Family Secrets and the Slow Violence of Social Stigma

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Abstract
This article uses Rob Nixon’s theory of ‘slow violence’ to examine how families keep secrets to manage stigma over time. In an age driven by hurriedness and distraction, Nixon calls for scholars to attend to the uneventful injustices that slip beneath the radar, dismissed or postponed. While his concept addresses environmental pollution, I argue that it is also relevant to the temporal dimensions of other sociological problems. To understand the social causes and impacts of family secrets I apply the concept of slow violence to qualitative survey responses collected from non-professional family historians in 2016. Bringing Nixon’s idea to family secrets, I argue, exposes how stigma – as an often unseen and accretive form of social violence – is felt and managed within families across generations. The article demonstrates how Nixon’s time-centred theory valuably foregrounds long-term ramifications in a context where the churn of election and policy cycles often sets a short-term view.

Keywords
emotions, family history, family secrets, intergenerational families, qualitative surveys

In an age driven by spectacle, hurriedness and distraction, Rob Nixon’s (2011) notion of ‘slow violence’ calls for scholars to register the uneventful and seemingly undemanding injustices that slip beneath the radar, dismissed or postponed. While Nixon focuses on the erosive temporalities of environmental crimes, I argue that his concept is also useful for thinking about the temporal dimensions of other social problems because it addresses the unseen structural forces that sustain social injuries and protect them from exposure. To explore the value of Nixon’s theory for sociology I use the concept of slow violence to analyse responses from an online qualitative survey I conducted in 2016 about the social causes and impacts of family secrets. The survey was aimed at Australians researching their own family histories who had uncovered family secrets kept by past generations, including illegitimate births, bigamous marriages and criminal acts. In the

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responses, descendants reflect on their ancestors’ lives and describe how inherited silences haunt and shape the emotional tenor and relational configurations of their families across generations. Applying Nixon’s idea to family secrets, I argue, exposes the temporal dimensions of how stigma – as an often unseen and accretive form of social violence – is experienced and managed within families via secrecy. Building on the notion of slow violence, I suggest that families experience a double form of violence, where the risk of social stigma pressures the family unit into silencing, or even ostracising, family members, and then, in a second blow, leaves subsequent generations to deal with the often hurtful or confusing legacy of secret-keeping.

After a brief review of the literature on family secrets, I will outline Nixon’s theory of slow violence and put it into dialogue with sociological theories of intergenerational transmission, including Erving Goffman’s (1963) under-theorised notion of ‘tribal stigma’. Recently in sociology we have seen a return to the concept of stigma, primarily in the work of Imogen Tyler (Tyler and Slater, 2018) and Michele Lamont (2016). This article contributes to this discussion; however, while Tyler and Lamont focus primarily on the experience of individuals or social classes in civic spaces, I address the management of stigma within the intimate sphere of family life and emphasise the intergenerational impact of these practices. This shift in scope links an analysis of stigma with rich conversations in the sociology of personal life that show how families navigate, perform and often defy normative and functionalist schemas that prescribe what ‘the family’ is and does (Finch, 2007; May and Dawson, 2018; Morgan, 2011; Smart, 2007). Drawing on data from my survey, I will then examine how secrets – as markers of stigma – operate unseen and slowly over time, as a form of slow violence within families. This analysis allows us to ask how secret-keeping, as a social practice, restructures families in response to changing social perceptions about, for example, the ‘proper’ timing of life course events. What are the private and public impacts when families cut lines of communication or enforce codes of silence? How do the spaces of the unspoken – sutured stories, erased relationships, censored traits – simultaneously hide and foster ongoing inequalities? While I focus on secrets, my hope is that the discussion will also serve as an example of how Nixon’s time-centred theory could be brought to a variety of sociological analyses, primarily to open questions about the long-term ramifications of stigmatising social attitudes and policies, in an age when the churn of election and policy cycles often sets a short-term view.

The Socio-Temporal Life of Family Secrets

In the context of this study, a secret is something wilfully hidden. It is a silence constructed via a series of communicative practices – editing stories, leaving out details, concealing connections – that are used by one or more persons to shield information from an/others. This definition squeezes out important grey areas; for example, a suspected secret can generate its own emotional effects and structural consequences, even if it turns out not to exist. Similarly, given the passage of time that carries many family secrets, it can be difficult to determine if information was intentionally concealed, unrecognised due to wider social blindness, forgotten, or simply not known. In this regard, it is important to note that the consequences of secrecy can be more concrete, and thus
easier to determine, than the nature of the secret itself. I also acknowledge the multivalence of secrets. Because this article is about violence, the focus is on secrets and practices of silencing that my respondents deem damaging, or to have had primarily negative impacts. But secrets can also be protective, chosen and an important form of resistance in the face of demands to speak. As Sara Ahmed (2010: xvi) writes:

"silence and speech have different even contradictory effects given their timing, which is a question not simply of their time, but also of the place in which we reside at a given moment of time, the worlds we find ourselves in."

Here I wish to explore the social aspects of family secrets; that is, how they are produced by a context wider than the family, a context that includes historical and political processes, and social proprieties and policies. This approach suggests that secrets are not always the result of individual intention – they register an intimate action, but also the pressure of a wider context that directs codes of conduct and silence. Each family has its own unique secrets; but at the same time, secrets are held in common. By this I mean that the content of secrets is socially embedded and determined by what attributes are considered stigmatised, or ruinous to disclose, in a specific time and place. The family secrets reported in the survey indicate that families hide certain experiences because they fear social sanction. Illegitimate birth, bigamy, adoption, being raised as your mother’s sibling, homosexuality, all of these things were deemed shameful due to age and gender norms, religious and moral strictures, or the selective sanctioning of relationships. Similarly, experiences of mental illness, post-war PTSD, desertion, suicide and criminality are kept secret due to ideas of what constitutes a healthy mind, a brave man or a sinful act.

Existing work on secrets suggests that a deeper exploration of their socio-temporal aspects, in particular, is vital if we are to connect family experiences with wider social changes. More research is needed to understand how family secrets are constituted, transmitted and refigured across generations, as well as how family secrets register the ways social stigmas are felt and managed on an intimate scale. An intergenerational scope has the unique capacity, as Rachel Thomson and Julie McLeod (2009: 113) explain, ‘to capture the simultaneous and symbiotic operations of social reproduction and innovation, which connect the intimate operations of family life to the social and economic landscape within which they are situated’. Most of the existing research on family secrets is situated in psychology and focuses on the impact of present secrets on the immediate family, particularly infidelity and incest (Brown-Smith, 1998; Orgad, 2015). Sociologists have written about the connections between family memory, temporalities and generational transmission (Bertaux and Thompson, 2005; Brannen, 2006; Favart-Jardon, 2002; Koenig Kellas, 2013), and guiding works address broader questions about the nature of secrecy and secret-keeping in philosophy (Bok, 2011), history (Cohen, 2013) and sociology (Smart, 2007, 2010, 2011; Zerubavel, 2006). Read for what they say about time, these texts show how the experience of managing family secrets changes as the social repercussions of disclosing certain information shifts.

Generational politics around family secrets is often complicated by wider cultural transformations, which reframe the meaning of decisions that were made according to a
different moral compass and/or set of social pressures. Both Deborah Cohen and Carol Smart argue that secrets once served a protective function, shielding the family from censure, upset and social stigma. In her study of Victorian British families, for example, Cohen (2013: 2) argues that with the rise of democratised family histories, there has been a push to unearth secrets and reclaim ancestors, but often without attention to the reasons why secrets were once kept. Smart’s work on the changing policies surrounding paternity and donor conception captures the shifting social codes around family secrecy. Smart (2007: 128) explains that the ‘changing status of secrets reflects a complex change in the normative and cultural order. But it also impacts upon personal relationships.’ Keeping paternity a secret, for example, was in one decade – in both practice and policy – thought to be ‘an apparently sensible and caring course of action’ but in the next decade ‘redefined as harmful subterfuge likely to damage a child emotionally and psychologically’ (2007: 128). In this conflicted context, family historians may discover that the same secret has been both protective and destructive of the family, or interpreted in these two ways by different generations.

The existing literature on the socio-temporal life of family secrets explains that the meaning and effect of secrets is not static, and not only determined by their keepers. However, important questions remain around the ongoing impact of what can be seen, in hindsight, as the censoring acts of a protectionist state, rather than simply a protective family. Further attention is therefore needed to understand how families – particularly successive generations – deal with secrecy as a legacy of discriminatory policies and moral attitudes over time. New generations are tasked with making sense of secrets in a very different context from the one in which they were initially kept. This requires families in the present to think carefully about the context of their family in the past. But the principle also works in reverse. Ancestors may not have known the full implications of the secrets they kept, including their structural impact on the family over time, and their role in reproducing social discriminations. The ambiguity around intention only adds to the unsettling impact of secrets on the family. Disconnections in meaning and motive between the past and the present leave families to deal with the consequences of stigmatisation, and the secrecy that is used to combat or control it, often without any clear way of locating accountability and closure from a discrete cause. This, I argue, is the slow violence of family secrets.

**Slow Violence**

The word violence, meaning ‘to inflict injury or damage’, readily summons the physical force of a kick or a punch; however, sociologists have outlined how injury or damage can take other forms, such as emotional violence, where aggressors inflict or evoke shame and anger to manipulate and harm (Scheff and Retzinger, 2002). My analysis joins with this effort to recognise less visible, direct and immediate forms of violence. Existing research on the legacy or memory of violence focuses on the lingering effects of war, and other explicit forms of attack (Collins, 2008; Ray, 2011; Wieviorka, 2009). Less is known about the transmission of less overt processes, processes that do not necessarily register as violence (Walby, 2012). These forms deserve attention because just as Duncan Bell
Barnwell (2009: 348) insists that ‘the fugitive traces of memory long outlast the sound of the guns’, so too do histories of discrimination reverberate along the genealogical lines of families. They do so in ways that register as trauma or emotional distress but also as structural damage to familial relationships, with relatives or branches cut off from one another and from the family stories they each hold. The injury and damage that can attend intergenerational secrets is often hidden and unfolds slowly over time. It therefore requires us to conceptualise ways to register scales of temporality and perception that can otherwise be overlooked.

Nixon’s ‘slow violence’, as a concept, lends itself to this scale. Nixon (2011: 2) defines it as ‘a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’. While political theories in the past few decades have scrutinised ‘the event’ or dissected the ‘crisis’, Nixon (2011: 2) argues that ‘we need to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales’. In this Nixon (2011: 7) joins with Lauren Berlant (2011), who calls for a redefinition of crisis as a state that can be prolonged and enduring in its production of simmering precarity and sustained vulnerability and unease. Given this, Nixon’s (2011: 10) primary aim is to ‘widen the field of what constitutes violence’ and rethink how we represent it. With a focus on time, Nixon (2011: 3) argues that such ‘a rethinking requires [us to] complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound and body bound’. Instead, we ‘need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions – from domestic abuse to posttraumatic stress […]’ (2011: 3). Nixon develops the concept of slow violence to address unacknowledged ecological ruin – toxic build up, declining species – that occurs primarily in the Global South, kept out of sight by multinational corporations and resource-hungry governments. But as we can see in the preceding quotation, he also foreshadows its applicability to a range of social injuries.

Much of the secondary work on Nixon’s concept, not surprisingly given his focus, has been in environmental studies. However, texts that embrace slow violence as a temporal lens to understand other structural forms – such as state-sanctioned race crime – are emerging (Kern, 2016; Ward, 2015). Broadening the reach of his theory, I argue that Nixon’s concept is useful for examining the intergenerational impact of discriminatory social attitudes, particularly those signified by secrets. His conceptual and representational questions are insightful for understanding secrets as social acts that play out slowly and that are difficult to trace, and thus scrutinise. First, Nixon helps us to consider how past events reverberate across generations. In the context of my data, these actions could include secrets that were kept due to social policies that committed mentally ill people to total institutions, or forced unwed mothers to give their babies up for adoption, to list just two examples. Nixon also gives us the scope to ask how these historical actions slowly perpetuate transgenerational traumas, specifically in a way that hides their origin, and makes their cause difficult to pin down and address. Thinking methodologically, his theory asks how researchers can attune to and trace the subtle, yet powerful workings of unseen forms of social censorship and dictation.
Slow Violence within Intergenerational Families

Drawing Nixon’s concept into the sociology of the family illuminates a different register; that is, how people are corralled into an everyday complicity in slow violence. In Nixon’s scenario, companies, governments and other stakeholders collaborate to keep the human and environmental costs of the resource boom under wraps. But in the context of family secrets, a double form of violence operates. With inherited secrets particularly, the cogs of relational and social obligation grind down the voices of the very people the secrets work against: the family itself. Families are compelled to edit their public face in response to judgement and sanction; and then new generations inherit these stigmas and maintain silences even when the direct threat of discrimination may no longer exist. Families, as spaces of social reproduction, can become instruments in perpetuating the structural inequalities and discriminations of earlier political eras.

To further clarify this double violence, it is clear that families may not even know what or how they are reproducing the stigmas that shape secrets. Generations can inherit traditions, rituals and stories that have lost their original meaning but continue as practices that differentiate, mark and shape the family in a particular way. Learned manners entrench rules about which topics, memories and stories become ‘sensitive’, and thus avoided, within families. Such conventions are often preserved and performed gradually, tacitly and without notice or studied intent. They enlist future generations’ collusion in an unspoken violence that – often in response to wider social discriminations – excludes certain relatives, relationships and life events from the family’s history. In this doubling of violence, the family is made responsible for social censorship, though often acting unknowingly, protectively, out of obligation or under duress. Even in cases where families break from these practices – through revelation or dissent – there is still the fact of living with the legacies of these gaps and silences.

Sociological theories of how families control information, and how generations edit collective memories, both help to anchor Nixon’s notion of slow violence within the context of intergenerational family dynamics. True to his definition of such processes as ‘bloodless’ (2011: 16), slow violence in this context can take the forms of shaming, silencing, ostracising, withholding recognition and effectively erasing memories and relationships. These actions are often unspoken, or whispered among few, but can result in restructuring the actual family to suit a social ideal of ‘the Family’. As Erving Goffman explains in his work on stigma, this collective censorship is often intended to fulfil a protective function. Families can control information to limit stigma, or at least the emotional impact of knowing you are at risk of being discredited. Goffman (1963: 46) cites the ‘capacity of a family […] to constitute itself a protective capsule for its young’. In this context, ‘intimates not only help the discreditable person in his masquerade but can in fact serve as a protective circle’ (1963: 120).

The family secret is key to this process. This is especially so in the case of what Goffman (1963: 14) calls ‘tribal stigma’ – the stigma that comes with belonging to a group, and is thought to ‘be transmitted through lineages and [can] equally contaminate all members of a family’. Tribal stigma is social; it moves between families and society, but it is perceived as sticky – once one family member ‘contracts’ stigma it is thought to
taint the family as a whole, within and across generations. The family is not the source of the stigma, but is likely to be read as such and must therefore manage the stigma. Common secrets identified within the survey – mental illness, illegitimacy, suicide and inter-racial and inter-class relationships – conform to the theory that families keep secrets with the intention of protecting the family from contracting and/or inheriting stigma. These are the kinds of experiences that, in a particular time and place, are thought to carry social shame, contaminate the group and result in social sanctions. When family members hide these things, they protect the collective, but at the same time inflict a violent cut, severing the stigmatised, and pre-empting the threat to the group at their expense. They can conform to, and thus reproduce, the pressure to present a sanitised image of family life.

This restructuring process is most concentrated at the point of generational renewal (Mannheim, 1927). Social mobility often requires that generations control information to limit the transmission of ‘tribal stigma’. To do this, families change their story and forget certain potentially discrediting details. The family story is censored to realise a better future, assuming the past is tainted and unsalvageable. However, Nixon cautions us to remember William Faulkner’s dictum, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’ (in Nixon, 2011: 8). To render something invisible does not mean it disappears completely. The secret, though silenced or forgotten, can remain productive in its seeming absence. The act of hiding something or someone, of imbuing it with shame, has social repercussions within and beyond the family. Analysing survey responses from family historians, I explore how an analysis of intergenerational family secrets as slow violence can help us to track the often-unseen structural and emotional effect of discriminatory social attitudes and policies on families over time.

The Family Secrets Survey

This article is based on data I collected via an online qualitative survey aimed at Australian non-professional family historians – people researching their own family histories, specifically those who had already found secrets kept by past generations. I chose this group for reasons of both ethics and expertise. In sociology, it is recognised that family historians perform important memory-work by reconciling inherited stories with archived records, and revising certain class, gendered and cultural histories (Bottero, 2015; Kramer, 2011; Mason, 2008). They are also likely to have already dealt with emotional or shocking aspects of uncovering family secrets, making them a less vulnerable group for this sensitive topic. As a critical point, it is worth noting that this group is particularly reflexive about the connections between past and present, and therefore do not represent experiences where slow violence may register as a complete lack of knowledge about or access to the family’s history.

The survey was conducted over one month in late 2016 and advertised through genealogical societies and state and regional libraries using both paper flyers and social media. It contained five initial demographic questions and seven free text questions. The format was modelled on the Mass Observation directives held at University of Sussex Archives, The Keep. As previous studies demonstrate, these qualitative questionnaires have been a valuable source of data for the sociology of intimate life (May, 2015; Smart, 2011).
However, having worked with archived directives at The Keep, and experienced the challenge of copying and comparing the handwritten documents one box at a time, I decided to make my survey digital. I piloted the survey with a small group of family historians which helped to refine the questions.

In the survey, I asked respondents about the cause and effect of secrets within families, including why the secret was kept, who it was kept from, how the family has reacted to the revelation of the secret and whether the secret will now become part of the official family history. For ethical reasons, it was important to me that people be able to draw their own assumptions about what constitutes a secret, and decide how much detail to disclose. To facilitate this, I did not require respondents to explicitly state the nature of the secret itself, and some withheld this information.

Four hundred people answered the survey. Responses to each question differ in detail and length, ranging from single word answers (often ‘shame’ as a reason for keeping secrets) to 750-word answers. The self-selecting sample was more than 80% female, with an age range of 25–87, averaging 60 years of age. From discussions with librarians and genealogical societies, it appears this composition mirrors the demographic of people doing family history in their reading rooms. In the analysis I include ages, along with pseudonyms, to identify respondents, as the age gives some indication of generation and/or socio-temporal context.

The data were systematically coded using NVivo software to identify and explore patterns and analytical themes. Because this survey is the first phase of a larger mixed-methods study about Australian family histories, the systematic coding was broad and exploratory. After an initial open coding, I refined the codes covering family secrets to specify what respondents identified as the types of family secrets; the causes and consequences of family secrets; the gendered aspects of secrets; and the emotions associated with both the keeping and revealing of secrets.

The aim of this article is not to report the overall findings of the survey, or to apply Nixon’s concept to all of the family secrets. While most family historians drew links between family secrets and social norms, the focus and tone of responses differed depending on the circumstances. In some cases, descendants felt removed from past events, especially if they were very far back in time, and some described the discovery of secrets (especially those about convict ancestry) as ‘thrilling’ or ‘interesting’. Others wrote about the positive personal experience of filling out the family story, rather than detailing how secrets affected preceding generations. Given this diversity, I am not suggesting that Nixon’s concept of ‘slow violence’ is relevant for understanding all types of family secrets, or that family secrets by default function as ‘slow violence’. Rather, in this article I focus on the code covering negative consequences as a sample of family secrets where Nixon’s concept can be insightful. Thirty-nine responses offered concrete accounts of structural damage across generations as a ‘consequence’ of family secrets, such as conflict, ostracism and family separation. These responses offered varying levels of detail about specific consequences, but they all focused on the slow-burning ramifications of one or more family secrets.

In the following sections, I analyse this sample of responses, focusing on how Nixon’s concept of slow violence might help us to read these particular family secrets as indices of social stigma. To do this I track how the respondents draw links between social stigma,
family secrets and the impacts of these dually social and intimate forces within their family lives.

**How Does Stigma Operate as Slow Violence via Family Secrets?**

Approaching family secrets as a form of slow violence gives us deeper insight into how families use secrecy to manage stigma and the intergenerational repercussions of secret-keeping practices. Some of the responses describe exactly how stigmatisation operates as a form of slow violence that – doubled in its impact – can make the family an instrument of its own social censorship. For example, Melissa (52) sees the threat of social stigmatisation as the reason why her family kept secrets about bigamy and illegitimacy. She also notes the form stigmatisation takes, figuring it as a social emotion. As Melissa writes:

> I guess that the reason these types of things were kept secret is that people think it was shameful, that others will think less of them and such information could stop them from having a career, or family or getting ahead in life. Or… what will people think if they knew the truth about us?

Trying to make sense of her ancestors’ secrets, Melissa locates the social ascription of shame and the fear of social sanction as central causes. Ellen’s (71) experience also captures a fear of emotional contagion, or ‘tribal stigma’, within families. She explains that her uncle was institutionalised at the age of 21 after being diagnosed with schizophrenia, because of ‘shame, and the thought that the whole family was tainted with this shame’. These social emotions are roused by the perceived judgement of others. Shame is seen to be a contagious force that must be stopped from infecting the family across both intra-generational and intergenerational lines. In both Melissa and Ellen’s responses, violence is slow and dislocated from its social source because it is felt to originate within the family.

In some survey responses the nature of the secret is not entirely known. These cases display the tacit way that secrets produce effects within families, even when their content remains undisclosed. Rose (67), for example, does not share the nature of the family secret, but she still shows how it echoed through her family. Rose describes how the secret events of her grandparents’ generation affected her father, and then his relationship to her. It is also worth noting the style of this response, which, in trying not to disclose the family secret, performs a meta-version of the ‘choreographed silence’ (Smart, 2011: 549) that it describes:

> This happened before my father was born but it has a lot to do with him as a young man. It shocked and surprised me as when I found out I knew at that very moment why I was singled out as a child. Out of six children, I was most like my father both in looks and attitude. Thrown out at eighteen. I now know why in his mind but certainly not necessary. What happened was two generations back. I would like to tell my father it wasn’t my fault but I feel he knows that now. Someone had to pay for the past. That was me. (Rose)
In the diffuse terms of this response, we can see how secrets restructure the family, even if they are never spoken about and only reveal themselves via unexplained emotions and reactions. An event before Rose’s father’s birth ricochets down the family line, and though silenced, shapes the experience of following generations. In hindsight, Rose feels that she was attributed responsibility for something that happened two generations prior. As Nixon (2011: 7) argues, ‘attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements […] Such displacements smooth the way to amnesia.’ Secrets, even when unknown, can animate the present, shaping actions and fuelling confusion. Rose’s description of how guilt, responsibility and anger are transmitted underlines the productive nature of silence – the slow violence that occurs in the unseen and unspoken intimacy of family dynamics.

Looking back at the reasons why secrets were kept, it becomes clear that older generations seek to control or prevent the transmission of social emotions to the rest of the family. For example, Lindy (38) selects social propriety, and the emotion that is used to police it, as the driver for her grandparent’s silence about illegitimacy and desertion: ‘I think it was kept from my father’s generation and mine out of a) embarrassment and b) it not being the socially accepted normal of the time when my pop was growing up’ (Lindy). This generational control recurs throughout the data. Referring to secrets about illegitimacy and incarceration, for example, Amber (36) says ‘Family wouldn’t have wanted future generations to know the shame that came with these secrets’; and Roger (78) notes, ‘Each generation seemed to think that the shameful parts of their conduct was of no business of anyone else, even the following generation.’ As these responses suggest, generations are seen to play a key role in judging the emotional and social consequences of information, and then editing the family history in order to control what is perceived to be the transmission of stigma. The family story is reconstructed across several lifetimes to reach for an identity that, each generation presumes, will afford social opportunity, or even survival, in the present and future.

The responses from family historians give us a deeper insight into how secrets are managed in a structural way that is often unseen and defers the jolt of scandal, replacing it with the slow toxicity of repression. To staunch the flow of stigmatised information, and its presumed contagion, families can be seen to restructure, cut off or shun. For instance, Stella (70) describes how her family’s efforts not to transmit information extend to geographical and emotional separation, as people who know and do not know the secret must be kept apart. To hide the criminality of a family member, Stella’s family moved towns, breaking from other branches of the family and the local community. Stella explains:

In essence, it was only my two aunts and succeeding generations who didn’t know. The aunts thought the sun rose and set in their father, so it was doubtless a way to protect that relationship. Moving away ensured that what was common knowledge among family (localised around the town where the event took place) and other residents was shielded from the girls. Keeping family at arm’s length prevented revelation via chance remarks. Some of the family suffered a lot of taunts and unpleasantness at the time, and even after the release from prison. My grandmother seems to have been very keen to improve her children’s opportunities.
In this response the pressure to keep the secret comes from the fear of being stigmatised, and here taunted, in the public eye, and the perceived threat to future opportunities and social mobility. Here the family also becomes instrumental in perpetuating silences to protect descendants at the cost of knowing the family narrative, and indeed, even knowing the family. One generation, as Stella explains, changes the story via secrecy and relocation, severing family and community bonds to keep from transmitting the story of the father’s criminality and its attending stigma to the next generation. In this family the need to manage stigma results in lasting disconnection between kin. A fear of shame and social sanctions draws the family to make protective cuts with the past and avoid transmitting stigmatising information.

The Impacts of Secrets Stretch across Time and Space

In Julie’s (65) story, which charts three generations, we see with even greater clarity how managing stigma via silencing can be a form of slow violence quietly inflicted across generations. Julie describes her family’s reaction to her having a child out of wedlock:

When I told my father over the telephone, ‘He said don’t come home. What would the neighbours (everyone) think, bringing disgrace upon the family.’ [...] when there was a family discussion about my situation, it was taboo to mention I ever had given birth to a child. It was never to be discussed within the family, let alone to friends or neighbours.

Echoing Goffman’s contagious ‘tribal stigma’ Julie’s father locates her as the source of ‘disgrace’, asks her to stay away from the home, forces her to give the child up for adoption and to keep the whole event secret, a rule that is extended to the wider family. As a perceived carrier of stigmatised experience and information, Julie is met with the strategic indifference of her intimates. She says ‘I will never forget that my older sister saw me in the street and deliberately shunned me and pretended she didn’t know me.’ Julie’s experience is rendered silent and quarantined to manage stigma. The sister’s spurning wounds Julie via a form of violence, that, as Nixon defines, is powerful without needing to be outwardly dramatic or spectacular. Harm ekes from prolonged withdrawal in response to social pressures.

Locating the personal in a socio-temporal context, Julie makes sense of her family’s attempt to manage stigma as a response to normative attitudes about women’s sexuality. She explains that:

The secret was kept mainly because of the climate at the time in society. The attitudes set in place from early days still stood in the fifties and sixties and early seventies. Unwed mothers were looked down upon and labelled as whores, sluts, bad girls and anything else people would say regardless of why a young girl found herself in the situation. (Julie)

Julie describes that social policies, such as the lack of welfare provisions for single mothers and her father’s legal right to sign over adoption, further facilitated the inability to challenge this moral status quo. All social avenues led back to the cloistering of illegitimate births. As this quotation shows, social proprieties are governed via social policies,
but families can play a role conforming in fear of social ‘disgrace’. Even though these stigma-management processes may remain low-key or silent, they can result in serious structural impacts, such as family separation.

The wider familial context of Julie’s experience deepens the intergenerational impact of secrets, as it comes out that her mother was also made to give her child up for adoption as a young woman. Julie suspects that her mother’s shame and her father’s disapproval of this original secret, as well as the social sanctions and pressure felt by the previous generation, affected how her parents dealt with her pregnancy. The reproduction of these social attitudes and facilitating social policies continued to stigmatise and silence women for having children out of wedlock across changing times. In the year 2000, Julie eventually found her daughter via a family connection service. Only then was Julie able to tell my siblings and my mother about finding my daughter that the taboo subject was now in the open and could be talked about (My father had died in 1989). After this discussion – allowed by changing gender politics, and access to support services – Julie helped her mother find the birth certificate of her own daughter via an overseas government. When she was 70, Julie’s mother learned the details of her adopted daughter’s life, but passed away before she was able to meet her.

This three-generation story shows the divisive impact of family secrets on relationships within families over time. It captures the temporality of what Nixon (2011: 3) calls the ‘elusive violence of delayed effects’. The original adoption is concealed, but its emotional repercussions – the lingering fear of stigma and shame – are nonetheless passed on to Julie and her own daughter, who are forcibly separated. The social stigma around (shared experiences of) illegitimacy and adoption caused trauma and disconnection across several generations of Julie’s family. As Nixon argues, slow violence plays out in this dispersed and erosive way. While ‘violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space’ (2011: 2), there is also ‘the hushed havoc and injurious invisibility that trail slow violence’ (2011: 6). As we can see from Julie’s experience, family secrets can operate as a form of slow violence, in that they can remain unspectacular, even for generations, but nonetheless have profound structural effects on families, and wider social values.

**Shaping ‘the Family’ via Secrecy**

Family secrets, seen in a wider social context, indicate how family lives rarely conform to norms, but also how family ideals continue to circulate and pressure families to fit. Beyond the intimate sphere of the family there are subtle yet damaging social censorships that proscribe how families can be discussed in public life. Myrtle (73) describes how the pressure to present a ‘happy family’ in everyday exchanges made her lonely and unwell. As a child, Myrtle was made to keep her mother’s romantic relationship with her brother-in-law secret from the family. For fear Myrtle may disclose the relationship, the mother kept her separate from extended relatives. Years later, Myrtle discovered that relatives, reaching out, were also kept from her. As she writes, ‘I not knowing this fact had lived my life socially isolated, and disconnected. […] having no visible family made Christmases awful.’ Myrtle explains that for many years she ‘invented stories at work
about “what I did at Christmas” having ‘learnt that it was easier to embellish the truth than to say after I left home at 16 years old I never went back’.

Myrtle later tried to break from keeping family secrets, but found that not conforming to social codes around how to discuss ‘family’ resulted in disconnection from other people, and from the emotional security of social belonging. Not to reciprocate the presumably shared experience of family creates emotional and social distance between friends and acquaintances. As Myrtle explains:

When you lack evidence of kith, kin or clan you would be amazed at how much ‘the family’ or ‘my family’ or ‘members of my family’ comes up in everyday conversations. Side stepping these conversations often resulted in people seeing me as aloof, private, a non-joiner because I felt I had no family to talk about in loving terms so it was enough that I felt disconnected, I did not have the energy to create some loving fictions family.

Here Myrtle explains the pressure of feeling as though one has to create a fictional story of the family to relate to other people. She gestures to the emotional labour of this performance, an act she does not have the energy to maintain because of her familial disconnection. But, in a compounding effect, her reluctance to perform ‘Family’ in this way results in further disconnection from a social circle. Though notions of ‘the family’ as a normative institution have been thoroughly deconstructed in sociology, Myrtle’s experiences gesture to the enduring power of such ideals to stigmatise people, and the social pressure she felt to affirm a fictional family in the hope of avoiding ongoing isolation from relatives and friends.

John Gillis underlines the consequences of creating ‘some loving fictions family’ in his work on the ‘imagined family’. Gillis (2002: 5) argues that in presenting and performing idealised versions of our families we cleave a deeper division between the ‘families we live with’ and the ‘families we live by’. We defer our attention ‘from a group of people one lives with in the here and now to an imagined entity we live by through either a remembered past or a dreamed of future’ (2002: 1, emphases in original). In reproducing this differentiation, albeit under social pressure, and often as a protective response, families can participate in reifying an idealised notion of ‘the family’. This, I argue, is a form of slow violence, which causes sometimes quite severe structural changes within families and, on a social scale, imbues normative narratives of family life with the power to further censor and stigmatise families. The sources of these moral ideals derive from social policies and institutions and yet it is families that become the instruments of their power, inflicting violence upon their own formation and identity. In this doubling of violence, families are also held accountable, and left to deal with the consequences of secrets.

**Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated via this study of intergenerational family secrets, families often attempt to revise their narrative and control information and relationships to prevent the transmission of what Goffman calls ‘tribal stigma’. In a complex response to both potential and actual discrimination, secrets can be the means by which families both defend
against and perpetuate social stigmas. This stigma, as the family historians’ responses show, takes the form of emotions such as shame, which are presumed to be contagious and to foreclose certain social opportunities. As a reaction, families may keep secrets to shield the family. Nixon’s theory of slow violence can help us to recognise the workings and long-term ramifications of unseen, yet injurious social acts. Secrets, I have argued, can operate as a slow violence through and against the family because they carve away at relationships to fit an ideal image of ‘the Family’, and thus reproduce the very norm that polices families in the first place. This double violence pushes families to conform to moral codes, and then leaves the family culpable for making cuts that ripple through the lives of its descendants over time. This enlisting of families, via secret-keeping practices, into the discriminations of the state and social milieu compounds the difficulty of dealing with the past, as the responsibility for damage and trauma is hard to locate and arrest. The social structures that determine secrets can remain unseen and unaccountable, or may even have been dismantled by the time the rippling effects are felt.

Secrets, in this context, operate as a form of social censorship that can play out slowly over lifetimes, affecting both specific families and stoking wider social ideas and values about what kinds of family lives and experiences are worthy or acceptable. Looking from the outside in, we may not recognise the process of secrets being kept within families. Acts of strategic silence, blindness and exclusion can happen quietly, and slowly, as families respond to perceived social risks and sanctions. A close look at family secrets demonstrates how unspectacular events and social processes can wage an impact over time, yielding social power from within families and across generations. Offering an intergenerational view, my examination of the symbiosis between intimate family lives and wider social attitudes and policies opens a more inclusive socio-temporal scope; one that offers the potential to register less visible forms of violence and locate evasive causes of entrenched inequality. It moves towards what Nixon (2011: 8) defines as a need for ‘violence […] to be seen – and deeply considered – as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labour, or resources, but also over time’. To think of violence as a contest ‘over time’ may help us to envision and demand different levels of accountability. Our attention is often directed to the immediate – 24-hour news and election cycles respond quickly to moments of crisis and flag the instant impacts of policy changes and political debate. If we register and attune to a slower set of ramifications we can keep track of how this present resonates, and perhaps also contest the quiet retreat of social responsibility that is a doubling of slow violence.

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