictatorship's use of a Social Curse approach to family persecution was successful. *Our first main finding is therefore that the impact of the Albanian (and other) dictatorship's strategy of targeting families was effective in part through its stigmatising and corrosive effects on family identity, continuity and efficacy.*

### **Social Cure Processes**

Across their accounts of the pain and loss it became apparent that, for many, families were also a source of Social Cure, whereby the identity processes involved in family groups facilitated shared meaning-making, uncertainty reduction, continuity, resilience-building, collective self-esteem, shared understanding, and support through a sense of common fate. Although being defined as an 'enemy of the state' resulted in the division of many families, for some the maintenance of family ties remained possible. Sometimes in secret and at high risk of punishment, families resisted the opprobrium of state and community, leading to maintenance of familial bonds and a sense of control in a context of division and powerlessness (Hosken & Kasapi, 2017). In this case, our research shows that this sense of control and agency can be effective, even in the absence of publicly shared support.

More generally, the need for families to bond together to cope with the challenges of persecution resulted in heightened intragroup resource provision processes. Parents needed to provide dedicated psychological/emotional resources to enable their children to cope with the pressures of exclusion and oppression. Participants described how this care provided meaning-rich resources with which to reappraise their threatening environment. In line with the rejection-identification hypothesis (Branscombe et al., 1999), the bonding resulting from shared social exclusion facilitated access to enhanced provision and receipt of resources within the family. *Our second main finding is therefore that, despite the efforts of the dictatorship, family identity remained a source of resilience and even resistance.*

## **Justice**

Our work has a dual focus on both the historic trauma endured by families and upon their current recollections/perceptions of that trauma. The historical dimension is brought to the fore in a third set of findings which pertain to the role of trauma in undermining or affirming transgenerational continuity. As noted above, the finding that external threat could lead to enhanced intragroup resource provision attests to the resilience of threatened families. However, the coping mechanisms taught to children also present something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand they recognisably facilitate a positive sense of family continuity over time, something known to enhance the positive effects of family identity upon wellbeing. Participants spoke of the pride they had in their family before and after the advent of the dictatorship. On the other hand, this transmission of collective pride also ingrains perceptions of lack of efficacy and injustice which are then carried by family members through subsequent eras, and ultimately transmitted to their children. Again, this supports work by Warner et al., (2016) attesting to the transmission of guilt and characteristics over time when collective continuity is perceived as high. While pride enabled successful coping within the circumstances, it also made it difficult to accept the injustice/lack of collective

efficacy possessed in order to obtain justice. For our participants, injustice was a family concern as well as a social/political concern. There was also concern about burdening future generations with the responsibility for achieving this justice. *Our third finding is therefore that the family identity-based strategies which enable participants to cope with threats may also perpetuate feelings of injustice and of conflict in those directly affected by persecution, and in their children.*

### **Theoretical Contributions of This Work**

The theoretical contribution of the work therefore goes beyond the simple application of the SIA as a heuristic to interpret the experiences of these individuals. Our work demonstrates the unique qualities of family identity which make it susceptible to persecution, but also make it a site of resistance (even when this entails the transmission of trauma and conflict). This adds to a growing body of work indicating that families are much more than simply another social category: they contain inherent properties of continuity, support, and resilience which are embedded in the roles of parent, spouse, child, and sibling; that are encoded in the activities of relationship-building, child-rearing, and socialisation; and that are underpinned by processes of social identification. We argue that these processes are even stronger in family-oriented cultures (Acero et al., 2017) such as communist Albania. Our work thus expands the literature on historical/transgenerational trauma (e.g. Bombay et al., 2014) by: a) highlighting how unresolved justice (post-trauma events) adds to intergenerational stressors; b) describing active family-group mechanisms of coping and resilience; and c) exploring perspectives of first-hand survivors, not just their offspring.

Our work also demonstrates the interdependence of families' identities and the local communities in which they are embedded. Typically, the benefits and negative impacts of social groups are either in isolation from one another or are interchangeable in their effects.

Our work demonstrates that, in this case, family occupies a particular place within local community life. In this context, families are the recognised social unit from which local communities are built, and the fate of individual families rests upon their relationship with this broader community group. As McNamara, Stevenson, and Muldoon (2013) put it, community is both the context and the cohort of local life, and hence a dual focus is needed in order to capture inter-/intra-family and community dynamics, to fully appreciate how they interact to influence their members' wellbeing, especially when those members are facing challenges such as those posed by oppressive regimes.

Next, this research contributes to Social Cure/Curse literature by showing how the two types of processes can co-exist, interplay, and even replace each-other over time (see Figure 1 for a summary of each of these processes and their potential interplay). This reflects the complexity of real-life, and the active processes of collective meaning-making and coping which are further impacted by changes in the wider socio-political context, such as (in)justice. We need to understand Social Cure/Curse within wider societal contexts, and these contexts must be integrated into strategies aimed at improving health/wellbeing alongside strengthening communities and social groups (including families). The present work expands on the Muldoon et al., (2019) review by highlighting the interplay between Curse/Curse processes, historical and intergenerational long-term impact, and additional mechanisms of resilience/vulnerability such as continuity, justice, and resistance within the family context.

This study has limitations. Participants recalled experiences taking place at least three decades earlier, or in a few cases experienced by ancestors. While this means that some events will have been mis-remembered, the paper was primarily concerned with meaning-making and family dynamics. That these relationships between meaning-making and family dynamics were observed so long after the events is testament to the long-lasting effect of

trauma on people's lives. Moreover, the present work aimed to explore whether this trauma would affect later generations and long-term justice efforts, which it was shown to do.

## **Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, our work has several practical implications for understanding/addressing the legacy of trauma across generations. The family- and community-based punishments directed towards 'enemies of the people' by the dictatorship impact several generations, a situation worsened by the inability of the persecuted (and their families/ancestors) to obtain justice. Effective strategies of redressing injustice and addressing the Social Curse of state oppression must therefore take family and intergenerational concerns into account. Our study highlights the important role played by family identity in mediating these traumatic experiences of injustice: a finding which should be integrated into strategies of support for survivors.

Although it is important for survivors to achieve justice to create narratives of triumph, resilience, and fairness, our participants' accounts show that this justice is hard to achieve, but that maintaining family identity is one of the triumphs in these stories of suffering. This framing of powerlessness and suffering within the positive context of the family has important implications for how families understand/respond to violations, and how to obtain a sense of meaning and justice after experiencing such appalling events.

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Table 1

*Participant and interview details*

Participant characteristics	Details
Gender	17 males (63%), 10 females (37%)
Age	$M_{age} = 63$ years, <i>age range</i> = 30-84 years
Recruitment strategy	First, via organisations working with the victims of dictatorship (the Institute for the Study of the Consequences and Crimes of Communism) Second, via personal contacts of the three Albanian researchers who conducted the interviews Third, using snowballing technique
Dates of interviews	August 2016- June 2017
Interview length	$M_{length} = 86.9$ minutes, <i>range</i> = 32-240 minutes
Research aim as introduced to the participants	The study was introduced to participants as research focussing on the psychological impact of the dictatorship
Interview topic guide:	
Information about participants' (and their families')	Can you tell me about yourself? Can you tell me about your family?
Information about experiences of the dictatorship	What happened to you during the dictatorship (local reference to the past)? How did it impact your life?
Information about understandings of crimes and perpetrators	Why did you think this happened to you? Who was responsible for what happened? Why did you think they (those responsible) committed these crimes?
Information about political and socio-legal changes/developments since the dictatorship	What changes have happened since the end of the dictatorship? Have there been any legal changes? What do you think about them?
Information about life in the present	What happened in your life since 1990? How would you describe your life today?

Table 2

*Table of Themes*

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. The Collective Nature of Trauma	1.1 Families as Targets 1.2 Community Punishment of Families
2. Family Responses to Distress and Human Rights Violations	2.1 Maintaining Family Connections: Splitting or resisting 2.2 Family as Social Cure
3. Family Narratives and Intergenerational Experience of Trauma	3.1 Family Narratives of the Suffering 3.2 Intergenerational Responsibility for Justice

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

### **Data storage**

The supporting data are preserved in the NTU Data Archive. Due to the politically and ethically sensitive nature of the research, no interviewees consented to these data being shared. Additional details relating to other aspects of the data are available at <https://doi.org/10.17631/rd-2021-0001-dsfu>.

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<sup>i</sup> We recognise that communities were often forced to enact some of these punishments but exploring this is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> The conviction rate was very high, so mere accusation meant certain punishment, or at least intense suspicion from that moment onwards. Files were opened and maintained from the point of accusation, and trials were predominantly political.

<sup>iii</sup> Banning perpetrators from holding public office is a common transitional justice strategy of institutional reform adopted by many countries, also known as Lustration. This reform relates only to those directly responsible, not their offspring. In the Albanian context, participants argue that responsibility is being transmitted to offspring in two ways. First, the offspring maintain the economic and political power of their ancestors, which enabled them to become leaders and hold strong economic/political power in the present. Second, the offspring purposefully block reforms or justice processes that would expose their ancestors and the crimes they committed. Such debates and issues are still very present in current Albanian society. For example, during the writing of this publication, the head of the Institute for the Study of the Crimes and Consequences of Communism, Agron Tufa, requested asylum in Switzerland following many threats to him and his family. These threats were motivated by his claim that many ex-communists and their offspring hold powerful public posts.