

# HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS: ENGAGING WITH TRANSGENERATIONAL COLLECTIVE TRAUMAS

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A call for a larger consideration of history in management and organization studies suggests a fresh responsibility for business schools to develop historically conscious leaders. As the world is increasingly challenged by social and economic events, organizational actors must better understand and manage inherent emotions and not be limited by bounded rationality. By teaching the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas to two cohorts in an internationally renowned business school in Europe and in Asia, this study explores how historical consciousness can be construed in the context of an executive educational program and the learning consequences of this process over two years. Our findings distill five themes describing the executives' learnings. First, the intervention allowed the participants to experience historical consciousness through (a) personal connections with collective traumas, (b) awareness of the effects of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas, and (c) the development of narrative competence. After two years, the participants identified two additional learnings in their organizational contexts: (d) they became more aware of how they manage their emotions, and (e) they identified perceived changes in their role as leaders. We propose that business schools encourage historical consciousness to better equip individuals in their roles as executives and leaders.

Un appel à une plus grande prise en compte de l'Histoire dans les études de gestion et d'organisation suggère une nouvelle responsabilité pour les écoles de commerce de former des leaders historiquement conscients. Alors que le monde est progressivement soumis à des événements économiques et sociaux, les acteurs organisationnels doivent mieux comprendre et gérer les émotions qui en découlent sans être menés par une rationalité limitée. En enseignant la transmission transgénérationnelle des traumatismes collectifs à deux cohortes dans une école de commerce de renommée internationale en Europe et en Asie, notre étude explore la façon dont la conscience historique peut être interprétée dans le contexte d'un programme de formation des cadres et les conséquences pédagogiques de ce processus au cours de deux années. Nos conclusions font émerger cinq thèmes décrivant les apprentissages des dirigeants. Tout d'abord, l'intervention a permis aux participants d'expérimenter la conscience historique grâce à 1) l'approfondissement de leurs expériences personnelles liées aux traumatismes collectifs, 2) la conscience des impacts de la transmission transgénérationnelle des traumatismes collectifs, et 3) l'évolution de la compétence narrative. Les deux années écoulées, les participants ont identifié deux enseignements supplémentaires dans leurs contextes professionnels: 4) ils sont devenus plus attentifs à la gestion de leurs émotions, et 5) ils ont identifié des changements perçus dans leur position en tant que dirigeants. Grâce aux conclusions de notre étude, nous proposons que les écoles de commerce encouragent la conscience historique afin de mieux équiper les individus dans leur position en tant que dirigeants et leaders.

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We would like to express our gratitude to our associate editor, Gabrielle Durepos, and our reviewers for their dedicated efforts, constructive insights, and knowledgeable remarks throughout our review journey. We would also

like to acknowledge and thank the executives and leaders whose inspirational stories and insights motivated us in this research.

History has always played an important role in education. A recent surge of unsettling events—such as COVID-19, civil wars, political unrest, and global natural disasters—invites a novel reconsideration of the role of history in management science and management education. Specifically, scholars advocating for a historical turn in management thinking call for an increase in historical consciousness (Foster, Coraiola, Suddaby, Kroezen, & Chandler, 2017; Suddaby, 2016; Wadhvani, Suddaby, Mordhorst, & Popp, 2018). Historical consciousness requires an awareness that permits individuals to assess current assumptions by undergoing reflective and reflexive processes through historical thinking. It is a sensemaking process that helps us “interpret the past for the sake of understanding our present and guiding outlooks into the future” (Rüsen, 2012: 523).

This call for historical consciousness in management scholarship parallels the scholarly debate on whether there is a need for more reflexivity and emotional work in management education to enable management students to become more self-aware and to understand how their historical experiences, values, and beliefs can impact their behaviors (Cunliffe, 2002, 2016; Greenberg & Hibbert, 2020; Hibbert, Beech, Callagher, & Siedlok, 2022; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). The call also accompanies a broader management learning debate on the important role of management education and, consequently, business schools, in the context of contemporary turbulent times (Anderson, Hibbert, Mason, & Rivers, 2018; Greenberg & Hibbert, 2020).

Surprisingly, despite the urgency and relevance of this topic, little research has been done to systematically study the effects of engaging with history or historical consciousness in the executive education classroom. Among the few exceptions are the work of Tennent et al. (2020), who explored the use of archives to stimulate historical consciousness in management students, and the work of Hibbert et al. (2022), who examined how individuals can learn from intense emotional experiences through reflexive practices. Nevertheless, what tangible value does history or historical consciousness bring to executive education participants, and how does such an approach impact participants’ awareness or shape their leadership behaviors and attitudes? These questions remain understudied.

With this paper, we aim to contribute to filling this gap. Drawing on Rüsen’s (2004) explanation of historical consciousness, we focus on the following two research questions: (a) How can we construe historical consciousness in the context of an executive

educational program? (b) What are the learning opportunities of this process? To address these questions, we focus on the personal experiences of executive education participants related to the topic of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas. This topic refers to historical atrocities that have caused emotional stress or psychological wounds to a group of people or a society (Tcholokian, Khapova, van de Loo, & Lehman, 2019). We focus on the topic of collective traumas because there is great relevance in the collective or societal responsibilities that leaders and executives could take in response to the continued collective outbreaks, unrest, and anguish.

We carried out our study in two time segments. In the first part of the study, we investigated historical consciousness as a reflexive tool (related to the topic of transgenerational collective traumas) in the context of an internationally renowned executive program in Europe and Asia by engaging 60 international participants and a self-selected group of 18 executives. Our executive participants volunteered to write reflection papers or subsequently participated in interviews to describe what the class topic and module revealed to them to elaborate on the collective traumas with which they identify and to describe any reflections that they had on the topic. Our analysis of the data revealed three themes: (a) personal connections with collective traumas, (b) awareness of the effects of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas, and (c) the development of narrative competence.

In the second part of the study, we conducted a second round of interviews with the same self-selected executive volunteers two years later to investigate the perceived changes of the participants or sensemaking relevant to their exposure to and discussions on the topic of the transmission of collective traumas and historical consciousness, specifically in their professional contexts. In doing so, we identified two additional themes: (d) how the participants manage their emotions and (e) the changes they perceived in their roles as leaders.

With this study, we make two important contributions. First, we propose that executive education programs incorporate histories and collective traumas in their curricula, not as a literacy mechanism but to increase historical engagement to help executives understand themselves in relation to generational stories. Doing so enables executives to “think differently” and to increase their ability to address challenges more proficiently or identify creative mechanisms to address them (Cummings & Bridgman, 2011). Doing so also reinforces the important

role of executive management education in the context of contemporary, turbulent times (Anderson et al., 2018; Greenberg & Hibbert, 2020).

Second, this paper argues for the growing relevance of reflexive processes and emotional work and their consequences for leader development in executive education, the purpose of which is to facilitate executives' ability to identify blind spots, understand the source of their worldviews, and encourage the use of new or unused lenses (Ahonen, 2005; Chia & Morgan, 2016; Cunliffe, 2002; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). Through reflexive processes, executives can learn from vulnerable emotions (Hibbert et al., 2022), better understand their implicit or explicit connections with their history, and potentially embrace new insights and emotionally intelligent opportunities in their roles as organizational actors (Brunninge, 2009; Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Hibbert, Beech, & Siedlok, 2017). Reflexive practices and emotional work can help executives to better understand and address emotions and not be limited to instrumental or rational boundaries (Edling, Sharp, Löfström, & Ammert, 2020; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015).

Our article first presents the literature relevant to the transgenerational transmission of trauma and historical consciousness and examines the potential of historical consciousness as a tool for executive education. Subsequently, we present our study and learnings by exposing the interpreted themes that emerged from the narratives of the executive participants. We conclude by proposing that executive management education programs encourage introspective, reflective, and reflexive processes through histories and collective traumas to enable individuals to become better equipped in their roles as executives and leaders.

### **TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

The transgenerational transmission of "large-scale traumas" such as war, civil unrest, and genocide implies an emotional inheritance by individuals who have an affiliation with such traumas (national, cultural, or religious) (Volkan, 2001). Collective traumas can create a mental imprint of the calamities experienced by one's forebears (Volkan, 2001, 2009), which implies that conscious or unconscious thoughts and emotions are transferred to or inherited by the descendants of traumatized victims, although the descendants may not have witnessed the event. Collective traumas are considered to be inherited or transgenerationally transmitted through family narratives

or testimonies, commemorations, or rituals (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Bilali, 2013; Tcholakian et al., 2019), and the atrocities can be depicted or understood very differently by the descendants than they were by the original family members (Auerhahn & Laub, 1998; Codde, 2009). As described by Neri and cited by Connolly, these "memories without experience" (Connolly, 2011: 612) become an accumulated set of images and moral characteristics that are experienced by affiliated group members or temporally expressed through family and community institutions (Connolly, 2011). Despite the strength and power that these historical testimonies and narratives may have for future descendants, the performative effect that these historical events can have on the ethical, moral, and critical consciousness of the inheritors of trauma remains an open question (Chinnery, 2010).

Numerous studies have demonstrated how collective traumas and historical narratives are passed to a child by a parent or grandparent; this process shapes the descendant's identity and sense of self (Coles, 2011; Tcholakian et al., 2019) since collective traumas form part of the collective memories that are triggered by remembered or deposited memories of events and stories (Kimble, 2006). Collective memory, as such, represents the "spirit" (Leichter, 2012) of the relevant group or nation that has experienced the trauma because the memory preserves the knowledge of the group's culture and identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Olick, 1999). Not every member of a collective group will feel a connection with a common past or a shared trauma. However, many descendants will feel connected with the selected memories or elements that make up their past. Descendants' mental images of their historical past remain alive on an individual basis to foster a sense of identification with the historical heritage (Volkan, 1998). This type of memory cultivates a bond and an affiliation with the past with which descendants identify and which they reinterpret for themselves (Crawford, 2014).

### **COLLECTIVE TRAUMAS AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

Memories of collective trauma help expand the narrative of historical facts that provide an understanding of our identity (Ahonen, 2005; Foster et al., 2017). Collective trauma narratives provide the form and context with which people develop a coherent self (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014) through time and space by providing a frame for historical orientation.

By internalizing collective traumas, descendants develop historical narratives over time to help make meaning of past events and orient the self. Historical narratives on collective traumas constitute how we perceive reality (Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 2005) and help us understand the “whys” and perceptions of past events and lived experiences (Ricoeur, 2004). The transmission of collective traumas can be assessed critically and reflexively, which allows the individual to comprehend, interpret, and use the moral values associated with their historical identity (Gergen, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005; Rüsen, 2004).

Through historical consciousness, the past is represented in the present by revealing its temporal relevance in relation to the present. According to Ahonen (2005: 699), individuals who develop historical consciousness undergo a “transgenerational mental orientation . . . that allows them to have interactions between making sense of the past and constructing expectations for the future.” Historical consciousness differs from simple memory in that the latter allows us to be aware of and literate in the past, but the former involves the development of a relationship between the past and the present (Rüsen, 2004, 2007; Seixas, 2004). It also differs from history, since history is established as information or facts; as such, “history becomes a product and source of human reflexivity” (Suddaby, 2016: 57; Tennent et al., 2020: 4).

The phenomenon of historical consciousness implies that historical events, like collective traumas, if given the opportunity to resurface, are guided by moral issues or develop moral orientations. Individuals can give significance to their past, especially when it is “embedded in the collective consciousness of their group or wider culture of belonging, and through the various processes of group socialization” (Zanazanian, 2015: 18). Historical consciousness can arise when the inheritors of collective traumas have the opportunity to hear temporal narratives and use the experience of the past to make the practical life activities of the present more meaningful (Rüsen, 2007; Zanazanian, 2015). Collective memory therefore serves as a key function in the critical consciousness of descendants, specifically when there is an opportunity not only to understand the collective trauma but also to interpret it as relevant to the self in the present and in the future (Ahonen, 2005; Clark, 2014).

Historical narratives mobilize the development of narrative competence because they establish an identity and translate historical memories and experiences into real intentions and expectations that shape the future (Rüsen, 1987); they can also be

loaded with moral dimensions (e.g., to bear the responsibility of justice for the victims of the collective trauma). This narrative competence develops into a “moral consciousness” (Ahonen, 2005: 703) by transforming historical narratives into a reflexive mechanism so descendants can interpret and orient themselves to historical events (Rüsen, 2004, 2012). Narrative competence implies being attuned to the human or moral elements of history and can help us make meaning of past experiences (Nordgren, 2019). As such, “turning to the past” can help equip individuals with an implicit or explicit connection to their collective trauma to create opportunities to embrace new or different perspectives, insights, and decisions (Brunninge, 2009; Collinson & Tourish, 2015).

### HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Educational programs that address historical teaching, including past collective traumas, tend to focus mostly on historical knowledge or historical awareness to shed light on past and current decisions and behaviors (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Suddaby, 2016; Tennent et al., 2020; Wadhvani et al., 2018), but they do not necessarily apply these teachings to develop historical consciousness (Chinnery, 2010). If addressed efficiently, historical topics such as collective traumas can help students develop a new frame of reference by interpreting historical circumstances and critically questioning past decisions (Nordgren, 2016; Seixas, 2012). To expand this further, reflexive thinking on history can help students to be open and sensitive to the past and help them question their assumptions in relation to their own historical memory. Chinnery (2010) identified this as a “critical” historical consciousness that engages students to question their role in their historical memory, to question their responsibility related to their history, and to question their own identity in this process. This type of critical historical consciousness can help people develop new learning in relation to the past, nudge the soul, and foster prospects for new ways of thinking and behaving (Nordgren, 2016; Rüsen, 2004).

Suddaby (2016) called on experts and academics in management studies to pay attention to how history is used as an instrument in institutions (companies and governments) and to recognize that history is no longer produced for historians. He further called for management studies to take a “historic turn” and be inspired by new possibilities for learning and development; executive students and

practitioners can utilize history to help develop knowledge not only cognitively but also critically. Through a stance of compassion and thoughtfulness toward the past, executive students can “recognize the ethical significance of the individual’s relationship to the past” (Chinnery, 2010: 403). A historic turn in management and executive programs could entail executives interacting with their histories and engaging with the possibility that their collective traumas are connected to their worldview and their social realities.

### **Historical Consciousness as a Way of Sensitizing Participants in Executive Education Programs**

Sharing collective trauma narratives and engaging in mutual dialogs can help stimulate the reflexive insights that facilitate an understanding of how voices from the past seep into our voices today. By introducing a mechanism for critical thinking about historical events and memories, executive programs and teachers can, together with executive students, apply reflexive teaching methods and relationally embodied dialogs (Cunliffe, 2008; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002). Doing so will facilitate the identification of blind spots and untapped lenses that can be beneficial in leading, inspiring, and organizing teams of people, as long as the program and pedagogical process facilitate a safe, contained, and nonjudgmental ecosystem.

Collective traumas can be key learning opportunities for executives to question their own assumptions and beliefs, to become aware of blocked or unaware emotions, and to develop a moral position provided that individuals have space to engage in relationally reflexive dialogs (Hibbert et al., 2022). Reflexive processes, such as historical consciousness, are activated when there is interrelational dialog and when emotional experiences are revealed and shared. As organizational actors, executive educational programs that address historical topics such as collective traumas can enable individuals to become increasingly engaged with, and relate to, others (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015).

Giacalone and Thompson (2006: 270) considered educational curricula related to a human-centered worldview to help leaders of tomorrow “focus on values and traits that are associated with the best of the human condition such as forgiveness, hope, altruism, gratitude, transcendence as well as concern for community, social problems and quality of life.” The reflexive process enabled by executive educational programs that include historical thinking and

historical consciousness can not only allow participants to think about their behaviors and actions or understand the consequences of their decisions or actions but also encourage moral agency.

### **RESEARCH CONTEXT AND SETTING**

This paper draws on an in-depth study of 60 international executives in the context of an internationally renowned executive program in Europe and Asia from two separate cohorts who were part of an 18-month, eight-module executive program at one of the world’s leading business schools. The average age of the executives was 44 with 19 diverse nationalities. These individuals had an average of 20 years of experience, and the gender mix was on average 52% women and 48% men.

As part of the educational program, executives explore topics relevant to their individual, family, community, and organizational roles by discovering the basic drivers of their behaviors and the hidden dynamics of organizations. The topic of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas taught during this particular module is an extension of the topics covered throughout the program, such as family dynamics, the community, and the self.

All 60 executive participants actively participated in the four-hour class module, which consisted of a presentation on the topic of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas, followed by small-group discussions (three or four people per group), before reconvening in the large class discussion. The participants’ stories felt honest, since many expressed their thoughts on the topic, its negative and positive aspects, and the in-group reflections and discoveries they experienced in listening to each other’s stories. These discussions enabled the participants to touch upon anchor points within them to help them realize the existence of unthought knowns (Bollas, 1989) that exist within us with which we can connect, reflect, and engage.

During this module, we noticed an increase in curiosity and interest in the executive participants. Many of them expressed having felt a deep connection with the topic, and some used it as part of their thesis work at the end of the 18-month program. As such, we felt that it was important to capture the relevance of this topic to enhance our knowledge regarding the role of historical consciousness in leadership and management education.

After the module, we invited executives who resonated with the topic to volunteer for a deeper study that was carried out in two parts, as explained

below. As stipulated in the program guidelines, we reiterated verbally to the cohort participants that their participation in the extended study would in no way influence their grades, and we informed them that they would be free to decide to volunteer or withdraw from the study at any time. From the 60 cohort students, 18 volunteered to write reflection papers and participate in the interviews (nine female and nine male). Respecting student boundaries is an important component of the program, and the students were informed (in the program guidelines at the beginning of the program and verbally in class) that their comments, discussions, and reflections would be used as part of this research study anonymously.

The class and group discussions on the transgenerational transmission of collective trauma may have brought forth only salient or selective memories, and the more private self-assessments drawn from the reflection papers and individual interviews gave us the opportunity to observe if the participants reflected on specific collective memories, identified new associations, or addressed events, experiences, or memories that may not have been shared or thought of during the class module or class group exercise (McAlpine, 2016).

### **Facilitating an Open and Free Interrelational Educational Environment**

The studied executive education program is a modular program that entails an ongoing established relationship between the program experts and the executive participants that includes certain agreed-upon conditions, such as the exploration of emotions and (unconscious) personal motives and patterns. The methodology of the program involves not only large-group courses but also preprogram interviews with the participants, one-on-one sessions with program leaders and facilitators, small-group work, and the submission of regular reflection papers. As such, there are a series of touchpoints and collective work to provide social support to one another, to ensure a healthy and safely contained environment, and to help motivate and inspire. Prior to joining the program, the executive participants were informed of the expectation to create a learning environment that also engages unconscious themes. Accordingly, the landscape of the program is clear from the start. The environment will be a safe space in which the participants can digest and reflect on intense and possibly disruptive emotions and thoughts, with the intention of allowing them to take a deep dive into the basic drivers of their behaviors and hidden dynamics.

Two of the authors (one, a psychoanalyst) were the leading module facilitators on the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas and shared their collective traumas to decrease any power dynamics between teacher and student. We were mindful to not push, pull, or nudge the participants to think or feel a certain way but rather to consider that we all have vulnerabilities and anxieties that are deep within us, which are touched upon and integrated throughout each module and subject.

### **Potentially Triggered Emotions**

The program facilitators were experts in the areas of leadership, individual and collective trauma, and system psychodynamics. Given the possible engagement of negative emotions in a classroom setting, the program facilitators were efficiently trained to develop a safe space, enable healthy expressions of painful emotions or memories, professionally and confidentially contain individuals in that space, and support the participants during and after the engagement of such emotions. As a consequence of the modular courses, whereby the participants can work together in a contained safe space, the participants are also enabled to openly have emotional reactions to difficult or stressful memories and know that they can feel authentic, supported, and safe to engage with any kind of emotion (Hibbert et al., 2022).

As part of the program acceptance agreement between the executive participants and the program leaders, the participants were expected to participate in class and group discussions unless they had a reason to not want to participate, in which case they were invited to speak with the program director. It is fully respected if a participant prefers not to disclose or further explore a topic at this stage in the educational context. However, we did not encounter such cases within these cohorts.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS**

Our dual-component longitudinal study consisted of three data collection modes. First, we observed class group discussions, after class reflection papers, and semistructured interviews. These helped us investigate historical consciousness as a reflexive tool (related to the topic of transgenerational collective traumas). They also enabled the participants to describe what the class topic and module revealed to them, to elaborate on the collective traumas with which they identify, and to describe any reflections that they made on the topic. Our initial interest in

conducting this study was to understand the life developments, relational experiences, formative and situational orientations and influences (people, places, and situations), and moments or events that marked their lives in connection to collective traumas (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 2013). However, as a result of the rich stories revealed by the executive participants, and thanks to their engagement, we felt compelled to extend the study to a second component. We wanted to understand the possible value that the initial intervention had and to understand any changes or meaning-making opportunities that may have taken place.

We adopted an interpretivist social constructivist position to observe and interpret how the participants constructed meanings as they reflected on aspects of their collective memories and how such meanings instigated engagement with questions related to their lives. Thus, we sought to observe ways in which the participants experience or make meaning of their memories or stories relevant to their collective traumas (Creswell, 2013). By interpreting the participant meaning-making process and by construing their rich experiences, we also became cocreators of these data (Einola & Alvesson, 2019). That is, we were not only observers during the study but also an integral part of the setting as interpreters of the participants' experiences and emotions.

The reflection papers encouraged the participants to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences related to the module on the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas. Doing so helped to set the pace for the initial interviews that took place shortly after, helped the participants privately conduct introspective work, and provided additional data. To investigate and observe any perceived changes in the participants or to identify any sense-making opportunities after having introduced the topic of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas (and the role that historical consciousness may have played), we contacted all 18 individuals who participated in the first component of the study two years later. Twelve of the cohort participants were available for our follow-up semistructured interviews. Our intention was not to attempt to make causal conclusions, but we were interested in identifying any type of interpretations, revelations, or changes that the participants may have felt or noticed in connection with their experience in class related to collective traumas. Our analyses of the interview data revealed two additional themes concerned with the participants' learnings from the intervention, which we discuss below.

The semistructured interview protocol allowed for flexibility during the interviews in both components of the study to address the relevant matters that may be important to the participants and to freely explore experiences (Heath, O'Malley, & Tynan, 2019). The initial interviews lasted two hours on average and primarily focused on the participants' reflections on the transgenerational transmission of the collective traumas presented and discussed during the class module a month prior and on obtaining more personal historical information that the participant may have identified or connected with as described in their reflection papers. These initial interviews allowed the participants to address what they may have felt or expressed during their class group discussions and in their reflection papers and to share any assumptions that they made or discovered about their collective traumas or their history. The interviews for the second part of the study (two years later) lasted 90 minutes on average and aimed to explore any perceived changes that the participants may have noticed subsequent to the module and the first interviews and reflections. Table 1 presents a few examples of questions posed during these two interview sessions.

Although this study implies the collaborative work of three authors, the fieldwork for both segments of the study (assessment of reflection papers and first and second interviews) was conducted by

**TABLE 1**  
**Leading Questions Posed During the 1st and 2nd Data Collection Periods (Semistructured Interviews)**

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***Interview 1 (following the module on the transgenerational transmission of collective trauma)***

- What was relevant about the topic to you?
- What resonated with you?
- Did you have any reflections after the module?
- Tell me about your collective trauma and what you remember.
- What are your memories related to this trauma and how were you informed?
- Are there values or beliefs that you feel are associated with your collective trauma? If so, what are they and how do you associate with them?

***Interview 2 (two years later)***

- What reflections do you recall you made during the module and the first interview?
  - Did you explore this topic further after we met?
  - Have you undertaken a sensemaking process since that time?
  - Do you feel that your past or collective trauma shapes your role as a leader today? If so, how?
  - Do you work with people differently?
  - Are there any connections between your awareness of your collective trauma and your role as a professional?
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the first author, which suggests a single narrator. As a descendant of collective trauma, she was in a position to develop a connection with the participants by explaining her background related to her collective trauma, which may have also facilitated the re-emergence of the participants' memories. To help mediate the risk of fueling unpleasant and discomforting sentiments, she attempted to ensure an empathetic approach that helped the participants manifest a connection with and understanding of their collective trauma stories that may not have always been apparent to them. Being a descendant of a collective trauma not only influenced her choice of formulating the research design, the interview questions, and the learning process but also helped develop a stronger level of trust and dialog with the participants (by developing a close connection with them) and potentially invited the participants to feel heard and understood, without which we may not have acquired the rich narratives or shared emotions that we address here.

The first author developed memos after the reflection papers and each interview for both study components to describe what she personally felt was taking place between herself and the participants when they shared their stories and sentiments and shared the observations and interpretations with the other two authors. She read the group discussion memos made during the module, the reflection papers, and the interview transcripts carefully several times and avoided disconnecting the data from the general meaning of the stories and reviewed her interpretations with the other two authors. Our iterative process of understanding the data included the flow of the experiences and the participants' meaning-making process. For instance, when the participants reviewed their related collective traumas at the beginning of the study, their views evolved or changed from a mechanical understanding of the events to a more meaningful and deeper discovery of the self by bestowing life and meaning to their experience with the collective traumas. To avoid losing a larger understanding of the rich data and stories shared, we did not systematically code the data. Instead, we used a case-by-case process of the unfolding of self-awareness, self-discovery, and meaning-making, and we identified pertinent themes to capture this movement. For this reason, the data from the reflection papers and the two separate interviews were not used separately to validate the results because each data set became complementary to the former one. Instead, they were all used to obtain a more in-depth, complementary understanding and interpretation.

Once the interviews were transcribed, we reread each participant narrative to create a comprehensive story that preserves each individual's voice (McAlpine, 2016). All the authors identified the connections made among past events related to the participants' collective traumas, their sensemaking moments, and their interpretations. Each participant's story was assessed as an individual case, and once each case was individually analyzed, we engaged in an interpretative process across the individual narratives to identify what was remembered of their collective memories, what was experienced through family and community narratives, commemorations, rituals, and traditions in relation to collective traumas, and what meaning was made from their experiences. We grouped segments of reflection papers and interview transcripts into sets of descriptions, interpretations and themes.

From the preliminary descriptions and interpretations made by the authors, we identified an underlying pattern or themes. These were similar for most participants, such as how they felt or what they experienced, how they connected or did not connect with their collective traumas, how they identified their values, how they distinguished certain values that may have been inherited or developed, the personal lessons they drew from this experience of exploring their collective traumas, and how they perceived their professional roles with these new senses.

All participants are identified by assigned numbers and we eliminated many references to specific countries or ethnicities that the participants mentioned in their stories to ensure full anonymity. Table 2 illustrates the example of one participant's story to describe the ways in which we described the selective narrative, interpreted it, and identified it with a relevant theme that was most meaningful to us.

## LEARNINGS

Although the histories, personal reflections, and interpretations were different from one another, the overarching phenomenon that was similar was the patterns through which the participants made meaning of their past in their current professional and personal lives. More specifically, we discovered a pertinent way in which the executives connected, interpreted, and extracted their personal orientations and expectations.

In this section, we present the patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives, which subsequently revealed the process of becoming historically conscious. Specifically, we interpret and identify the



**TABLE 2**  
**Sample Participant: Data Collection Sources, Author's Interpretation, and Identified Themes**

Data	Method	Description	Author's Interpretation	Theme
<p>"During the module, we had the opportunity to reflect on the impact of significant historical events on our families and on those within our cultural groups . . . When contemplating how historical events impact my own prominent societal values, it is my view that the events of the Second World War had a profound influence on my family's and my individual values . . . My hypothesis is that my approach to life is influenced by the experience of the loss of the Second World War and the subsequent explicit effort by the survivors as well as the winning countries to prevent a reoccurrence of the behaviors and circumstances that lead to the tragedies of war. It may possibly explain why an emphasis on individual freedom of choice and self-determination has such prevalence for me, if one sees these as opposites of prioritizing the will of the collective, strict obedience to hierarchy and a complete de-prioritization of individual self-fulfillment." (1)</p>	<p>Reflection paper</p>	<p>Identifying the collective trauma(s) that may be relevant to one's life. Means of access to memories of collective trauma. Personal explanation of memories.</p>	<p>The participant decodes the collective trauma as it resonates to her and invokes a connection with the information as stored in her memory. There is a deeper initiation to think about how one's values may be related to past events or to identify an association with them. This participant not only reflected on the implications of her memory with the Second World War but also identified a personal relevance with it. She has a deep reflection and is formulating a provisional hypothesis about her herself in connection with her collective trauma. She is "mentalizing" as a base for potential further reflections and as a possible initiation for better understanding herself. This example resembles Rösen's (2004) notion of "critical narrative" because although the individual acknowledged the importance of her history, she does not feel completely engaged with the values of her ingroup, or her collective identity. The participant consciously adopts different values as a response to her identified collective traumas or collective identity.</p>	<p><b>Personal connection with collective trauma</b></p>
<p>"My grandparents did not talk about the war. I was physically close with them, but they never spoke about it. Well, my grandfather had, I think, several brothers or something like that, all of them were fighter pilots most of whom who passed away during the war, so he was one of two brothers that survived the war, and he survived because he was injured. I don't have many firsthand memories of what my grandparents lived. They're just these images of, well, a memory I have is that he had . . . you could see the scars on his legs from where he had been injured, and I remember that image of</p>	<p>Interview 1</p>	<p>Remembering told and untold stories of collective trauma.</p>	<p>Even if stories were not told during childhood, certain images remain that enable the participant to feel associated (not necessarily connected) with their collective trauma. The interviews that followed the class/group discussions and the reflection paper enabled the individual to take a deeper dive within and remember family episodes or emotions that were relevant to the collective trauma. There was a process of "connecting the dots" from past to present, not by remembering historical facts but by remembering images, symbols, narratives, and even emotions that enlarged the picture of their role in</p>	<p><b>Becoming aware of the effects of the transgenerational transmission of collective trauma</b></p>

**TABLE 2**  
**(Continued)**

Data	Method	Description	Author's Interpretation	Theme
<p>whenever I saw that for the first time, that I remember and then I associated that with him." (1a)</p>	Interview 1	<p>Ability to utilize the interpretation of the collective trauma to determine an approach or a principle.</p>	<p>this historical process. Doing so helped her hone into the ways in which her current self may be associated with her collective trauma, directly or indirectly. This is similar to reflexivity in action whereby memories seem to trigger additional memories, such as the scars on the legs of her grandfather. She connects with this memory, and further, with her memory of the painful wounds (scars) of the war.</p>	<p><b>Developing narrative competence</b></p>
<p>"Actually, there is a way I would like to aspire to be. Constructs of national identity only get in the way. They are not helpful, and they are not constructive . . . I don't want to adjust or interact with people based on their race or other artificial constructs that get in the way but rather [based on] their behavior. I think what I want to be known for is to embrace everyone and interact with people for who they are. This is a foundational enabler for my career. And trying to be explicit about that and trying to ignore any artificial social constructs about people, and for this, I can have more tolerance and patience for differences and different ways of doing things." (1a)</p>	Interview 2	<p>Thinking about collective traumas and relevant assumptions help embrace a more reflexive response to the management emotions and experiences.</p>	<p>The participant develops (or already had) the ability to interpret the relevance of her history and to express ways to act upon it. There is significance in "turning the gaze onto the self" whereby she makes meaningful considerations by uncovering the way that her experiences shaped her and how she has the capacity to shape her own experiences and relationships. This is an example of "historical perspective-taking" (Seixas, 2015: 9) which helped the participant to embrace a competence that was not bound, for instance, by ethnicity, nationality, or religion as a means of developing more inclusive forms of professional relationships. By deconstructing past event or collective traumas, the individual is able to better understand not just the set of emotions that she may have developed or inherited but have the power base from where to make narrative interpretations or practical orientations for her own life.</p>	<p><b>Managing one's emotions</b></p>
<p>"I am trying to appropriately calibrate my assertive style. There are some raw reflections and I'm still grappling with them . . . I think I grew up with the notion of leadership being authoritarian leadership. I think if you go back even before the Second World War era in [country], stereotypically, it was a very authority-abiding society,</p>				

**TABLE 2**  
**(Continued)**

Data	Method	Description	Author's Interpretation	Theme
<p>and all those traditions were all very hierarchical structured authority-based communities, I suppose, or social structures. Ultimately, the association then is that these authoritarian behaviors that, on the one hand, through history, are second nature, on the other hand, through more recent history, are then associated with these catastrophic outcomes of genocide and significant crimes. And I would say that that conflict is certainly something I felt and continue to feel, where I'm conflicted about should I be more assertive, should I not be more assertive? And when I get the feedback that says, 'You should be more assertive,' then I go, 'Oh, do you really want me to be more assertive? Are you aware of what you're asking for?'" (1b)</p>	<p>Interview 2</p>	<p>Active or potential changes or outlooks identified in an organizational context. Better understanding of ways to lead in a meaningful context.</p>	<p>experiences or memories from her collective traumas since she interprets her history and substantiates it by consciously dealing with her own questions and emotions. She understands the potential triggers that may (or may not) develop and ways in which she wishes to address or tackle them as they show up. Dealing with the inheritance of collective traumas opens space for her to embody emotions and feelings. Embodied emotions allow her to think of her work not solely in relation to cognitive capacities or skills but to authentically acknowledge vulnerabilities.</p>	<p><b>Perceived changes in leadership role</b></p>
<p>"Now that I'm using those [module] tools consciously in particular, it completely removes the feelings of impatience that I would have felt in the past. Because now I have an appreciation that this is allowing the other parties space for their adoption journey, and whereas in the past, I would have felt impatient and gone, 'If you just did what I told you to do, then we wouldn't have to spend all this time going over it again and again' . . . I think I've just grown more comfortable with my leadership style. And when I think through the conversation [two years ago], I still have this assumption that to be a recognized successful leader, you need to be assertive. I probably don't want that to be the case. And I try not to practice it whenever I can. I also think the level of openness is different. Because I'm more comfortable with my engagement style, that results in me being more open and probably more</p>			<p>There is a deep exploration of the potential impact of past collective trauma experiences of her family and her country on her own experience of, and attitude on, leadership. There is a developed capacity to reflect upon the impact of collective trauma on how she "feels" about leadership and on how she wishes to take up her own leadership role. Igniting historical consciousness through the topic of collective traumas permitted the individual to undertake important reflective and possibly reflexive work about herself and her history, to identify the relevance of her behaviors and emotions in her relationships with others, and to connect these aspects with the current episodes or situations she faces daily. By making meaning of the collective trauma, we feel that we can better understand how we shape and are shaped by the relationships and experiences with families, communities and societies</p>	

TABLE 2  
(Continued)

Data	Method	Description	Author's Interpretation	Theme
<p>genuine in the way I appear to others, whereas previously I would have probably come across as even more reserved. And perhaps this entails more psychological safety, because if I am displaying more comfortable behaviors, it then gives more license for others to display . . . to be comfortable with themselves and not feel judged as much." (1b)</p>			<p>(Alvesson, 1996; Berger &amp; Luckmann, 1966). This participant's narrative reinforces the idea that by understanding how collective traumas may have informed our thinking, feelings, and beliefs, we can reinforce a stronger sense of self-awareness, which subsequently can enable us to extend our care toward others who may have had similar inheritances. These heightened moral senses in ourselves can enable us to connect and support others.</p>	

Notes: Approach adapted from Ayikoru and Park (2019). 1a indicates narrative and data from the reflection paper or first interview; 1b indicates narrative and data from the second interview two years later.

following three key elements by which the executive participants experience historical consciousness: (a) making a personal emotional connection with collective traumas, (b) becoming aware of the effects of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas, and (c) developing a narrative competence. We additionally show how the process of historical consciousness enabled the executive participants to share their learning interpretations and undergo a shift related to their personal and professional lives two years after the first intervention by identifying two additional themes: (d) managing one's emotions and (e) detecting perceived changes in leadership role. With these learnings, we conclude that the process of historical consciousness in executive educational programs can better equip executives for their roles as executives and leaders.

### Personal Connection With Collective Traumas

Deconstructing the collective traumas was the primary step in permeating personal experiences and cognitively identifying the participants' knowledge related to their memories of the traumas. This process does not mean that the participants embraced their collective traumas or felt they had necessarily inherited anything from these events; however, the expressions of their views on the topic showed how they began to associate with or relate to it. This way of thinking about collective traumas initiated blunt or straightforward descriptions of collective traumatic events that helped the participants understand the context of the life experiences (i.e., family upbringing) that they would not have otherwise recognized.

Thinking about this topic, I feel a greater sense of connection with the generation of my grandparents and feel that I resonate more with my grandparents than with my own parents. My grandmother, when she was young, had to give up all her assets and possessions as part of the efforts between the [country] communist state and middle-class or richer families. I felt her pain from being dispossessed of all her belongings and the suffering of losing something that belongs to you and being uprooted. I sensed her determination to be understood and to fight to get back what was rightfully hers. I also felt her anger, and I only recently realized that I discovered those sentiments within me, as part of me. (14a<sup>1</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> To maintain the anonymity of our research participants, we identify them by number. The letter 'a' refers to quotes taken from reflection papers or first interviews; the letter 'b' refers to quotes taken from second interviews (two years later).

The participant quoted above did not explain the historical context or the consequences of the Communist regime in his country, but the transmitted history across generations was still alive and emotionally operational. The association of oneself with one's collective traumas allowed the participants to reduce the gap between their sense of self and their history to make clearer and better educated associations between their collective traumas and their worldview.

The historical narratives on collective traumas not only featured historical facts but also exposed memories that were consistent with commemorative rituals, family stories, and events, and these narratives identified behaviors passed through cultural or social practices. These narratives also revealed how the participants' embodied emotions were experienced through time and were related to human suffering and mourning.

I did not think that the collective trauma of a nation could be applicable to me, but once I understood the concept, it became clear to me that I very much relate to the events of WWII and the stories I have heard from my family. The most impactful story was from my father, who was a little boy when the war happened and who remembers greatly suffering from hunger. He would always say that bread is the biggest luxury in the world, and I don't think I ever paid attention to this. I came from a poor family, and I think the reason why I never really wanted to connect with my father's stories of hunger was because I desperately wanted to get out of poverty and not be reminded of it. But I also now see or understand why it's so hard for me to spend money on pleasures, or things that are not of absolute necessity. (10a)

Similar to the story above, many participants felt unprepared or unsuspecting of emotions that could be related to them. Most had a cognitive or rational awareness of the facts relevant to their collective traumas, but they had not made the emotional connection prior to this class module. The class and small-group discussions stimulated an opportunity to voice histories that helped shed light on how the participants see themselves or how they feel others see them.

Not all participants thought about or felt collective trauma histories in similar ways, but offering opportunities for dialog with others who may or may not have connections to collective trauma allowed the participants to gain more access to their relevant memories and make sense of their own social realities. These dialogs enabled the participants to engage with their emotions and process their relationships with their collective trauma stories or memories. In fact, the lack of awareness of certain collective

traumas among certain participants ignited a mutual learning action.

During our group discussion, we spoke mostly about X's experience with apartheid and the injustices that were witnessed, and I felt like I was living in a cocoon and felt a bit ashamed because I knew so little about apartheid . . . What an awful feeling, isn't it? There really was a strong feeling of sadness. (12a)

As far as we know, these discussions did not lead to isolated or disconnected reactions, nor did we notice confrontational responses among the participants. Instead, there was a growing sense of awareness, interest, and reflection toward an increased involvement to learn and to share.

Our role and presence in the teaching module reified the memories of the executives relevant to their collective past. This may appear to be a dangerous or detrimental undertaking as it could inadvertently open gateways to repressed painful memories or experiences. Furthermore, we did not intentionally seek to enhance psychologically painful stressors, but when the participants shared their stories, we perceived it a special opportunity for deeper meaning-making, and we were comforted in knowing (and trusting) that the program's overall learning context and conditions, and the psychoanalytical experience of the program directors, would provide a healthy and safe environment in which to address any strenuous cases if a relevant need arose. We felt that the vulnerable emotions (including from the lecturers) offered a golden opportunity to better understand the makeup of our "selves," our role in relation to one another in specific contexts, and the ways in which our history may have played in the conditioning of our parents and eventually ourselves. We, as lecturers, did not feel the need to contain our emotions out of fear of shaping the thoughts or emotions of the participants. Instead, we felt safe and genuine enough to acknowledge any reaction that we may have had both in the classroom or during the interviews and to help stimulate genuine care and support among one another. Overall, we felt that the topic, albeit emotional, helped us better affirm how our worldview is always subjective and how our historical narratives can be a potential source of impact on our assumptions and values.

### **Becoming Aware of the Effects of the Transgenerational Transmission of Collective Trauma**

Many participants may have already felt a cognitive connection with their collective traumas; they

instrumentally knew that their family history included painful memories caused by war or disasters. However, for some participants, this may have been their first experience of making an emotional connection. This insight “from within” helped the participants notice patterns that may have shaped their own behaviors, identities, or values.

Interpreting the role that collective traumas have played in the construction of their reality and their worldviews (Bruner, 1991) permitted the participants to transfer narratives from the past to the present and to recognize the relevance of these stories in their lives. The transgenerational transmission of collective trauma is not about the traumatic event itself but about the memory of that traumatic event that was experienced or witnessed by one’s forebears that lives on in subsequent generations. In other words, memory is not about what factually happened in the past; instead, the awareness of memory facilitates an educational shift from the knowledge of history to an experiential consciousness of history.

Learning about this concept (the transgenerational transmission of collective trauma) and this topic actually helped me connect things and helped me touch upon the question “who am I?” which I was never really able to answer. But once I connected it to the session and topic, it just made sense, and I felt that I needed to take a step back actually to reassess where I come from at a deeper level. (15a)

In recalling and questioning the responsibility borne by past family and community members to keep the traumatic memories alive, the participants (as descendants) revealed the personal imprints that they have experienced and their understanding of the actions taken or emotions felt by their families and ancestors that helped them appreciate their social realities and their personal relationship to their past.

I see how my identity has been shaped by the stories of my family’s past and trauma of the [nationality] from my grandparents and from my great grandmother. The history of the family was always present in every social event, in any family event. It was also reinforced in the national history curriculum in our schools from early on . . . I see how my story plays into my own values, the way I conduct myself, how I perceive things. It helps to make sense to understand a lot of the things and justify a lot of things about me, how my personal story evolves throughout the years, and the choices I have made. (4a)

The act of connecting our lives to collective traumas from our family can be the first step toward self-awareness. Tapping into historical narratives

and collective memories allowed the executives to create meaning from the past in the present and to identify any values or beliefs that may have been passed on, which are also called “knowledge assets” (Rowlinson, Casey, Hansen, & Mills, 2014).

As part of an evolving process, from a cognitive understanding of one’s own collective traumas to a reflective observation of the self as a protagonist in one’s own stories, the participants articulated identity elements from their memories of their collective traumas. Recalling historical narratives about collective traumas thus helped them understand how their personal development and choices may have been associated with their history and identity. This process enabled us to observe how the participants identified the role of historical atrocities as mechanisms to sustain ethnic, religious, or sociological systems into their own lives, and in some cases, this assisted them in questioning their own identity and morals that were constructed by, and ensued from, these traumas.

Now that I think about it, I feel there is a clear line of values carried down [to me] from times of war, such as hard work, disdain for waste, and building a better society. My paternal grandfather had experience with [segregation] when working in [country]. I always took the stories from that time as tales of morality. Like how he was ostracized for treating black house staff with respect. Or the guilt he felt for seeing a man who worked on the grounds show up for work badly beaten in his township for accepting a hand-me-down suit from the “white man” who was my grandad thinking it a kind gesture. I think this created for me a lasting conflict of wanting to help but fearing how helping someone might unintentionally harm someone. I think these stories established a sort of reactive instinct for perceived unfairness or injustice, as well as both a belief in equality and courage to stand up for such things. (9a)

For the 18 participants who wrote reflection papers and participated in the interviews, we witnessed and observed how the topic of collective traumas stimulated them not only to think about their personal stories and collective memories (spoken or unspoken) but also to question how these traumas may have been relevant to them. Taking a deep dive after the class module was found to be an opportunity for the participants to have a contemplative temporal experience. Whereas the class or group discussions may have offered the opportunity for tacit or implicit knowledge to be revealed or verbalized, the subsequent reflection papers and personal interviews offered an opportunity for a deeper gaze within or a

potentially more reflexive undertaking related to the transmission of trauma.

As the stories unfolded in the reflection papers and subsequently through the interviews, attention was increasingly focused not only on lived experiences or emotional responses but also on understanding the self in relation to history, specifically, collective trauma. The content of collective trauma and the process of narration make it possible to identify the self as an offspring of history. We cannot state that we observed the “unconscious coming into the conscious” or that we identified a time at which the participant felt a deep sense of connection with their collective traumas or how that occurred. We paid attention, however, to how the memories of collective traumas were remembered and, through a discursive or narrative medium, how the participants developed a sensitive relationship with their histories, which galvanized a process of interpretation and instigated a means of meaning-making. For some of the executives, their collective traumas helped legitimize a moral obligation or moral behavior.

It is my view that the events of the Second World War had a profound influence on my family’s and my individual values . . . Throughout my schooling, the education had a huge component of coming to terms with the Second World War . . . and my takeaway from that educational journey was learning to notice tendencies that lead to a totalitarianism and a “don’t do it again” mentality . . . And then, after that point, it turns more into an apologetic position that says I’m very regretful that these things happened in the past, and now we all have an individual obligation to prevent these things from happening again . . . When I reflect on this, I understand why I don’t feel or have a national association. My takeaway is that being associated with national identity can lead to devastating outcomes . . . I think my sense of disassociation with a national identity is that it liberates me to build relationships with individuals based on their behaviors and not based on who they are or which country they come from. (1a)

Divulging the codes of conduct of the participants’ parents or grandparents served to identify and even justify who they are in relation to their forebears. Their inner or external dialog was formed as an ongoing sensemaking process that was shaped as a response to voices (or dialogs) from past family and community members. This process was helpful in witnessing how the participants may have created their reality or may have been shaped by their relationships with their families or communities.

## Developing Narrative Competence

According to Straub (2005), narrative competence is the story-creating ability that incorporates both linguistic and cognitive elements and that helps not only in telling the story but also in understanding and being embedded in it. Narrative competence is when the narrator can interpret and transform aggregated historical information into a personal and practically constructed story (Rüsen, 2004; Straub, 2005). In our study, we observed how morality was at the center of the development of our participants’ narratives and how the use of memory and the narratives of collective traumas were predominant in self-defining moral values or the recognition of moral selfhood. Narrative competence emerged as part of the awareness and interpretations that shaped or confirmed the participants’ life orientation and identity as a way to differentiate themselves from others by their bounded collective memories (even if the memories were critical). The participants conveyed the ways in which they would personally or professionally act in given situations in view of their collective history.

During the civil war, my parents went out of their way to selflessly help community members, as a way to help sustain and support our people during these very difficult times. As I process and carry this, and connect with my past, I realize how unnecessarily overprotective and micro-managerial I have been with my working team, probably because I feel that this is what I grew up with. I now know how this kills innovation. I feel the need to allow them to be risk averse and to be more self-reliant. Reconnecting with my past and my roots enabled me to realize that I need to be more empathetic, to communicate and listen more, and enable more two-way feedback and communication. (15a)

By observing their respective collective histories, the participants interpreted their moral dispositions and values in relation to actions or decisions taken, which suggested reflexive thinking. Narratives functioned as an aid to understand history’s relevance to the present. Without comprehending past events, it may not have been possible to understand or explain the moral intentions that the participants expressed. Without narrating their collective traumas and the stories, events, or feelings that were remembered and shared by family and community members, it may not have been possible for the participants to explain or justify their situation or to substantiate their values or beliefs.

The participants were open to a newly constructed future or value-laden life orientation by “making use

of history” (Nordgren, 2016, 2021), the people in their history, and their identity. The participants seemed to have constructed their own stories as a way to critically orient their own lives and even use history to ask themselves existential questions equated with history. By using the temporal quality of collective traumas as inherited or remembered, the participants were able to feel a sense of responsibility by vocalizing their collective trauma memories. This process allowed them to develop (or at least share what they had already contemplated before the study) a narrative that reasserted their moral positions and potential actions for the future, as we observed in the following participant:

There is a sense of duty, namely, related to the immigrant experience of people that come to another world. It’s important to have a sense of curiosity to understand the why’s of people. Empathy should not be just about trying to understand what it’s like to be in another person’s shoes but to take things deeper and try to understand people’s drivers, their sense of purpose or meaning. We always work in teams in the professional world, and topics should go beyond just “I’m Ukrainian, you’re French.” We each make decisions [that are] slightly different, so we need to talk about that and be more genuine and find the human experiences that bond us over and above the cultural differences. There is a need to find more genuine connections in groups and teams. And for this, I see how we need to realize the opportunities that are before us by getting into the team’s conscious dynamics. (9a)

Regardless of the conscious or unconscious views that the executives may have shared in relation to the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the consequences of collective memories consistent with their personal and professional lives, many participants felt a sense of dynamism, incitement and growth in this process. Some described the interviews and reflections as “thought-provoking” (6a) or “therapeutic” (1a); one participant even stated that the process “helped positively trigger and reconnect with my past” (15a). Although the narratives shared by the participants revealed temporal experiences and patterns of historical consciousness, we cannot claim that these were new discoveries for them or know whether they had already reflected on these matters prior to our study. We can only affirm what was shared during this study.

### Managing One’s Emotions

The introduction to and the engagement with the topic of collective trauma enabled the participants to

think about how certain emotions or feelings may have been experienced and to question the role of their collective traumas in relation to such emotions or feelings. This practice seemed to ignite a basis for the participants to think about their assumptions or actions vis-à-vis others and to embrace a more reflexive response to managing organizational experiences. Dealing with the inheritance of collective traumas opens space for us to embody our emotions and feelings. Embodied emotions enable executives to not think of their work solely in relation to cognitive capacities or skills but to also acknowledge and embrace the positive aspects of being vulnerable, of being fully human. Experiencing emotional growth can be just as relevant as instrumental growth to help us become as authentic and whole as possible.

The topic made me think and reflect about who I am and who I want to be. It was very grounding. I realized that the people in my past are people that are sometimes, maybe, present and embedded in who I am and that it’s OK. It’s important to understand the reasons why I think the way I do, or react the way I do, and I realize that there is an entire society that helps shape who we are, and why we are the way we are. It helps me to understand who I am with a bit of compassion and empathy. (14b)

The process of historical consciousness allowed certain participants to be aware of attributions or espoused thoughts or emotions and to understand their role in the social context of others. Certain participants were clear in sharing how their relationship with their past helped shift their perspective when dealing with issues at work or even at home. For others, it was about opening new perspectives to cultivate or reconfirm self-understanding. Most participants made meaning of the cohesion among the past, present, and possible future by using a moral compass to help orient themselves with others. The development of narrative competence was apparent when the participants were able to make meaning of the relations and experiences that originated from their collective traumas by gaining access to their collective traumas and articulating their interpretation of these histories toward a personal resolution. The increased sense of self-awareness helped the participants identify triggers, if or when they surfaced, and potentially helped them become conscious of addressing them.

I am able to recognize when my biases come out front, and after our interview [two years ago], I am able to let go of the traps I may have had before, and even



dissociate my family's traumas and the stories with which I am connected . . . I'm not sure exactly how people have perceived me before versus now, but as an observer, I can see that there is a shift in my mode of communication. I am more at ease, and because of this, they [staff] are also more at ease. (4b)

The reflections that took place post-module show the practice of self-awareness as a consequence of self-reflection. We cannot attest that the process of historical consciousness is directly connected to self-improvement, but the mere attunement of the self with emotions helped the participants utilize new emotional muscles that they otherwise may not have tapped into before. By unleashing and articulating their own emotions, not only were the participants self-aware, but they also felt equipped to address any struggles they may have had with repressed or unprocessed emotions.

### Perceived Changes in Current Leadership Roles

Collective traumas may be perceived as a topic that can unsettle individuals, but it can also enable them to better (or critically) engage with moral perspectives in relation to their management or leadership practice. The participants felt that when they confronted their histories, something was activated in them to question their own relations with others. The participants' post-module questioning and interrogations gave us an indication of the reflexive process that had taken place not only when the participants thought about their peers but also the implications of their own reactions or behaviors toward others. This increased sense of connecting or relating offered the participants the opportunity to recognize the consequences of their own actions or emotions for others, whether the actions or emotions were positive or negative.

I look at myself as coming from a very fortunate background and a very privileged person. And now I know that with this comes responsibility of constructively dealing with multiple different forms of trauma that might be around the meeting table, either from different events or a collective event like the pandemic, which we all experienced very differently. As we have to work with that in a safe, respectful and considerate way . . . So I think what this has done is to give me a heightened level of applied empathy and critical reflexivity and to really allow dissenting voices to come out by enabling that to take place from my heightened role model ability. (9b)

The topic of collective traumas made us aware of just how much information or emotion can be

unknowingly inherited, which may not be processed or may not be part of our consciousness but can have a major impact on our tacit behaviors, decisions, or actions. There are so many implications for us as leaders in terms of our responsibility to help create a healthy space for individuals to communicate or be heard.

I think my level of openness is different because I'm more comfortable with my engagement style. That results in me being more open and probably more genuine in the way I appear to others, whereas previously I would have probably come across as even more reserved. The psychological safety aspect is also improved. So if I am displaying more comfortable behaviors, it then gives more license to everyone else to display . . . To be comfortable with themselves and not feel judged as much. (1b)

Mutually related dialogs (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002) became relevant during the process of historical consciousness. By making meaning of collective traumas, we were able to better understand how we shape and are shaped by the relationships and experiences with families, communities, and societies (Alvesson, 1996; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By understanding how collective traumas may have informed our thinking, feelings, and beliefs, we are able to reinforce a stronger sense of self-awareness, which can subsequently enable us to extend our care toward others who may have had similar inheritances. These heightened moral senses in ourselves can enable us to connect and support others.

There is a different sense of awareness of why I was behaving a certain way as a leader; that reflection is now a lot stronger, and I understand where it comes from [collective trauma]. And I understand why it is there. Can I say that the collective trauma events have influenced me as a leader today? The answer is yes. This process helped create much more awareness, and it allows me to work with others in a more integrated way. I feel the need to be more fair, and that sense has become stronger now. I am no longer afraid to speak for or against something or someone if it will hinder the well-being of another. I will no longer be complicit. (6b)

Overall, the topic of the transmission of collective traumas may have ignited an awareness of the self and of the worldview that was different from the world as the participants knew it. It enabled the participants to interpret their own and others' emotions differently and to enhance their learning about themselves in their leadership roles with humility and integrity.

As educators, we feel that our experiences with these cohort participants and our approach in using the topic of collective traumas as transitions toward historical consciousness enabled us to integrate and emotionally connect with each other's experiences. Our experiences and approach also permitted us to reexamine our role as participants in management educational programs who develop meaningfully mutual relationships by embracing each other's vulnerabilities and transformative journeys. We conclude that the process of historical consciousness in executive educational programs can better equip individuals in their roles as executives and leaders.

## DISCUSSION

In recent years, scholars have advocated for a historical turn in management thinking and have called for a rise of historical consciousness to enable individuals to participate in reflective and reflexive processes through historical thinking (Foster et al., 2017; Suddaby, 2016; Wadhvani et al., 2018). Nevertheless, thus far, very few attempts have been made to study the emergence of historical consciousness in the executive education classroom (i.e., Tennent et al., 2020 and Hibbert et al., 2022). Aiming to contribute to this limited research, we conducted a time-lagged study over two years among a sample of international participants from an internationally renowned executive program. Our goal was to explore the following questions: (a) How can we construe historical consciousness in the context of an executive educational program? (b) What are the learning opportunities of this process? Our data analysis revealed, first, that historical consciousness can emerge in the executive education classroom by (a) emotionally connecting the self with collective traumas, (b) becoming aware of the effects of the transgenerational transmission of collective traumas, and (c) acquiring narrative competence. Second, two years later, this learning experience crystalized into (d) how the participants manage their emotions and (e) the changes they perceived in their roles as leaders. With these learnings, we conclude that the process of historical consciousness in executive educational programs can enable executives to become better equipped in their roles as executives and leaders.

Subsequently, this study makes at least two important contributions. First, it shows that executive education programs can incorporate history and collective traumas into their curricula to facilitate executives' increased engagement with histories and enable them to enlarge their perspectives and address challenges or

identify creative mechanisms to do so (Cummings & Bridgman, 2011). Our learnings reinforce a scholarly debate to consider a historical turn in management thinking among management and organizational scholars and practitioners (Foster et al., 2017; Tennent et al., 2020: 4) and to reinforce the important role of executive management education in the context of contemporary turbulent times (Anderson et al., 2018; Greenberg & Hibbert, 2020). In this study, we drew on the topic of the transgenerational transmission of collective trauma because it allowed the participants to share and engage with their personal narratives. Collective trauma narratives provided the form and context with which executives envisioned a deeper understanding of the role of their inherited collective traumas in their lives and made meaning of past events. Drawing on earlier research on the transgenerational transmission of collective trauma (Tcholakian et al., 2019), our methodology has deep implications for helping executives develop a new frame of reference by interpreting historical circumstances and critically questioning past decisions or events (Nordgren, 2016; Seixas, 2012). We also found that our intervention (a) created an impactful learning experience in the classroom and (b) heightened the curiosity of executives to explore their personal connections with their inherited histories and the potential effects of their collective traumas in their lives. We invite researchers to explore the learning effects of other histories or history-related methodologies and to explore the behavioral implications of the use of history in executive educational programs.

Second, this study provides additional evidence of the relevance of reflexive processes and emotional work for leader development in executive educational programs. We identified the important impact that historical consciousness had in encouraging the participants to heighten their moral senses and self-awareness, as we interpreted two years later. By engaging with historical consciousness as a reflexive process and by conducting emotional work, the executives better understood the source of their worldviews and gained new perspectives on their leadership role. They were also able to learn from vulnerable emotions, some of which may not have been evident initially; identify the roots of their beliefs and behaviors; and embrace emotionally intelligent opportunities in their roles as leaders. Specifically, our study suggests that engaging executives with historical events and processing historical consciousness in the executive classroom can enable them to better understand emotions and feelings and not be limited to instrumental or rational boundaries

(Petriglieri, 2020). We propose that future research assess reflexive approaches and teaching instruments to validate the role played by historical narratives in shaping leaders' and executives' narrative competence. Narrative competence, and subsequently historical consciousness, can be useful directions to help us obtain a deeper understanding of ourselves as leaders or in leadership roles. Future research is also encouraged to address embodied narratives and the discursive processes of historical consciousness not only to pay attention to the lived experience but also to facilitate a deeper understanding of embodied interpretations by drawing on different ontological and epistemological methodologies, such as hermeneutic phenomenology (Polkinghorne, 2005; Straub, 2005). Future research can also aim to interpret how different individuals react, embody, or experience similar events (but with different perspectives), which can help ensure inclusivity in a variety of interpretations of collective or historical events.

Historical consciousness is a complex and somewhat equivocal concept that has been studied and written about by historians, psychologists, management and organizational theorists, and pedagogical experts. Our study cannot do justice to the theoretical and methodological contributions made to understanding this phenomenon and the various typological explanations relevant to narrative competence implied by historical consciousness. The same applies to the embodied nature of narratives and dialogs in the phenomenon of historical consciousness. Our study, however, encourages future researchers to dive deeper into understanding how organizations are managed (by leaders or board members) because organizations are networks of people, each having inherited a history that may have shaped their inner world. Since organizations are governed by individuals, and since individuals have their own experience with their history, we can uncover multilayered and deep-seated questions that address why executives lead organizations the way that they do. Reflexive processes such as historical consciousness may not be widely used in executive educational programs, but they are relevant in helping identify and awaken unused senses by drawing on social, cultural, and historical resources that can help open new gateways for executives to address ever-changing and challenging work environments. Historical narratives and mutually responsive dialogs are important instruments by which executives can acquire reflexivity and historical consciousness (Foster et al., 2017; Polkinghorne, 2005; Wadhvani et al., 2018) that allow them to introspectively observe and question the origins of

their moral values and worldviews. They can serve a powerful interpretive function in questioning, clarifying, and making meaning of even the most troubling events and relationships (Bruner, 1991, 2004).

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Historical consciousness, historical narratives, and memory become complementary means of advancing our understanding of leaders and executives and the underlying motivations associated with their behaviors and actions to support management and organizational studies and executive education. To develop historical consciousness, executive education programs must enable the embodied nature of learning processes.

Executive program educators and students have numerous opportunities in an educational space to develop informal learning tactics that may generally be taken for granted, tacit, or explicit. Dialogical practices (Cunliffe, 2002) enable executive program participants to establish reflexive forms of conversations and discussions that help develop critical questions of one's own reality and worldview. This practice can help educators and students acknowledge their emotions (even the most messy or difficult ones) as inherently valuable and subsequently develop an awareness of how to interpret and cocreate their positions as organizational actors and decision-makers.

Mutually responsive interventions on sensitive topics such as collective traumas in educational programs can offer useful and important opportunities for executives to not only become aware of assumptions but also sensitive to possible background and traumas that other organizational actors may have inherited. Based on our experience with our program over the years, we have understood that this type of experience has been a highlight for executive participants because we normalize our methodology not in terms of psychopathology but as part of an integral, inclusive, and global experience, regardless of age, culture, religion, or political conflict. The space is contained to enable individuals to articulate, share, and make sense of their emotions, ideas, and experiences, not only in their professional or personal roles (i.e., CEO or parent) but in their broader human experiences that go beyond family dynamics and early childhood experiences, including generational histories that can be embedded in the makeup of who we are, the choices we make, and the perspectives we hold.

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