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**Inheriting the Family: Emotions, Identities and Things**

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Abstract: This introduction to the special issue ‘inheriting the family: emotions, identities and things’ briefly explores how attention to different forms of inheritance as emotional practices offers new ways to understand ‘intergenerational emotion’. It explains the importance of new methodologies to interrogating this emotion and introduces a range of possibilities that are taken further by the contributors in the issue itself. These include analysis of emotional concepts, object-orientated investigations, particularly as part of interviews and ethnographies, post-memorial creative practices, and researcher self-reflexivity, notably in relation to family history research.

Keywords: family history, intergenerational emotions, methodologies, postmemory, ethnography

A baby blanket. A watch. A war medal. Treasured objects held onto by families, passed down across generations; value created less from a world of economics than of affection and sentimental attachments. That the things we inherit are important to us, and perhaps not to others, is a commonplace idea; to own such things can be construed as a form of privilege – not available to those whose ties to family have been severed – but in many respects is so common to not be noteworthy (Field 2022; Haebich 2014; Swain and Musgrove 2012). Remarkably, the nature of the emotion that subsumes such objects, and which makes them ‘sticky’, has been the subject of relatively little exploration (Ahmed 2004). Part of the emotions of family, the inherited object might convey love, point to affinities or connections, transmit

intergenerational trauma, carry guilt or obligation, and much more (Barclay et al 2025; Mason 2018; Hirsch 1997). To name this emotion, however, at least in English, is never entirely satisfactory. If it is a single feeling at all, its boundaries and nature are elusive. We agree it exists but not what it encompasses for individuals, families, or societies.

The nature of this feeling, and as importantly its political effects, have only recently become the subject of scholarly attention. Why people hold onto particular objects or intangible inheritances, like stories, while discarding others, or what shapes the decisions to relegate something to an attic or retrieve it again, are new questions with important consequences. Cultural heritage and national memory are frequently products of family inheritance. The letters, diaries, and account books that fill archives, the artworks displayed on gallery walls, and the objects curated in museums often exist only because a family deemed them to be an important inheritance that should be maintained and, eventually, vested in our national institutions. Similarly, families funded many of the statues, monuments, and buildings that mark notable people and events, seeking simultaneously to remember their ancestors and sustain their own fame and lineage as a national inheritance.

Such feelings are also important to individuals and groups. Inherited objects contribute to the formation of identity. They can act as physical anchors that tie people to kin, communities, and social, economic, and cultural structures. As such, they might root us, giving direction to the selves we can make and the futures we can build, or act as burdens that we struggle to discard. Within such accounts, objects hold agency, carrying meanings, emotions, and possibilities (Brown 2004). They carry stories, or they don't, mysterious signs of a mislaid past, a lost relation, of people who once were and who are no more. Inherited objects then speak to selves

and relationships that extend across time and generation, and that facilitate and embody the connections and histories that haunt our present (Derrida 1994; Coverley 2020).

Attention to inherited objects points to the overlapping areas of memory studies, family history, and the history and sociology of emotion. Scholars of memory identify how family can frame engagements with the past and the production of collective memory, particularly in relation to the world wars (Noakes 2018; Holbrook and Ziino 2015; Halbwachs 1992). The public's ever-expanding interest in genealogy, family history, and genetics is of interest to sociologists and heritage studies (Kramer 2011; Nash 2008). Historians of the family have explored intangible and material inheritances as alternative sources for interpreting family life and behaviours (Scott & Scott 2000). While all acknowledge the role of emotions in explaining their subjects, what such emotion is, what it is doing, and why it matters is still a nascent field of research (Downes et al 2018; Madianou and Miller 2011).

This special issue proposes that using emotion as an analytical tool to explain and interpret how we engage with our inheritances offers new ways to comparatively investigate the relationship between familial inheritances, especially objects, national heritage, and emotion. Acknowledging the relative novelty of this area of research, our goal is not to provide definitive answers but rather to offer a range of methodological approaches that help elucidate the emotions of inheritance, and so to offer a toolkit, or the beginnings of one, for further research in the field. Our contributors draw on methodologies from the history and sociology of emotion to investigate how and why family inheritances from a range of different groups maintain their cultural power as they move across generations and from private to public spheres.

The emotions that are carried or transmitted by our inheritances are sometimes referred to as ‘intergenerational emotions’, often emotions that are produced across generations, and, perhaps, allude to obligation or identity (Barnwell 2019; Green 2013). The first step of any method, however, is identifying the object of study. In this special issue, Barclay and Crozier-De Rosa provide an analysis of the concept of ‘intergenerational emotion’, articulating its nature, boundaries, how it has been imagined by a range of theorists, and why engaging with these ideas can give it firmer definition. They particularly consider intergenerational emotion as a temporal phenomenon, given shape in relation to different forms of temporality and distance, and where the family is central to its associated feelings. The remainder of the special issue provides a range of methodological reflections on how such emotion can be identified, its role, and its relation to the researcher.

Objects themselves play an important role in the production of intergenerational emotion and so several articles in this issue consider their capacity to provide an access point to family emotion, as well as the various object-oriented methods that support their analysis. Barnwell addresses ‘troubling possessions’ – inherited objects that provoke difficult feelings, rather than the warm sentiments we often associate with heirlooms. Speaking to an emerging field of literature on perpetrator family histories, the sociological study draws on interviews with descendants of colonists in Australia. Using ‘material methods’ (Woodward 2019), Barnwell explores how the presence of inherited objects in interviews summoned emotions and facilitated reckoning with family legacies informed by colonial denial and myth.

Edwards and Canning’s paper looks at what the emotional dimensions of inheritance are for Care Experienced people, who have often been separated from

kin. Edwards and Canning analyse their voices through social media posts, exhibitions, poetry, and art, focusing on the idea of inheritance as an emotional 'practice' (Morgan 2004) where Care Experienced people 'feel their way through' notions of inheritance that summon feelings of loss and anger, but also open space to forge new legacies for the present. .

Gerodetti extends the conversation about the practices of intergenerational emotion in her consideration of urban gardening as an inherited family practice. Through an ethnography and interviews with Korean families, she considers how caring for plants provided opportunities to disseminate family knowledge, support group rituals such as sharing meals, and to invent new family traditions, while engaging in a 'Korean' practice that ties the personal to the nation. Emotions of nostalgia and solastalgia overlap within such accounts as form of intergenerational emotion, that simultaneously looks backwards and forwards.

Inherited objects and intergenerational emotions rarely stay in the family as Gerodetti's example suggests. The intersections between history with a capital 'H' and family history are prominent in discussions of post-memory, where families grapple with inherited trauma, typically tied to larger national crises or events. Mohan and Varma consider the creation of graphic novels by the children of Vietnamese migrants to the US. Redeploying family stories and objects, especially photographs, in graphic form, Vietnamese-American artists produce alternative narratives of the Vietnam War that centre the trauma of Vietnamese refugees, and counter US nationalist narratives. Sheets similarly considers the artistic creations of the Palestinian diaspora, exploring how traditional embroidery practices become opportunities for a second or third generation of migrant to explore their inherited emotions. Within both examples, inherited knowledges, objects, and skills are

redeployed by artists as simultaneously post-memorial emotional management and contributions to new histories of nation and identity. Creative material practices here provide entry points to old and new feelings and stories, producing emotion that acknowledges distance and time as part of its composition.

The things we do with family inheritances provide rich opportunities for scholars to enter into the dynamics of intergenerational emotion. Family history, however, is also a personal practice and so can be reflected on by individuals and the scholar-practitioner. King explores the emotions involved in her work with family historians, as well as her own family history research. She forefronts the emotions of the researcher as a central tool in such scholarship, considering the tension between producing critical distance and intimate proximities in family history research. Garapich raises similar questions in his account of producing his own family history, highlighting the value of 'intimate ethnography' as a method that enables new insights for complex, cross-class family connections. Intimate ethnography is a dialectical method that asks the scholar-researcher to continually move across boundaries, public and private, local and national, amateur and professional, subjective and objective, in the production of knowledge. Intergenerational emotion for the scholar emerges as they practice the making of past and present knowledge.

Together this special issue offers paths forward for future work on the intersections of emotion, family, and nation. Through its attention to time and space, distance and proximity and their flowthroughs, it draws particular attention to the temporal dynamics of emotions and the way emotion, in turn, elucidates relationships that rely less on personal connections than obligation, inheritance, and imagination. The essays provide a range of methodologies for conducting such research and invite further interdisciplinary conversation about how histories and

sociologies of emotion can come together to spark new theoretical and methodological insights.

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