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Essay

Religious, Genetic, and Psychosocial Understandings of 'The Sins of the Fathers' and Their Implications for Family Historians

Susan M. Moore

Department of Psychological Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia; smoore@swin.edu.au

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the idea that the misdeeds of ancestors will have negative consequences for their descendants, as encapsulated by biblical quotes about 'the sins of the fathers'. The prevalence of these ideas in religion and folklore, through the notion of family curses, is discussed, as is an analysis of what constitutes 'sin'. How the so-called sins of our forebears might reach across future generations is considered in two ways. The first is that detrimental characteristics, behaviours, and health conditions can be transmitted to descendants via genetic, epigenetic, environmental, and psychosocial mechanisms (and the interactions between these). The second is that descendants can feel guilt and shame as a result of the actions of their ancestors. Overcoming the effects of ancestral fault and disadvantage may occur through improvements in living standards, medical advances, more tolerant and inclusive cultural beliefs, as well as other environmental and social changes. These processes are also likely to be assisted by greater knowledge and understanding of one's own family history. Such knowledge, in historical context, has the potential to facilitate both personal psychotherapeutic change and decisions about appropriate reparations where these are indicated.

Keywords: family curses; sin; heredity and environment; intergenerational trauma; intergenerational guilt

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1. Introduction

The idea that the actions and attitudes of one generation will have implications for the lives of future descendants has been around for a long time. One aspect of this idea, focusing on wayward and distressing behaviour among past generations, is encapsulated in the biblical phrase 'the sins of the father'. The phrase is used in several different biblical chapters and interpreted in various ways, but the theme tends to be that immoral and/or damaging behaviour by ancestors can have repercussions well down the ages, indeed 'unto the third and fourth generation'. Is it a warning to the ancestors or the descendants? Is it concerned with the legacy that you leave or the amends you should be making? In this paper, we discuss ways in which the meanings and outcomes of the 'sins of the fathers' have been interpreted through the lens of religion and folklore, as well as through academic disciplines including biology, sociology, and psychology. We discuss the implications for family historians of uncovering ancestral faults, crimes, and misdemeanors during their research. One implication relates to the possibility of experiencing guilt or shame at discovering ancestral wrongdoing and making decisions about whether we should or can make reparations to the descendants of injured parties. A second implication concerns aspects of one's own self-hood. Here the question arises as to whether undesirable or troubling characteristics of the self that appear to have been handed down through generations (either through heredity, shared environments, or interactions between the two) are amenable to change or amelioration.

The notion of ancestral sin and its consequences appears to have captured the creative imagination. Generational 'curses' are frequently the topic of books and movies. A quick

Google search uncovers more than a dozen books in print with a 'sins of the father (or fathers)' title, the most famous one probably being Jeffrey Archer's novel that forms part of the *Clifton Chronicles*, a series of books that chart a family's history of secrets, lies, and betrayals and their effects on later generations (Archer 2012). Among the non-fiction titles, there's a biography of Joseph Kennedy and his seemingly accursed dynasty (Kessler 1996) and another that tells the story of convicted Australian drug trafficker, Schappelle Corby, who apparently 'took the rap' for her father's drug syndicate, subsequently spending years in an Indonesian prison (Duff 2011). In these various fiction and non-fiction works, the theme is generally about how the protagonist copes with and ultimately escapes the malignant outcomes/curses arising from their ancestral history. As a twist on this theme, in the acclaimed novel Disgrace by J. M. Coetze (1999), a daughter's attempt to atone for the racism of her father (and his colonial forebears) becomes as much a punishment for the father as for the daughter.

In this discussion, as in most on this topic, we assume 'fathers' refers to one's ancestors in general, of any gender, and even in some cases to those who are unrelated but part of one's ancestral tribe or race, for example, 'colonial oppressors', or 'warlike Celts'. 'Sins' is a more difficult term to qualify and will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections. Generally, it refers to cruel, corrupt, and otherwise immoral behaviour, but it can also be applied to activity that was not considered immoral by a particular group at the time *but is now*; for example, keeping slaves or forcing a group to abandon their language or religion in the name of assimilation/progress. Further, some characteristics or actions *once* considered as sinful or markers of previous sin are no longer so judged, for example, in the early Middle Ages in parts of Europe, epilepsy was believed to be the result of demonic possession (Myers and Benbadis 2018). Genetic characteristics such as propensity toward certain diseases or even bodily characteristics may have been judged as marks of sin (sometimes encapsulated in the phrase 'bad blood'). Even today, stigma and shame are attached to some illnesses, including genetically inherited ones, as discussed later in this paper (e.g., Beck 2007). Similarly, behaviours associated with particular environments or cultural practices have been—and still can be—associated with sin in the sense of undesirable habits and practices, for example, social judgements of those who live in poverty.

The extraordinarily popular pastime of family history research, and the relatively ready availability of resources now available for hobbyists to engage in that research, means that many, if not most, family history researchers are bound to uncover some ancestral 'sins'. These might include findings as varied as murderous and violent ancestors, family histories of diseases or mental illnesses that were once stigmatised, and citizens considered law-abiding and upright in their times but whose actions we now judge negatively.

The aim of this paper is to consider the idea that 'the sins of the father' (or undesirable ancestorial characteristics/behaviours) may, indeed, be passed on through generations via biological and psychosocial means, and to discuss the implications for family history researchers troubled by their relevant findings. While the focus is on individual guilt and perceived responsibility, there is an inevitable carryover to the collective implications for cultural groups and nations, and this is briefly touched on in the Discussion section of the paper.

The first step is to briefly discuss the religious and folkloric origins of these ideas.

2. Results

2.1. Religion and Folklore

The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament refers to 'sins of the fathers' primarily in the chapters *Exodus* (20:5), *Deuteronomy* (5:9), and *Numbers* (14:18). For example, using the New International Version (NIV) translation of the Holy Bible, *Deuteronomy* (5:9), states, 'You shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me . . .' (Holy Bible: NIV 1984).

Numbers (14:18) is even more definite: 'The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation'.[1]

These quotes can be summed up by the idea that sin has consequences. But what is sin? The online Encyclopaedia Britannica (2024) notes: '*The concept of sin has been present in many cultures throughout history, where it was usually equated with an individual's failure to live up to external standards of conduct or with his violation of taboos, laws, or moral codes*'. The quote reminds us that sin, or wrongdoing, is, at least to some extent, culturally bound and linked to historic time because external standards of conduct, taboos, laws, and moral codes vary and change. Even a set of basic principles such as the Ten Commandments, widely held in one form or another across most religions, nations, and eras of modern history, are open to interpretation, as well as religious expectations around social behaviours, such as dietary choices, standards of dress, sexual preferences, and styles of worship. It is also worth considering the idea that in some contexts, the word 'sin' may refer to 'fault', in which case an undesirable characteristic of an individual may not have occurred through the individual's purposive behaviour. For example, a missing limb or blindness may be considered faults in human design, and once even as marks of sin, but in today's world they are not considered immoral in any sense. In the New Testament (John 9:1–5), the disciples ask Jesus who had sinned, a blind man or his parents. Jesus counters that 'neither this man nor his parents sinned' thus presenting an enlightened interpretation of illness and disability that does not reflect the Old Testament views of ancestral sin discussed above.

Definitions of sin vary, as does what counts as evidence that sin has occurred. These ideas are constantly evolving, hopefully towards more informed and just societies. For example, in medieval Europe until the early 18th century, to establish whether a woman was a witch, 'ducking' could be used, whereby the accused woman would be thrown in a deep river or pond, sometimes tied to a ducking stool. If she floated, she was guilty of being a servant of the devil (and sentenced to death); if she sank, she was not guilty (but dead) (Ducking Stool 2024). Women who did not fit the model of obedient wives and mothers, or showed healing skills through knowledge of herbs, or even those who kept cats, were prime suspects to be judged in this way. Behaving differently from the norms of the time, looking different, or suffering from certain disabilities could readily be interpreted as evidence of sin. Thus, the so-called sins of our ancestors were often quite different from those behaviours we now judge as immoral. Today we might be quite pleased to find out that our great-great-great-grandmother kept her bullying husband in check or dabbled in herbalism, but we would be unhappy to know that she held slaves or turned a blind eye to cruel treatment of those of other races.

Myth and folklore, as well as religion, present stories of the implications of ancestral 'sin', for example, through the notion of family or generational curses. These refer to a pattern of undesirable outcomes that occur throughout a family's history, sometimes for multiple generations, because of the behaviour or characteristic of an ancestor. Folkloric belief is that such curses result from the wrath of the gods or those with supernatural powers, on individuals or communities that have displeased them. The famous Rockefeller and Kennedy families have been described as cursed, given the tragedies and misfortunes that have plagued their kin for several generations. But given the wealth, prominence, public visibility, and likely risk-tolerance of many of their family members, it is perhaps not so surprising that misfortune has occurred across several generations. So has good fortune.

Nevertheless, the study of family history shows that misfortune may plague generations in many 'ordinary' families, as well as the rich and famous; it is just that we do not hear so much about it. As we shall see in the following sections, these so-called generational curses are more likely to result from a combination of inheritance of biological tendencies, learnings arising from family and cultural contexts, and generationally shared economic and social circumstances.

So, putting aside direct interventions from deities or supernatural powers, what human circumstances, characteristics, and behaviours could allow for malignant influences

to manifest themselves across generations? In the next sections of this paper, consideration is given to the roles of biological and psychosocial forces in shaping how ancestral family transgressions might lead to outcomes for descendants.

2.2. Genetics and Epigenetics

It is well known that genetic risk factors for disease can be passed down to children from parents, grandparents, or even more distant ancestors. For example, Huntington's disease (a rare, serious, and life-limiting degenerative brain disorder) is carried on a single gene, with individuals who carry the gene having a fifty percent chance of passing it on to their children. Because symptoms often do not appear until middle age, carriers may not be aware of the risk of passing on the condition until too late, after they have already had children. This was more likely in earlier times when the condition was not understood and is still possible today if family history is unknown. European monarchs (and other royal lines), who in past centuries preferred to marry others of 'royal blood', weakened their genetic inheritance through so-called in-breeding, resulting in diseases such as haemophilia, deformities including the 'Hapsburg jaw', and in some cases severe disability and mental illness. The majority of the risk of inherited disease, however, comes about not through consanguineous partnering or via a single gene. It is determined by genetic combinations plus environmental factors that can affect whether an inherited disease potential will be triggered to produce symptoms. For example, while genetics plays a strong role in the development of Type 2 diabetes, so do factors like diet, exercise, weight, and smoking.

Having a genetic tendency toward a disease state can hardly be described as a result of sin or wrongdoing. Nevertheless, even today, people can hold, consciously or unconsciously, non-rational beliefs about illness and disease as punishments for malfeasance. When individuals contract serious illnesses, the response is sometimes, 'What have I done to deserve this?' or 'Why am I so cursed?' Such thoughts are a relic of more ancient notions of disease and misfortune as judgements from a higher power.

There may, however, be a genetic component in the tendency to behave in ways that lead to undesirable outcomes such as illness. For example, there is evidence of genetic predispositions towards addictions (e.g., Hatoum et al. 2023), violent criminal behaviour (e.g., Levitt 2013, 2014; Paul 2020; Sohrabi 2015), risk-taking (e.g., Nicolaou and Shane 2020), and impulsivity (e.g., Bevilacqua and Goldman 2013). In turn, these tendencies, if acted out, are associated with the development of illness, accidents, injury, or incarceration. However, whether a genetic tendency will ever actually manifest in behaviour depends on many factors, including parental behaviours, social environment, education, inherited strengths, personal motivations, and even chance.

The relatively new science of epigenetics is significant here. Epigenetics involves the study of how behaviour and environment can cause changes that affect how genes work, as contrasted with changes—or mutations—in the genes themselves. Unlike genetic mutations, epigenetic changes are potentially reversable. They do not alter a person's DNA sequence, but they can lead to variations in how the body 'interprets' this sequence. This occurs in a range of ways, for example, via chemical and physical alterations to parts of the DNA coating, affecting whether a gene is turned 'off' or 'on' (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022).

Maladaptive epigenetic changes are thought to be caused by extreme stresses to the organism; for example, poor nutrition during pregnancy (such as that which can occur during famines) may have malignant effects on the DNA mechanisms of the foetus (Roseboom 2019). In a comprehensive review, Bohacek and Mansuy (2013) report evidence that certain epigentic changes can be inherited and thus 'reshape developmental and cellular features over generations' (p. 220). In one study designed to test mechanisms of epigenetic transfer, Dias and Ressler (2014) examined how male mice conditioned through mild electric shock to fear a particular smell (acetophenone) subsequently produced offspring who were more sensitive to acetophenone than to other odours. 'Grandchildren' of the originally exposed mice also exhibited increased sensitivity. The researchers concluded that this

transmission of a stress response to a generally non-noxious smell occurred via chemical changes to the genome that affected how DNA was 'packaged and expressed' rather than being a change to the actual DNA sequence. In other words, it was an epigenetic change.

Thus, through genetics and epigenetics, ancestors can pass down traits and tendencies that predispose descendants to negative outcomes. Lifestyles judged as unhealthy, indulgent, or immoral are sometimes implicated in these transfers, and such lifestyles may be interpreted as comprising 'ancestral sin'. For example, a child born to a woman addicted to certain drugs during pregnancy must then suffer the trauma of drug withdrawal during infancy. In adulthood, such children may be more susceptible to addiction due to genetic susceptibility, early experience, childhood environment, or some combination of these factors. Similarly, foetal alcohol spectrum disorders are conditions in which children subjected to high levels of alcohol in utero are born with disabilities including physical, behavioural, and cognitive problems, which may in turn limit their adaptiveness to adult life (and potentially, their parenting skills). Nevertheless, describing addictions as 'sins' is not in tune with modern sensibilities; neither is the distinction made by the 1834 English Poor Law between the 'deserving' poor (poor through no fault of their own) and the 'undeserving' poor (poor through their undesirable habits, laziness, etc.) (English Poor Laws 2024). The undeserving poor were in a sense considered to be sinners, with their offspring suffering as a result, especially if they adopted the habits of their parents and, in turn, passed on a way of life that led them to be described as a burden to the community. Modern-day social scientists tend to reject this differentiation, arguing that 'need is need' but there is still ongoing debate (e.g., Solas 2018; Zatz 2012).

More often than not, the individual has little or no control over their genetic contribution to descendants (although this may change in an era of 'designer babies' as it becomes possible through invitro fertilisation for parents to choose implantation of embryos with genetic characteristics judged as desirable). It is important to emphasise, however, that genetics, though influential, does not define one's destiny. Families pass on not only their genes but also provide their children with an environment for learning about attitudes, behaviours, relationships, and lifestyle choices, each of which contributes to descendants' character, health, well-being, and resilience, as does the culture in which children spend their formative years.

2.3. Psychosocial Influences

In reality, the division between biological and psychosocial influences is a false one. As we have seen above, genetics and environment interact, influencing individual and family characteristics, with outcomes affecting both health and behaviour. Having a genetic predisposition toward a particular trait does not guarantee that it will become manifest, and neither do particular environments accurately predict individual outcomes. Environments act differently on different people depending on their genetic characteristics and past experiences. Children of alcoholic or criminal parents, for example, may become alcoholics or criminals themselves, but many—perhaps most—break away from these malign influences. Nevertheless, cultural, social, and family environments can provide the mechanisms through which ancestors cast destructive influences on descendants, influences that affect well-being psychologically as well as physically. For example, a very large Swedish study (N > 12 million) confirmed previous research showing that violent crime runs in families (Frisell et al. 2011). Parents and siblings of someone who had committed a violent crime were more than four times likelier than matched controls to also be violent, while more distant relatives of violent criminals were more than twice as likely to offend. Further, Vaughn et al. (2014) examining the importance of family history in predicting antisocial personality, showed that about 30 percent of their large sample diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder had family crime problems that were multigenerational, involving parents, grandparents and other relatives. While genetics may play a role here, the sharing of attitudes as well as modelling and direct teaching of socially maladaptive behaviours are implicated.

Family dysfunction does not necessarily arise from purposeful ancestral behaviours; it can result from forebears' lack of awareness or inability to control or ameliorate negative influences. For example, families constrained to live in war zones or polluted, unsafe, or unhygienic situations face environments likely to affect the well-being of future generations. This is also the case for families who, through circumstance, are unable to escape poverty, with its accompaniment of poor diet and unhealthy living conditions. Breaking free from these hazardous lifestyles or maladaptive cultural practices is only possible if external circumstances improve and/or individuals and families develop personal or community coping strategies that enhance lifestyle quality.

The term 'intergenerational trauma' is used to describe the phenomenon whereby traumatic experiences in one generation cast their shadows on descendants. As well as through health problems (as discussed above), this can occur through the transmission of maladaptive attitudes and beliefs, unhelpful coping strategies, and insecure personality styles. A study by Hartowicz (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with individuals who felt that their mental health had been compromised by the activities of family members from previous generations. She presented examples from these case studies of individuals who, through knowledge and understanding of their familial past, had been able to break recurring cycles of destructive patterns of behaviour. One study participant discovered that both his father and grandfather suffered from depression, both suiciding in their 40s. This participant, recogising similar tendencies in himself, sought therapeutic help to manage his own depressive tendencies. Children in situations in which a family member suffers war-induced post-traumatic stress disorder are known to be at risk for mental health challenges (including violent behaviour), and these effects can be transmitted across more than one generation if untreated (e.g., Banneyer et al. 2017; Russell et al. 2016). Another more general example is the extent to which citizens of warring nations learn to 'hate' citizens of their enemy nations, and these attitudes may be handed down to descendants long after the wars are over. Dislike and suspicion toward a particular national or religious group can last for many, many generations, as was once the case with Catholics and Protestants. It takes more than individual therapy to overcome these prejudices. Governments and communities must work toward attitude change.

Some forms of intergenerational trauma occur through indirect learning and/or as a direct response to parental behaviour. For example, the theoretical model known as attachment theory (e.g., Ainsworth and Bell 1970; Bowlby 1969, 1982) is often used to explain how trauma in one generation can affect relationship quality in future generations. This theory asserts that a warm and loving relationship between infants and their caregivers leads to the child developing a 'secure' attachment style. This refers to a pre-verbal understanding, based on consistency and sensitivity of nurture from a parental figure, that the world is a trustworthy place and that the child's needs will be met. Secure attachment is a basis for a sense of trust in others and the world, needed for development of assurance and confidence in adulthood, and the ability to relate to others with warmth and integrity. Some parenting styles, however, promote insecure attachment, for example, caregivers who are overly anxious and self-doubting, or those who are neglectful, inconsistent, or lacking in warmth. Historic trauma, such as poverty, domestic violence, illness, or war, can engender insecure parenting, as parents in these situations may be unable to provide the care, consistency, and warmth that children need. In addition, fashions in childcare, such as a strong belief that a child will be 'spoiled' by parental attention and overt displays of affection, or favouring severe forms of punishment, may also contribute to insecure attachment styles among offspring (Griffin 2020; Parker-Drabble 2022). Children with such attachment styles are, in turn, more likely to experience relationship (and potentially parenting) problems later in life, maintaining a cycle that can continue until it is broken by some kind of change or intervention. Those who gain understanding, either explicit or implicit, of their own psychosocial development, may be able to break these family patterns of insecure relationship styles via active attention to their own parenting (Bifulco 2021; Nicolson 2017; Parker-Drabble 2022). Through education and support, there is potential

to overcome past mistakes in parenting styles and provide family environments more conducive to mental health.

3. Discussion

Implications for Family Historians

If you inherit the faults of your ancestors either through genetic or environmental influences (or a combination of these), maladaptive patterns of coping must be changed to break the repetitive generational cycle. This may not always be possible in one generation, especially for those constrained by poverty and disadvantage. Better living standards, greater medical knowledge, safer work practices and improved education can all assist in making positive change possible, but individual knowledge, understanding and personal motivation, reinforced by social and cultural support, are also key factors. Family historians have the skills to uncover ancestral patterns and communicate them to their own families or, if they use their skills professionally, with clients. Discoveries can be distressing (Moore 2023b), and for some, the appropriate next step is to seek help from medical, psychological, or other health professionals. One medical example is pre-pregnancy genetic counselling for those worried about a family history of inherited health concerns. Psychological interventions include programs to manage addiction or addictive tendencies, or to control impulsivity, among those who have experienced these negative tendencies among themselves and recognised/uncovered similar patterns among their forebears. For some, discussions and support with friends and family may be the key to change.

Vaughn et al. notes, however, that '[t]he multigenerational antisocial family tree is a challenging cycle to interrupt' (p. 829). These researchers recommend that health professionals, when working with clients vulnerable to anti-social or self-destructive behaviour, consider exploring clients' intergenerational family histories of behaviour problems, where this is possible. They particularly recommend this history-taking when working with at-risk pregnant mothers and pre-school children, to allow for early therapeutic opportunities for breaking cycles of family dysfunction.

It seems clear that awareness of family history can be an important factor in changing unhealthy generational cycles. In a literature review, Elias and Brown (2022) summarised research evidence indicating that intergenerational knowledge of family history was associated with positive mental health and wellbeing. Similarly, Merrill and Fivush (2016) found that intergenerational narratives shared in families were positively related to identity development and wellbeing among adolescents and to generativity and well-being in adults (e.g., Bohanek et al. 2006; Duke et al. 2008; Fivush et al. 2011; Hebblethwaite and Norris 2011; Norris et al. 2004).

The process by which knowledge of family history contributes to mental health may be through increasing our understanding of the stresses and traumas faced by our ancestors. This, in turn, may lead to the possibility of acceptance of the past, forgiveness, and resolution of current distress (e.g., Allen 2013; Lenherr 2019). It may also contribute to the motivation to make changes that break negative cycles. Among children and adolescents, higher levels of family history knowledge may be associated with more shared family discussions and a correspondingly greater sense of family cohesion and sense of family identity.

If the sins of your ancestors are passed down to you not necessarily as physical, psychological or behavioural deficiencies, but as guilt and shame for the actions of your forebears, a different course of action might be in order. It is not uncommon for descendants to experience feelings of responsibility for their ancestors' actions and even fears that they may share some of the negative characteristics that their ancestors exhibited. As one woman from Moore's (2023a) study put it, the '*realisation that your privilege is built upon historical oppression of others'* is guilt-inducing. But are we responsible for the behaviours and attitudes of our forebears? While some argue that we are not, there is a trend among individuals, institutions, and nations to attempt amends (e.g., Pettigrove 2003). This is more likely in cases in which current descendants are still benefiting from ancestral perpetrators at the

expense of their victims' descendants. Examples include those whose current prosperity derives at least in part from past colonisation, theft, slavery, or other denigration of specific cultural groups who are still disadvantaged today.

The United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation (2019) present five forms of remedy and reparations for historic violations of human rights resulting from colonisation and slavery. The first is 'restitution', for example, returning land to its original owners. 'Compensation' usually refers to putting a monetary value on the wrongs acted upon ancestors and paying that amount to descendants. 'Rehabilitation' is designed to encompass medical and psychological care for victims of historic violations, as well as the provision of legal and social services for these victims. 'Satisfaction' involves efforts to both find and acknowledge victims, for example, through apologies, 'truth telling', acceptance of responsibility, and restoration of dignity. The final form of remedy is 'guarantees of non-repetition of past wrongs'. This may be attempted through the development of new laws and treaties, as well as through public education aimed at changing negative attitudes towards victims. Governmental apologies to historically damaged groups have occurred frequently in the last couple of decades, as have other forms of remedy and reparation (Pettigrove 2003). Nevertheless, there remain many unresolved cases of contention in relation to land rights, compensation payments, and the like.

Although the United Nations Guidelines are designed for remedy and reparation by nations and large institutions or cultural groups, families and individuals are also sometimes choosing to take action. One example from Australia of an individual response involves Suzannah Henty, a direct descendant of the Henty family, thought to be the first European settlers in the state of Victoria. She has called for the removal of monuments and statues to her pioneer forebears. At Victoria's Indigenous truth-telling inquiry, Ms. Henty was recorded as saying, 'Removing these monuments is a start to repairing the injustice committed by settlers'. She noted that some of the Henty family's monuments had been spray-painted with the words 'sovereignty was never ceded'—a popular phrase in Indigenous activism and one that is interpreted as reflecting the damaging impacts these monuments have had among local First Nations people (Ore 2024). A further example comes from a wealthy British family (the Trevelyans), who came to the realisation that their ancestors had been slave owners in the Caribbean. In 1835, the family received a huge compensation payout from the British government when slavery was abolished (slaves were not compensated, only slave owners). The extended family have formally apologised and begun the process of making reparations that include both financial compensation and social action (Lashmar and Smith 2023).

One way in which descendants of colonial settler ancestors are acknowledging past wrongdoing is through telling their family history stories in the context of historical events, that is, trying to interpret these events from the perspectives of the different groups involved. Shaw (2021, 2022) and Sleeter (2020) call this 'critical' family history; a form of storytelling that takes into account the varying viewpoints and power relationships of actors in the drama of history. Class, race, ideology, religion, even the availability or lack of records—all these can influence how historic events are analysed and judged. These more nuanced, contextual interpretations have implications for how large-scale historical events are understood, as well as their implications for individuals who seek to understand their own family stories.

An example of critical family history is discussed in a paper by Heath and Barnwell (2023), in which the descendant of an indigenous Australian tribe (Heath) and the descendant of the colonial adventurer who photographed of the tribe (Barnwell), come together as 'a partnership of equals'. Rather than the original interpretation of the photographic collection as a depiction of 'primitive' and stone age' peoples, these writers discuss their significance from the perspectives of both photographed and photographer. Presenting the pictures in the context of dual family histories gives them a dignity that was not

present in their previous representations as examples of 'them' (the 'primitive') and 'us' (the 'civilised').

Despite the apparent morality associated with attempts to remedy and repair past wrongs, there are problems and issues involved in doing so in a manner that is fair and just. As an example, Tombs (2024), in a recent discussion paper, asks how the monetary cost of long-past harms can be calculated and whether such resources might be better used to relieve today's urgent social needs. He further argues that reparations often cause resentment. This is more likely to be the case when reparations are 'collective', in other words based on national attempts to balance past wrongs toward particular groups. An example is governments transferring land that one group believes they rightfully own to a different group whose claim is considered stronger. Such resentment can damage the prospect of genuine reconciliation. As well, reparations impose burdens on people who were not responsible for the damage in the first place, including descendants of those accused of harm and/or taxpayers in general when a reparation involves financial settlements from governments. Tombs is a strong proponent of the idea that if reparations are to occur, it is important to specify what damage is to be repaired and how the reparations will serve to repair it. In many, if not most cases, this is an extremely difficult exercise. Nevertheless, Maddison (2012) argues that a nation's integrity is at stake if this exercise is not undertaken, stating that 'until a nation is able to deal with social psychological barriers to addressing historical injustice, it is likely to construct and maintain a narrow and defensive form of nationalism' (p. 695).

In Australia, disagreements about national responsibility for harm to indigenous peoples as a result of colonisation have resulted in the so-called 'history wars'. On one side, the 'black armband theory' argues that too much emphasis on the perceived wrongs of colonisation will overshadow the great benefits that it provided in building a new nation. The opposing argument is that a history that valorises the deeds of white colonisers does not take seriously the very real damage to Australia's original inhabitants ('white blindfold theory'; e.g., Clark 2002). These are topics on which debate is passionate and ongoing.

4. Conclusions

The popular pastime of family history research has become, for many of its adherents, a way to honour one's ancestors (Moore et al. 2021). In some ways, it can even resemble a form of religion in which there is a passing down of 'sacred' stories and objects of significance, pilgrimages are made to 'walk in the footsteps' of ancestors, and the lives of our forebears are celebrated through gatherings and rituals (Robinson 2021).

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that biblical terminology is sometimes brought into play to describe responses to certain family history discoveries. Unfortunately, not all of these involve triumph or honour. As we find out more about the health, circumstances, and behaviours of our ancestors, thoughts about 'sins of the fathers' can loom large. The discovery of ancestral wrongdoing can engender grief, guilt, and concern about whether or how reparations should be made. As well, findings, or even suspicion, of the inheritance of undesirable characteristics—physical, attitudinal, and behavioural—may require mental health or social intervention to allow for acceptance and healing and to break negative cycles across generations. Although such findings might be initially distressing, they can stimulate positive changes in mental health through a deeper understanding of how the past influences the present.

How? The Holy Bible, from which the 'sins of the fathers' quote is taken, provides guidelines for overcoming intergenerational transmission of sin through leading a moral life and following religious laws (for example, Ezekiel 18:19–20). Medical science has come a long way in providing prevention, cure, and amelioration methods for some inherited conditions that can result in anti-social behaviour. A greater understanding of intergenerational psychology has and will lead to techniques that assist individuals to overcome their maladaptive cognitions and behaviours. This latter process can be facilitated by mental health professionals becoming more familiar with the kinds of issues

raised by family history research and by family historians becoming aware of the mental health resources available to them. Finally, it is hoped that more nuanced understandings of national and family history will lead to clearer pathways for appropriate reparations and apologies, as well as positive moves forward in resolutions about national as well as individual identity.

In short, it is important to remember that we have agency and are more than the sum of our ancestral history. In the words of Hannah Arendt (2003), '*Every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed by the deeds of the ancestors*' (quoted in Darby and Branscombe 2004, p. 121). In other words, we inherit positives as well as negatives, and most of us will have reasons for ancestral pride as well as ancestral guilt.

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Note

[1] In other sections of the Bible, differing viewpoints are presented, for example, Deuteronomy 24:16 states 'Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sins' (NIV).

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