A loss in the family: Silence, memory, and narrative identity after bereavement

Jenna Baddeley
The University of Texas at Austin, TX, USA

Jefferson A. Singer
Connecticut College, New London, CT, USA

Grief theories have converged on the idea that the sharing of autobiographical memory narratives of loss and of the deceased person, especially within the family, is a major way to maintain and/or reconfigure a healthy sense of identity after a loss. In contrast, we examine *unspoken memory*—the withholding of socially sharing autobiographical memories about the loss and the departed family member—as a way to either conserve an existing narrative identity or assert a new narrative identity. Depending on its context and function, silence about memory can play either a positive or negative role in an individual griever's ongoing narrative identity, as well as in the larger family narrative in which the griever's identity is embedded.

For many years early psychological theory, guided by Freud's seminal work on mourning, tended to highlight the internal dynamics of grief, focusing on the working through of ambivalent emotions and the shifting attitude towards the deceased person (Bowlby, 1980; Freud, 1917/1997). Kubler-Ross's (1969) influential work on the stages of grief continued to point the lens inward towards shifting psychological states as the immediacy of the loss receded. More recent work on loss and bereavement has increasingly examined grief as a social phenomenon that occurs within an interpersonal context of friends, family and culture (Nadeau, 1998; Rosenblatt, 2001; Walter, 1996). Critical to this perspective is the idea that loss is a challenge to the bereaved individual's sense of identity and that healthy recovery from loss requires the sharing of memories related to the loss as a way to sustain and/or reconfigure one's sense of meaning and purpose

in the face of grief (Neimeyer, 2001). Psychologists and lay people have long believed that bereaved people need to talk about their experiences to gain emotional recovery (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Worden, 2002). This belief in the healing power of talk has fuelled the rising popularity of grief counselling and bereavement support groups in recent decades.

In this paper we look at the opposite of sharing autobiographical memories in the face of grief—silence. The goal of this paper is to review research and offer a way to conceptualise the various meanings of silence—*unspoken memory*—in response to loss. In particular, since one loss that we all experience at some point is a loss within our family of origin, we look specifically at the role that unspoken memory can play in the sense of identity individuals have as members of a family unit. In addition, each family member's sense of personal identity within the family structure is also a strand

within the larger "family story". Accordingly, our inquiry into the role of unspoken memories after loss explores two interlocking systems: the individual's sense of identity, as expressed through a shifting personal narrative or life story (McAdams, 2001), and the family's sense of its identity as a whole, as expressed through the family's shared narrative (Fiese & Pratt, 2004; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Stone, 1988; White & Epston, 1990).

With regard to unspoken memories in the face of family loss, we propose the following premises:

1. Each family member possesses a set of family memories about the departed individual. These memories are part of that individual's "personal narrative identity" that defines where he or she fits within the family structure.
2. Family members have a *shared* set of memories about each other that have contributed to an overarching "family narrative" that belongs to all the family members and defines the family as a whole.
3. The death of a family member (e.g., father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister) is a challenge to each family member's personal narrative and to the family's larger narrative.
4. Silence about memories related to the departed individual or the loss itself can serve a function of maintaining or reconfiguring the narrative identity of each individual, as well as the family narrative as whole.
5. Depending on a particular individual family member's narrative and its relationship to the larger family narrative, these unspoken memories can serve as sources of stability, growth, or resistance in response to loss's demand for change.

To explore each of these premises in turn, this paper first provides background on and defines more precisely the concept of *narrative identity* as a critical source of self-understanding, meaning, and purpose for contemporary individuals. It further illustrates how membership in a family of origin yields one particular sub-narrative of an individual's larger life story. It also explains how families as a whole generate a common identity through shared memories and familiar family stories and myths.

It next examines the role that loss can play in challenging both personal and familial narrative identity. In particular, we look at the relationship of narrative identity to Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual process model of coping with grief. This model argues that individuals may engage in "loss-oriented" or "restorative" forms of coping that have very different implications for maintaining or reconfiguring identity in the face of loss.

With these components in place, we are ready to ask the question of how unspoken memory—in other words, silence about the loss—is likely to be either a catalyst for continued adherence to the previous individual and family narratives, or a force of change in both of these aspects of narrative identity. To answer this question we present one example from a popular film and four clinical case studies that illustrate the positive or negative functions that unspoken memories can play in family narrative identity after loss.

BACKGROUND OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY

In recent years researchers have increasingly explored the relationship of autobiographical memory to one's ongoing sense of identity. Identity, as originally defined by Erikson (1964), is the answer that each individual makes to the question "Who am I?" This question is answered through a process of "triple book-keeping" that allows the individual to reconcile the biological dimensions of the human lifecycle (e.g., temperament, physical and sexual development, giving birth, ageing) with the psychological (e.g., cognitive, affective, motivational, behavioural) and the social (e.g., familial, interpersonal, community, political). Identity weaves together these strands into a coherent sense of self that provides continuity across past experience and meaning and purpose for future endeavours. Over the decades since Erikson first described and outlined this process of identity formation, depicted eloquently in his books on Martin Luther and Gandhi (Erikson, 1962, 1969), many researchers have explored and catalogued the stages and processes that define the search for and achievement of identity (Josselson, 1996; Kroger, 2000; Lieblich & Josselson, 1997; Marcia, 1966; Waterman, 1993).

Perhaps the most important development in the last 25 years of identity research has been Dan McAdams' proposal that for most individuals in Western society, this process of identity formation transpires through the construction of an ongoing narrative or "life story" that a person keeps building or working on throughout adult life

(McAdams, 2001, 2006). This life story weaves together a set of significant remembered episodes into a coherent whole that guides our understanding of ourselves and our goals and actions. Singer has called these most important memories *self-defining memories*. Self-defining memories are vivid, emotionally intense, repetitively recalled, linked to similar experiences, and organised around an ongoing concern or unresolved conflict within the individual personality (Singer & Salovey, 1993). These self-defining memories serve the function within the individual's life story of capturing in a telegraphic and imagistic fashion critical recurring themes and affective scripts (Tomkins, 1979) that help to communicate to the individual and to others what matters most in their lives, both motivationally and relationally. Clearly, building a coherent autobiographical memory, let alone a coherent life story, requires that we narrate only selectively and remain silent about many of the details and many of the episodes in our lives (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004).

Researchers, particularly those working in a social-cognitive developmental orientation, have recognised how deeply situated and generally inextricable from social context are our autobiographical memories and our identities (Bamberg, 2004; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Our self-defining memories and life stories develop within conversations and thus bear the stamp of our listeners whose feedback, however subtle, shapes the course of our stories (McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi & Rich, 2005; Thorne & McLean, 2003). From our earliest attempts at constructing spoken narratives of our autobiographical memories, our listeners guide us about what is acceptable material to speak and what is best kept silent (Reese & Fivush, 2008). The stories we generate to answer the question of identity are wrought from the cultural and familial scripts that both listener and speaker have in mind when narrating events. These scripts provide the framework for our narrative material.

All cultures (and families are small cultures of their own, cf. Langellier & Peterson, 2004) have implicit cultural life scripts that define preferable or acceptable ways to be and act. The creation and (re)telling of family stories is a way of establishing a family identity that distinguishes the family from all other families and defines its most prized values, its outlook on the world, and its shared identity. Families' stories convey deep information about what the family thinks is the best way to be a man or a woman, what the meaning of death or sickness is, how much people outside the family should be trusted, and many other important attitudes that deeply bind the family together and inform individual family members' identities and worldviews (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Stone, 1988).

Telling and hearing these stories generates implicit agreement about the family's value and stabilises the family system and individuals' roles within it. For example, as has been documented in family systems theory and family therapy, as well as in family alcoholism treatment (Brown & Lewis, 1995; Wegscheider, 1981), these memory narratives may reinforce the family members' distinct roles of "scapegoat", "hero", "lost child", "mascot", or of "victim" and "perpetrator" (Stone, 1988; Taibbi, 2009). However, storytelling is certainly not a monolithic activity in which established family meanings and values go unchallenged; indeed, it can also be a site for family members to register dissent or disagreement and to contest established meanings (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Family storytelling has the potential to change family patterns and identities as well as maintain them.

LOSS AS A DISRUPTION TO NARRATIVE IDENTITY

When a family member dies, each surviving family member and the family as whole must inevitably confront the respective questions of "Who am I?" and "What is my family?" now that this critical member of their family is gone. Whatever previous narratives have served to answer each of these questions of self and collective definition, the loss poses an immediate challenge to their integrity (Nadeau, 1998; Neimeyer, 2001; Rosenblatt, 2000). According to narrative bereavement theorists, individuals turn to (co)recalling and sharing stories about the loved one and the loss in order to repair and stabilise their fragile sense of identity and to reaffirm their understanding of roles and relationships within the family structure (Harvey, 2002; Neimeyer, 2001; Walter, 1996).

When bereaved people share stories with each other, Walter (1996) asserts that they are seeking consensual validation to ensure the accuracy of their accounts of the deceased person: "Working out who the deceased really was, what she was like, how I related to her, how she died, and checking this against others' accounts is surely how the late-modern individual emerges from the other

side of loss" (p. 15). Yet the family systems literature disagrees that accuracy is the key concern, suggesting that in *family stories* the desire for veridicality is trumped by the need for homeostasis (e.g., Stone, 1988). Within families, the accounts that the bereaved people share with each other are likely to be edited when a secret or other potentially disruptive information is involved. In other words, the movement toward a stabilising narrative identity (i.e., a personal story and collective story in relation to the departed that each person and the family as a whole can live with) may require that certain memories regarding the lost individual be left unspoken. This silence about the departed, and perhaps about the circumstances of the loss itself, may serve many different purposes or functions in the dynamics of family members who are each seeking to re-align both their personal narratives and their understanding of the larger family story.

SILENCE'S ROLE IN FAMILY NARRATIVES AFTER LOSS

The family systems literature is replete with accounts of the role of secret-keeping in the perpetuation of family members' psychopathologies. Incest and alcoholism are classic family secrets whose concealment only reinforces these destructive behaviours for the sake of maintaining homeostasis (e.g., Jahn, 1995; Swanson & Biaggio, 1985). Yet some family secrets (i.e., autobiographical memories of individual family members whose revelation would be threatening to other family members or to the family system) remain unspoken because their status as secrets effectively stabilises the family system without undermining the psychological health of any of its members. Empirical studies (e.g., Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006) have provided support for the idea that keeping secrets can be good for individuals, and some writers have explored the potential benefits of keeping secrets within the family for fostering autonomy and keeping boundaries (Grolnick, 1983).

That silence about one's autobiographical memories may at times be a healthy way of responding to a loss is supported by the dual-process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), which situates narrative construction within a broader framework of coping processes. This model suggests that both avoidance of "processing" related to what has been lost and turning instead to dealing with the stressors associated with constructing a new life,

and confrontation and processing of the loss, including thinking about the deceased person and what it was that was lost, are pathways to recovery. Stroebe and Schut call these two processes restoration-oriented coping and loss-oriented coping, and suggest that bereaved people oscillate between the two. Telling stories about the loss clearly fits into loss-oriented coping. Restoration-oriented coping involves the taking of action to move past the loss and an avoidance of ruminative concern with grief and memories of the departed. Silence about one's autobiographical memories of loss and one's loved one is surely important to allow room for restoration-oriented coping activities. Silence can even be involved in loss-oriented coping. Even if one is thinking about the loss or the loved one, keeping some autobiographical memories about the loved one silent in the family environment can contribute to the griever's own identity growth or stability, or to the stability of the family system.

Keeping silence (as opposed to sharing narrative memories) within the family about a loss or a deceased loved one can indeed be a way of asserting a new identity or hanging on to an old one in the face of loss. A family member's silence may challenge or support his or her previous narrative identity in relation to the departed and the remaining family members. This silence may also challenge or support the larger family narrative to which all members belong. It can additionally have a challenging or supportive influence on the newly shifting personal narratives of each of the other family members. Finally silence, like narrative, can be a way of finding an appropriate place for the deceased person in the new family system. Figure 1 depicts the individual's narrative as nested within the family's narrative. The reciprocal line between the individual's narrative identity and the larger family narrative identity concretises the idea that there is a dynamic tension between the family's story and each member's personal story. The solid lines that form the ovals around the person and the larger family indicate stability in each of these narrative identities. The location of the personal identity within the larger family narrative also indicates the strong bond between the two.

EXAMPLES OF LOSS, SILENCE, AND FAMILY NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The following five examples illustrate how unspoken memories can facilitate individual identity
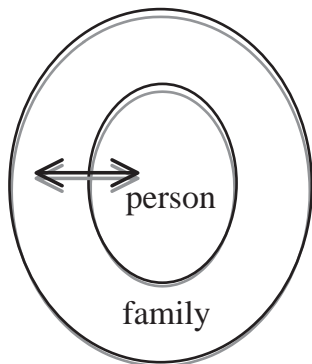
Figure 1. The individual's narrative identity embedded in family narrative identity.

stability or change, as well as stability or change in the larger family narrative. Whether unspoken memories benefit or hurt the individual or family as a whole is clearly a complicated and contextual question, hence the reason for the contrasting examples that we provide. What the examples taken together demonstrate is the significant role that unspoken memory (arguably just as significant as spoken memory) can play in narrative identity.

Figure 2 depicts the ways in which the individuals and families in our examples strengthened narrative identities (represented by bold outlines), maintained narrative identities (represented by solid outlines), or suffered weakened narrative identities (represented by dotted lines) as a result of silence about the loss. The reciprocal lines between family and individual may also be strengthened, maintained, or weakened (again represented by bold, solid, and dotted lines).

The movement of the personal identity oval from its place inside the larger family oval indicates a significant distancing of the individual from the encompassing family narrative.

In the first example the family is silent about the death of a son with negative effects for the remaining son's narrative identity and the specific memories that define his identity. Once this silence is broken the family loses its fragile equilibrium, which has been held in place by their willingness to cling to "an official story" of the death that reinforces their family myths. In the second example a widow remarried soon after the death of her husband and was silent about memories of her departed husband in an effort to transition into her new identity. Although her silence facilitated her own identity development, her silence strained her surviving family members and constrained her son's possibilities for narrating the loss and developing his own coherent story. A third example shows a similar pattern, but the daughter defines herself even more separately from her remarried father. In the fourth example a daughter's silence and her mother's desire to talk about the loss represent a family-straining tension between the daughter's claims for an autonomous, achievement-oriented identity and the mother's desire for the family system to remain intact and structured around the figure of the deceased husband. In the final example a daughter keeps silent within her family about secrets that she has discovered about her deceased mother. This silence preserves family harmony and ushers in a more adult identity for the daughter.
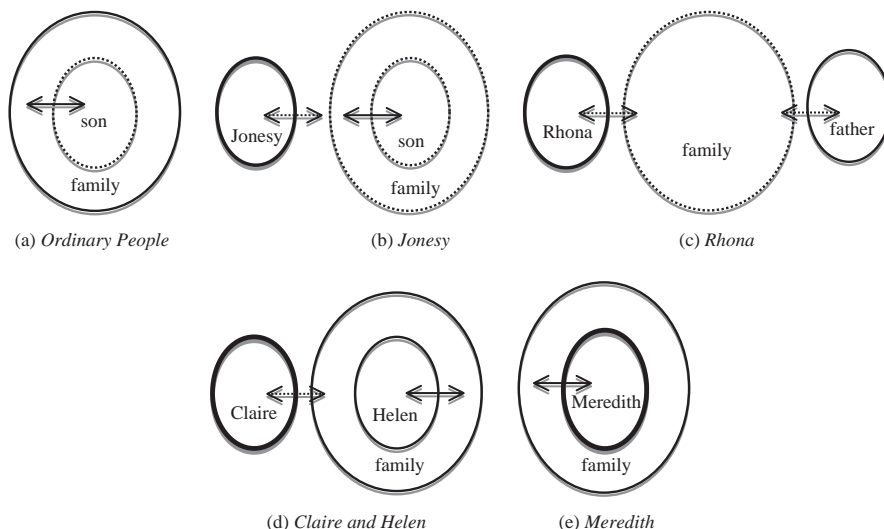

(a) *Ordinary People*   (b) *Jonesy*   (c) *Rhona*

(d) *Claire and Helen*   (e) *Meredith*

Figure 2. Effects of silence after loss on individuals, families, and the links between them.

Ordinary People

Our first example comes from the film *Ordinary People* (Schwary & Redford, 1980) in which a family maintains silence about the death of their older son. The silence keeps their family life running with a semblance of normality, albeit with immense tension below the surface. In psychotherapy, the surviving son begins to revise his autobiographical memory narrative of the loss and question his role within his family system. He recalls the incident of his brother's death in a sailing accident, for which he had initially blamed himself (and it is implied that his mother also held him responsible). In retelling the accident, guided by his psychotherapist, he realises that it was not his fault. This revelation fundamentally rewrites a major, identity-defining autobiographical memory and facilitates his exiting his prior role in the family from the alienated, "mentally ill" child. His insight and behavioural changes allow him to express more of his emotions, both anger and affection, in a healthier and more adaptive manner.

The father, following his son's successes in psychotherapy, begins to shift the family balance away from silence and towards more open conversation. A critical moment in the film comes when the father tries to talk to the mother about the son's funeral and she refuses. The mother's silence in this context becomes, for the father, a sign of her weakness: her inability or unwillingness to face her own pain or the pain of any of her family members. Their marriage, now potentially irrecoverable, shifts into separation. In this story the family's silence had held them together temporarily, at the cost of a healthy identity for the younger son and a truly intimate relationship between the two parents. To preserve the larger family narrative, the young son had been willing to retain a personal narrative identity in which he was the "black sheep" and the inferior brother to his older "golden child" sibling. Key to his collusion with this family story was his silence about the true memory of what happened during the sailing accident—that his brother was not strong enough to hold on to his hand when he might have been able to save him. Ultimately, this unspoken memory had stymied the younger son's ability to narrate an acceptable story of his life: he had to break this silence to claim a healthier identity. The silence—intended to preserve the family system—could not protect the parents' relationship, and

may have ultimately done more harm than good to the family system (see Figure 2a).

In the *Ordinary People* example, silence was used (ultimately ineffectively) to preserve the family's existing narrative identity, while constraining the possibility of growth and change in the narrative identity of one of the family members (and, most likely, in all three of the remaining members). In our next two examples silence is effectively employed by one family member to claim a new, positive personal narrative identity in the wake of loss but it results in disruption to the overall family narrative and to the other family members' individual narrative identities. One of these examples comes from the clinical practice of one of the authors[1] and another from a published case study (Riches & Dawson, 2000).

Jonesy

In the first of the two stories, an adult client suffered the loss of his father. After the death of his father, the client's mother quickly remarried. Her new husband and stepchildren gave her the nickname "Jonesy", a name by which her own children had never called her. Jonesy seldom talked about her deceased husband, although her adult children wanted to talk more with her about the loss of their father and share memories from their years together. Despite their requests, Jonesy almost never spontaneously brought up memories of her husband of over 25 years and only shared stories in a perfunctory manner. Jonesy's silence allowed her to more fully invest in her new identity as the wife of her new husband and strengthened her ties with her new husband's family. However, Jonesy's silence weakened her bonds with her own children. For her children, the silence changed their family's larger narrative identity from that of a happy and harmonious family to an identity of a more separate and private family. In fact, Jonesy's unexpected silence about their shared past even led her children to question at times whether she had been as happy in her marriage as they had fully and perhaps naively assumed she had been.

Similarly, her adult oldest son, formerly his parents' golden child, felt very much robbed of this special position within the family and arrived

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[1] Both case examples from our own clinical work represent amalgams of similar cases. We have removed all identifying information.

at therapy with a shaken view of his ability to count on good fortune. In the course of therapy he often noted that his mother's silence on the topic of his father created a different and more strained relationship with her. He remarked in session once that it was not uncommon for him to have the thought he had suffered a double loss and was now orphaned from both parents.

In this case, silence allows for the reconstruction of a new narrative identity—the pleasant and popular Jonesy who is connected to and beloved by her new family—but it exacts a cost on the larger family narrative and the personal narratives of her original family members. In our *Ordinary People* example, family members colluded in silence for the sake of the departed's revered status and the larger family narrative of normality and propriety. In the case of Jonesy, a family member employs silence to facilitate the development of a new personal narrative identity, but does so at the expense of the larger family narrative shared by the other family members (see Figure 2b).

Rhona

In a similar case (Riches & Dawson, 2000) a 17-year-old girl, "Rhona", had lost her mother. After a brief period of distress, her father began dating a neighbour and shortly thereafter they married. Rhona tried to talk to her father about her feelings of grief for her deceased mother and her feelings of anger towards her father for moving on so quickly, but when she tried to talk she felt like she was causing pain to her father and to his new partner. She felt like "the wicked stepdaughter spoiling my father's chance of happiness" (p. 365). Eventually, instead of trying to talk, she kept her feelings to herself, which may have felt like a better means of keeping the peace, but also made her feel like an "abandoned orphan" (p. 366).

Riches and Dawson (2000) interpret the case as illustrating the difficulties a daughter may have for successful grief resolution when her way of grieving is so different from her father's, and when conversational constraints prevent them from talking about the loss. Left with a restricted choice of identity narratives, Rhona chooses what seemed to be the lesser of two negative identities, rejecting the outspoken "evil stepdaughter" identity in favour of the silent abandoned orphan identity. In doing so she has allowed her father's unspoken memories to reconfigure her personal

narrative identity, while her connection to her larger shared family narrative with her father has become more tenuous (see Figure 2c).

Claire and Helen

Our next example comes from a case study by Ester Shapiro, a researcher and therapist whose work highlights the importance of social and family contexts and takes a developmental systems approach to treating and writing about bereavement. In Shapiro's (2008) case study the father, a charismatic college professor, died in his forties. He left behind a devoted widow, Helen, and three children. His widow had been a full-time mother and homemaker. In losing her husband she also felt painful secondary losses of closeness with his extended family and his network of university colleagues, as well as anticipating the loss of her youngest son who would soon graduate high school and depart for university. She revealed to the counsellor that she wished she could occupy the widow role for her whole life, so that she could remain attached to her deceased husband without being expected to "move on" and sell their home or develop new romantic relationships. Her daughter, Claire, took a contrasting position. Away at college, Claire successfully pursued her studies in science and stayed at her university instead of coming home for the holidays, feeling that embracing her academics was the best way to honour her father's legacy.

Mother and daughter clearly occupied quite distinct poles on the Stroebe and Schut (1999) dual process model, with the mother engaged primarily in loss-oriented coping and the daughter in restoration-oriented coping. If we could hear the stories that each would tell about the loss and the deceased person, we would likely find complementary silences. The mother's story would likely be silent on the subject of the deceased husband's desires for their daughter's autonomy and achievement and, indeed, his belief in achievement and ambition above family togetherness. The daughter's absence from family holiday gatherings is a clear example of remaining silent rather than contributing her assenting voice to mournful discussions about her father, and especially remaining silent rather than assenting to her mother's framing of the family story as one of togetherness around the central pole of her (deceased) father. The daughter's silence challenges the mother's version of the

family story and asserts instead an identity claim of herself as an independent, ambitious individual, carrying on what she perceives as her father's legacy.

In contrast to Jonesy and Rhona's father, and more similar to the mother in *Ordinary People*, the mother in Shapiro's case has a strong orientation towards preserving both the pre-loss family narrative and her own pre-loss personal narrative identity as wife and companion to her now departed husband. Unlike the offspring in the three previous examples, the daughter in the Shapiro case recognises that silence is an ally for her, a way of asserting her independence from the backward-looking impulse of her mother, while simultaneously allowing her to move forward in her academic pursuits in a fashion that would have pleased her father. In this complex example, silence by the daughter may undermine one dimension of the larger family narrative (i.e., the depictions of family togetherness), but may paradoxically reinforce her strong identification with her father's own intellectual journey (see Figure 2d).

Letters left unspoken

Our final case example comes from another one of our client's experiences. This case provides an example of a daughter's silence that protected the homeostatic balance of the family system as well as promoting identity growth for the daughter. In this case, a daughter, Meredith, lost her mother when she (Meredith) was a small child. Years later, when Meredith was an emerging adult, she discovered a collection of letters that the mother wrote to a close female friend. In those letters her mother discloses feelings of discontent in her relationship with her husband, the daughter's father. Meredith chose to keep the contents secret because there was no way that this knowledge could possibly be of use to her father, who shared very positive, affectionate autobiographical memories of his marriage to his deceased wife and clearly remembered the relationship as a very happy one.

The process of keeping these secrets, albeit for the purpose of preserving family identities the way they are, is also an act of self-development for the daughter in the sense that maintaining these privacy boundaries feels like an act consistent with a more adult relationship with the surviving parent. In this case and in the Shapiro

(2008) case, the daughters' acts of silence may also be ways of continuing the relationship with the deceased person by promoting or protecting their legacy. In the Shapiro case the daughter was continuing her father's intellectual legacy as she constructed it. In this case, the daughter's act of silence was a way of protecting the legacy of the narrative that her mother chose to present to her family, one that is expressed in positive autobiographical memories shared by father and daughter (see Figure 2e).

In this final example we can see a positive function of silence in the service of the persisting family narrative of conjugal happiness between the departed mother and the client's father. However, it simultaneously serves the individual personal narrative of a daughter emerging into an adult role of caretaker and equal who is capable of delineating and maintaining boundaries in sensitive interpersonal dilemmas. Unlike the previous examples, silence tactfully employed in this circumstance gives support to all family members, even as it supports their differentiation.

DISCUSSION

We have argued that silence after a loss—the choice to leave unspoken, rather than share, autobiographical memories of the loss or the loved one—can have multiple meanings and effects on family members, depending on the contextual application of that silence. This assertion about the conditionality of unspoken memories' positive or negative influences after loss is the mirror image of the contextual effects of bereavement narrative disclosures (Baddeley & Singer, 2008, in press). In examining these disclosures we marshalled evidence to challenge the simplistic assumption that all bereaved individuals must talk about their grief in order to achieve a successful and healthy recovery from their loss. Similarly, we have hoped to dispel the truism that the choice to remain silent about one's loss and related memories is necessarily a path to dysfunction and psychological distress. In this article we illustrate that silence after loss can either preserve or transform family members' previous narrative identities. We have highlighted the importance of considering how silence functions not just for the individual, but also for the family system in which the individual is embedded. As our examples have highlighted, one family member's silence can be used to sustain or change, for better or worse, that

family member's narrative identity, the identities and stories of other family members, the links between family members, and the overall structure of the family system. Silence can also be used to locate a persisting image of the deceased person within the new family system.

The use of silence as a way of reconfiguring narrative identity after loss is an important but a relatively unrecognised, and poorly understood, social process. If silence is defined as a way of shaping narrative identity, then it is framed not as a form of denial, but as a way of striving to accomplish developmental tasks that are important after a major loss (Shapiro, 2008). This framing is more compassionate and more useful as a basis for trying to help people to work their own way through the identity challenges that they face after a loss. It allows for some silences not to be considered "defences", but rather valorises them as part of a developmental process of growth after loss.

Framing silence as one means of building a narrative identity after a loss is also a way of recognising its importance as an act situated in an interpersonal field and with interpersonal purposes. Silence gets its meaning from the context of stories and tacit understandings shared by the people in the group in which it occurs. As suggested, unspoken memories, judiciously chosen, can be similar to spoken memories as a means of building narrative identity. Yet silence is inherently more ambiguous and more difficult to interpret than stories, and even more defined by its context. Thus, research on silence is difficult. We emphasise an approach to future research that considers silences in the context of existing family scripts, roles, and developmental needs. When considering the function of unspoken memories in familial interactions, researchers can focus on the role of silence for identity affirmation or transformation for each participant in the family interaction, as well as its role in the larger story of the participants' shared narrative.

As we conclude our review of unspoken memory's role in identity reconstruction after family loss, we are struck by the preference of human processing for the presence of phenomena rather than their absence. Artists are well aware that judicious use of space, the withholding of the brush or pen stroke, is what often allows for perspective, contrast, and volume in a painting or drawing. Perhaps we might acknowledge that the same lesson applies to the construction of narrative identities. Rather than see what is left out as

a defensive or destructive omission—an act of repression or oppression—it is possible to see silence in certain contexts as a necessary form of definition and boundary—the absence of words or memory as a way of expressing a different form of identity. In this sense, the key to the story lies in what is missing rather than what is found.

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