

Exploring Ancestral Grief

Families are deeply intertwined systems whose members exert mutual influence over each other. When a loss is not mourned in families it can shift the ways of being in ways that can be maladaptive particularly when they are transmitted through generations. The growth task for families navigating these multigenerational griefs—griefs which may be in response to losses of people, or of place, of identity, etc.—is to engage the grief, and integrate the loss in more healthy ways.

Our families have incredible power over who we become. Indeed, “for better and for worse, family relationships play a central role in shaping an individual’s well-being across the life course” ([Research paper](#)). Sociologists have evolved family systems theory, which illuminates some of the workings of family life that create such profound effects. Pioneered by sociologists Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, it considers the family unit as a complex social system in which members influence each other’s behavior ([ScienceDirect](#)).

According to family systems theory, each family member finds themselves “subject to the pushes and pulls of the system including competing emotional demands, role definitions and expectations, boundary and hierarchy issues, coalitions and collusions, loyalty conflicts, family and institutional culture and belief systems, double binds, projective identifications, and systemic anxiety” ([ScienceDirect](#)).

We may say that each person finds expression of themselves in relation to other members of the family. For example, a parent may express parental care in relation to their children’s particular needs. Insights about the way birth order shapes behavior also reflect the foundational ideas of family systems theory: oldest children are often more responsible because of their position in relation to younger siblings. Their position may also cause them to identify more closely with parental authority. ([Research paper](#))

Family systems theory helps clarify the ways in which loss impacts whole families. Within this frame, when a family experiences loss, particularly the shared loss of a member of the family system, family dynamics may be disrupted. Such changes may not be inherently negative. Karen De la Cruz, an assistant teaching professor in the College of Nursing at Brigham Young University, remembers her two children looked out for each other at school when her husband died. ‘If they reached a point during the day when they couldn’t cope, they could flash a signal and the other would step in to help,’ she says. ([Brigham Young University](#))

Nevertheless, it appears to be “very common for people [in grief] to turn to their family and find themselves terribly disappointed and confused.” ([What’s Your Grief](#)) The bases of these difficulties vary. There is the fact that grief is a highly personal experience shaped by individual factors including personality and the particular relationship with the person who died. As a result, family members may find themselves surprised to be isolated in their grief because of these differences.

Shifts in family roles resulting from a death may also make grief in families difficult: “Grieving family members find themselves disinterested and/or incapable of behaving in the ways they used to. Not only do people have to cope with grief, but they also must deal with the fact that a vital piece of the family is gone” ([What’s Your Grief](#)). Other factors, including birth order, age, and the presence of secondary stressors like financial concerns, may also complicate experiences of grief within families.

A loss and attendant grief experience may so profoundly affect a family that it shifts their ways of being in ways fundamental enough as to move through generations of a family. This transgenerational grief may come from a loss shared by the entire family or from a loss impacting individual family members, perhaps even before the family formed. Researcher Stuart Lieberman named transgenerational grief in 1979, referring to the lasting influence on the family of deaths that were not adequately acknowledged or mourned. “If family members are unable to mourn separately or collectively, a family pattern develops that may be transmitted transgenerationally,” he writes ([Research Paper](#)).

Often, these transgenerational expressions of grief take the form of behavioral adaptations to grief that become part of the norms of the family system and get transmitted between generations. Challenges arise when those adaptations have a maladaptive tinge. For instance, after going through the loss of a child, parents may become more overprotective of their other children, “sometimes to the point of instilling their fears of another such loss into their children’s belief systems.” When this fear is deeply instilled, it can even be passed on to the next generation, as these children become parents themselves ([The Grief Recovery Method](#)). Researchers surmise that unresolved family losses do not stay buried. Rather, they are unearthed, re-lived, examined, and grieved through individual stories and family lore. ([Research Paper](#))

The story of the Madrigal family at the heart of the 2021 Disney movie, *Encanto* presents a great example of the ways in which transgenerational grief manifests. The patriarch of the family dies amid a conflict, and as co-director Charise Castro Smith clarifies “when this kind of terrible foundational moment happened to the family, they were closed in and protected, but they were also sort of closed off from their past.” ([The Wrap](#)) Mirabel, a grandchild of the family, is tasked with the work of unraveling the family’s history to help them find a new, healthier foundation.

Closely related to but distinct from transgenerational grief is epigenetic trauma, which refers to the ways in which unresolved trauma causes shifts in gene expression ([CDC](#)). Those altered genetic expressions then get transmitted through generations. This epigenetic trauma may sometimes be linked to grief, but is not inherently so (see [our Episode 2 Prep Doc](#) for the distinctions and links between trauma and grief).

The language of transgenerational grief/trauma is somewhat widely understood in the United States, particularly in communities (largely communities of color) who have faced multi-layered histories of systemic violence. The ripple effects of grief faced by different communities has been extensively documented. For instance, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart of the University of New Mexico writes about the harmful impacts of federal prohibition of Native spiritual practices, as well as the belief of Native American people as savages, both of which served to disenfranchise the grief of Native people ([Indigenous Health Service](#)).

Joy DeGruy, a professor of social work at Portland State University, writes about the impacts a concept she describes as “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” on Black American families, whose ancestors were enslaved here. She points to the intense trauma that enslaved Black people faced amid the violence of enslavement, trauma that there was never room to deal with. This trauma, DeGruy argues, has continued to move through generations in Black families. DeGruy points to the presence of colourism in the Black communities, as well as the ways in which Black mothers might diminish the accomplishments of their children – a holdover, according to DeGruy, from the days when slavers would be forced to sell smart or attractive slave children to the highest bidder. ([Aeon](#))

Perhaps less often articulated in the United States are the transgenerational griefs that attend the loss of place and shifts in family identity that come with migration. In the first place, migratory grief is itself a kind of disenfranchised grief (see [our Episode 2 Prep Doc](#)), rarely acknowledged or recognized amid a U.S. culture caught in the myth of the American dream, and the idea that migrants ought to be happy to be here ([The Atlantic](#)). Nevertheless, migratory grief is keenly felt by migrants and their children. Journalist Kat Chow writes about the “shape of loss and longing that I noticed in my family for so long” but only found the language for as she encountered her mother’s passing when Chow was 13 years old, and later wrote about it in her adult life. She observes that this undercurrent of loss is felt by many Asian American families who have uprooted one life and come to start a new one. ([NBC](#))

Across expressions of grief in families, the task before families in grief is to reckon with and integrate their grief into new, healthy ways of being, much like Mirabel did for her family in *Encanto*. As psychotherapist Sara Chana Segal writes: “When a loss occurs that is swept under the rug or not properly addressed, it will spiral down the generations until a family member takes on the giant task of working through this unprocessed pain in an attempt to restore balance to the family system.” ([Integrative Psychotherapy](#))

Helpful Readings/ Anecdotes that offer insight

- [Family Systems Theory](#), article in ScienceDirect. Excerpt:
Family systems theory also helps clarify the ways in which families may evolve “self-correcting and self-reinforcing feedback loops in a system can either facilitate or hinder pathology or health, breakdown or resilience.”

Family systems theory also offers an important frame for understanding individual behavior: According to a family systems perspective, an individual's functioning is determined ...by a person's place in the system(s) in which he or she finds himself or herself, subject to the pushes and pulls of the system, including competing emotional demands, role definitions and expectations, boundary and hierarchy issues, coalitions and collusions, loyalty conflicts, family and institutional culture and belief systems, double binds, projective identifications, and systemic anxiety.

- [A Transgenerational Theory](#), research paper by Stuart Lieberman
- [Unearthing the Concept of Transgenerational Grief: The Ghost of the Sibling Never Known](#), a research paper by Diana Kempson, Virginia M. Conley, and Victoria Murdock. Excerpt:

I grew up the fifth of eight children, with four older brothers and three younger sisters. As a child I felt that I lived in the shadow of my personal family “ghost,” my older sister Carolyn. Even then, I was aware that I was a different daughter and sibling than I would have been if she had lived. Her disability and death made me the oldest girl in the family. As it was, Carolyn was number 3 in a line-up of 9 children, and I was number 6 . . . not that the exact middle order makes such a big difference if you’re a middle kid. It did, however, make a difference that, in a farm family with four older brothers, I had no big sister to help smooth my way.

Carolyn died when I was six. . . . Although she was 14, she had only been a shadowy figure to me because she had lived in a long-term care facility for developmentally

challenged persons on the other side of the state since before I was born. My parents went to visit her 2-3 times a year. I remember when we were notified of her death. The old party-line phone on the wall rang our number: one long and two shorts . . . during supper. My mother answered the phone, and after several minutes in which she said a few words, handed the phone to my dad and left to go outside. The first time I saw Carolyn was at her funeral. I was allowed to skip school to attend, which reinforced the magnitude of the event to me. Her appearance was in stark contrast to mine, with my curly short red hair and millions of freckles. Carolyn was everything I felt I was not: grown up, or nearly so in my eyes, and beautiful. She looked like Snow White: her skin was flawlessly ivory and her raven, slightly wavy hair cascaded over her shoulders. I was acutely aware of the workload my mother endured with eight children. Except for doing dishes, the boys worked outside. The rest of the household work—cooking, cleaning, laundry (including ironing), and sewing and mending—fell to my mother. I never remember not working in whatever capacity I could. By age 10, I was cooking, and by 13, I was independently preparing meals and sewing all my clothes.

Being socialized into young womanhood could be hard on a Catholic girl growing up on a farm with four older brothers. The world seemed filled with “don’ts” and male dominance. My mother was busy; women were socialized for submission; sexuality was for procreating, not for enjoying. I was uneasy with my changing body.

I missed having an older sister. I told myself that if Carolyn had lived, she would have been Mother’s “little helper” and my relief. And, because she was so perfect, she would have had time to explain “growing up” things to me and answer my questions. In her absence I made a conscious effort to be that perfect older sister to my younger siblings. I read to them, played with them, let them listen to my records, and tried to be the type of person they could look up to or emulate the way I looked up to the ideal of Carolyn. In retrospect, it’s not surprising that I went into nursing. I grew up being a carer, helper, and all the things that nursing embodies. Although Carolyn was not there for me as a child, she had an enormous influence on my life.

The above story by one of the authors, as well as stories by the other two authors, describes experiences of being socialized into their families and growing up in the aftermath of sibling loss. Individually, we each came to realize how profoundly a child’s death affects family dynamics, stories, career choices, and even other siblings’ perceived reasons for being. While the authors acknowledge that their stories may not be the norm for all families, the potential effects of this phenomenon are nonetheless worthy of exploration and research. Our premise is that the influence of the unknown sibling may be sustained over time to affect not only the lost child’s parents and siblings, but also future generations; hence the concept of “transgenerational grief.”

- [Encanto](#), 2021 Disney Movie that considers transgenerational grief and trauma. Synopsis: The Madrigals are an extraordinary family who live hidden in the mountains of Colombia in a charmed place called the Encanto. The magic of the Encanto has blessed every child in the family with a unique gift -- every child except Mirabel. However, she soon may be the Madrigals last hope when she discovers that the magic surrounding the Encanto is now in danger.
- [Seeing Ghosts by Kat Chow](#), a book about Chow’s experience with grief. Synopsis: Kat Chow has always been unusually fixated on death. She worried constantly about her parents dying—especially her mother. A vivacious and mischievous woman, Kat's mother made a morbid joke that would haunt her for years to come: when she died, she'd like to be stuffed and displayed in Kat's future apartment in order to always watch over her.

After her mother dies unexpectedly from cancer, Kat, her sisters, and their father are plunged into a debilitating, lonely grief. With a distinct voice that is wry and heartfelt, Kat weaves together a story of the fallout of grief that follows her extended family as they emigrate from China and Hong Kong to Cuba and America. *Seeing Ghosts* asks what it means to reclaim and tell your family's story: Is writing an exorcism or is it its own form of preservation? The result is an extraordinary new contribution to the literature of the American family, and a provocative and transformative meditation on who we become facing loss.

— *Dupe Oyebolu*
for *The Mash-Up Americans*