

Editorial

Critical Family History: An Introduction

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Abstract: Critical family history challenges historians to ask about their ancestors. Who else (what other groups) was around, what were the power relationships among groups, how were these relationships maintained or challenged over time, and what does all this have to do with our lives now? These are different questions from the questions most family historians ask. This introductory essay elaborates on what critical family history is and where the concept came from, then provides a brief overview of the articles included in this Special Issue.

Keywords: critical theories; critical family history; genealogy

1. Introduction

The field of family history is exploding as more and more people dive into electronic databases, send off for DNA analysis, watch genealogy-themed TV shows, and interact with other amateur family historians. [Shaw \(2020\)](#) observes that “Family history research, identified as one of the top three leisure pursuits in the world, is a multibillion-dollar industry with literally millions of participants around the globe” (p. 109).

Researchers have begun to explore why people are so drawn to family history. Studies find that many people seek a sense of belonging to place and community, reporting that knowledge of the family’s history deepens their sense of personal identity ([Bottero 2015](#); [Kramer 2011](#)). Based on a survey of 1406 Australian family historians, [Shaw \(2020\)](#) identified six general motivations: seeking some specific information, inheriting a sense of obligation to research the family, having an interest sparked through an external prompt such as a school project, having a general interest in history, curiosity (without elaborating on what that meant), and enjoying family history as a hobby. Ultimately, she concluded that family history personalizes the past: “the family historians in this research appeared to be interested mainly in the micro-historical narratives of the past as they pertained to their own individual familial stories. This finding underscores the inherently personal nature of family history research” (p. 122).

But, as a personalized pursuit, family history is not necessarily critical. Actually, one can regard its intense focus on one’s own ancestors, one’s own family tree, as a “navel gazing pursuit” ([Scodari 2016](#), p. 48). Most family historians give little or no attention to the social context in which the family lived. Indeed, family tree templates and software packages encourage reconstructing individual family memories through boxes they provide to fill in, and through questions they ask. In their study of what family historians do, [Darby and Clough \(2013\)](#) found most of their research participants focused on filling out the family tree; less than 20% sought information about the context in which the family lived. This individual focus seems especially prominent among white family historians.

Based on observations of how Black and white genealogists in New Orleans navigated slavery and racism in their family histories, for example, [Parham \(2008\)](#) noticed that the white genealogists used the historic context mainly as a backdrop on which to locate their ancestors, while Black genealogists regarded history, and particularly the history of slavery, as part of the family story. Everyone is located

within society's racial structure, and racism impacts enormously on opportunities. But the white genealogists apparently did not see race as relevant and did not look into how it might have been strongly impactful, leaving intact the narrative of families achieving solely through their own hard work. Critical family history draws attention to the impact of racism and other social structures on families' experiences.

2. Genesis of the Concept of Critical Family History

For many people, family history and genealogy are the same thing. However, Durie (2017) offers a useful distinction that critical family history builds on. According to Durie, "Genealogy is the retrieval of vital and familial data from records of various types, and its ordering into meaningful relationship patterns" (p. 2). Family history "takes the basic data of genealogical investigations, and includes the surrounding historical, economic, social, political, and other contexts to build a connected narrative" (p. 2). In other words, genealogy draws on primary sources to construct a family tree or lineage; family history seeks to describe or explain what the family did within specific contexts, and how context mattered. Critical family history delves into those contexts, and particularly into the power relationships they embody.

I more or less coined the term "critical family history". (I say "more or less" because I discovered that the term has a specific and different meaning to medical diagnosticians.) The idea came about through an internal dialog between my initial foray into my own family's history and my professional work that interrogates racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

About fifteen years ago, having a bit of free time, I decided to track down my paternal grandfather Ralston Sleeter on Ancestry.com. He was my only grandparent to die before I was born; I had always wondered what he was like and who his people were. I not only found him within minutes, but I also quickly found his parents, siblings, and grandparents. Like many of the family historians Shaw (2020) surveyed, my passion for family history research grew from this exhilarating experience that began with a question.

During that time, I was also entering my third decade of teaching and writing about education as situated within a structural analysis of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. As a university professor, for example, I often illustrated for students how systemic power relations work by using stories from my own experience as a white woman from a professional class family. But, for years, I was not able to extend those stories back historically because I did not know them, at least not until I began to trace my family history.

As an academic, I found critical theory, critical race theory, and critical feminist theories to be highly useful tools for analyzing why education works as it does (e.g., Sleeter and Delgado Bernal 2004). So, as I unearthed more and more of my family's history, I began reading that history through the lenses of these critical theories. For example, I rewrote a European immigrant bootstraps narrative I had learned about an ancestor, using critical race theory as a tool to make the workings of race visible. Using critical race theory directed me to archival information about the context this ancestor immigrated into during the pre-Civil War South, and how that context affected her emerging sense of identity (Sleeter 2011). Focusing on xenophobia, I drew a parallel between my German ancestors having been forced to jettison all things German, including their historical memory of that loss, and the contemporary pressure for immigrants to give up the languages and cultures they bring in order to be regarded as American (Sleeter 2015a). Through the lens of colonialism, I traced an inheritance I had received to the theft of Indigenous peoples' land, then wrestled with what to do with this realization (Sleeter 2016, 2018).

One further distinction: some people conflate family history and autoethnography. Autoethnography interrogates the self within a critical reflection of past experiences, using much the same data sources as family history. Marx et al. (2017) explain that: "This interdisciplinary approach to research centers the self as a site of inquiry. Its purpose is to translate the personal into the social science research realm with unique first-person representations that are accessible to readers both within and outside various communities in the global context." Critical autoethnography, like critical

family history, illuminates how power, privilege, and marginalization play out in the life of the narrator. But, while both endeavors situate the self in a socio-cultural context—and in this regard there is much overlap—critical family history generally reaches back multiple generations in order to understand the interplay between past and present. This reaching back may include a critical analysis of the self, but it may also entail a critical analysis of ongoing power relations without direct application to the self.

3. Critical Family History

In a nutshell, critical family history challenges historians to ask about their ancestors: Who else (what other groups) was around, what were the power relationships among groups, how were these relationships maintained or challenged over time, and what does all this have to do with our lives now? Whose records were kept, whose were not, and what difference does this make regarding whose stories are told (Scodari 2013)? As Scodari (2016) put it, “advancing from personal to collective identity is only one step in the direction of a critical genealogy; recognizing correspondences between one’s own collectives, and those of others, often separated by time, space, class, and/or race/ethnicity is, perhaps, the most illuminating and challenging” (p. 49).

The critical theoretical traditions prompt useful questions (see Sleeter 2015b). Critical theory, which analyzes the workings and reproduction of the social class structure under capitalism, suggests that family historians ask how their ancestors came to be located where they were within the class structure, and how class-based identifications and ideologies impacted on them. Critical race theory, which analyzes how racism works, suggests that family historians examine how race, racism, and colonialism were at work in the lives of their ancestors, where their ancestors were positioned within the racial structure, and how that positioning impacted on them. Critical feminist theories, which examine the institutionalization of patriarchy within an analysis of unjust systems of resource distribution, suggest that family historians consider how women were situated within the economy, and how families reflected broader social gendered relationships.

For those who already work with these issues, using them to analyze one’s own family’s history is a natural extension. Those who shy away from these issues, however, need guidance and prompting. Several years ago, for example, I integrated critical family history into a graduate-level course in which about half of the students were white. Some of the white students followed my lead in asking difficult questions, such as how their family had benefited from homesteading in the context of colonization of Indigenous peoples. Others took pains to avoid such questions. I recall asking one young man if any Indigenous peoples were in the vicinity of an ancestral family, and if so, what the power relationships were. He estimated that a tribe was located about 20 miles away, then opined that there was likely little or no contact. He avoided my probing into whose land his ancestors were on, and how they had acquired the land, at whose expense.

4. This Special Issue

Various articles and blog posts exist about critical family history, but this is the first collection of works using that framework. Given the explosion of interest in genealogy and family history, I wanted to curate this Special Issue to show various ways in which critical family history can enrich or shed significant light on family history research projects and important social issues. Articles in this Special Issue are grouped around four themes: social patterns that personal stories reveal, difficulties of identifying truth in family history research, how critical family history can disrupt contemporary ideologies and narratives, and use of critical family history in teaching.¹

Five articles illuminate broader social patterns and issues that personal family stories reveal. I like to think of critical family history as offering a lens for viewing the long arc of history as social structures

¹ At the time of this writing, a handful of articles were still going through the process of review and revision. They are not mentioned in this introduction, but are included in the Special Issue nonetheless.

and human relationships that were solidified generations ago continue to play out today. The particular lens of family history turns broad questions into personal ones in which our own ancestors, and we ourselves, are the main actors.

In this Special Issue, Davis examines how her parents, who had joined millions of other African Americans in the Great Migration from South to North, navigated opportunities and racism for a better life. In particular, she probes colorism (preferential treatment same-race people accord to others based on light skin color) in the lives of her parents and grandparents. Her research offers a fine-grain analysis of the workings of racism and colorism across the twentieth century in the U.S.

Similarly, Still begins with the question of what led her grandmother, an African American single parent, to relocate over a thousand miles from Texas to California in the midst of the civil rights movement. Using Black feminist theory, Still probes her grandmother's quest for a better life for her children and their children, in a context of racial and gender oppression. The story Still creates from her research portrays a strong and persistent woman who was able to walk tall while battling barriers such as underemployment, housing discrimination, and domestic violence.

Bell examines the impact of European colonization of Aotearoa/New Zealand on white (Pakeha) and Maori people, through the lens of her own family history. Based on her analysis of family wills and archival records, she shows how people like herself have inherited economic privilege due to the windfall of land acquisition, at the expense of Maori people who have inherited the trauma of land loss.

Dade takes on the matter of descendants of Cabo Verde immigrants to the U.S. seeking dual citizenship. She situates the quest for dual citizenship within the U.S.'s history of obtaining "cheap labor" from Cabo Verde. She uses her autobiographical case study of her own quest to highlight the challenges and barriers that present themselves to those trying to compile documentation for dual citizenship. She expresses a strong desire that governments will collaborate to address those barriers.

Finally, Cortes explores contradictions of growing up both privileged and marginalized. As a child of a Mexican American father and a Jewish mother, being on the margins has always been a part of his experience. At the same time, growing up bicultural and sensitive to other people's experiences with marginality served as what became the basis for a career in diversity issues. He suggests that experiences that create pain and marginality can turn out to be sources of creativity.

Three articles in this Special Issue probe the process of uncovering the past in family history. They begin with Durie's (2017) observation that genealogy is "not some struggle towards an ultimate 'truth', but a process of diminishing deception" (p. 4). Family historians may be trying to reconstruct the past, but all we have to work with are clues about the past. How, then, do we think about the truth of what happened?

Meyer, after relating her initial quest to find truth about her ancestors, introduces us to characters in a novel she wrote based on her family history. As she clearly shows, there is a sizable gap between the past as it actually happened, recorded traces of that past, and the stories we tell about the past. She argues that we cannot go back and retrieve the past, but we can strive for authenticity in our understanding of it. We can make the meaning of the clues we can find, and search for truth in that meaning, even if we cannot retrieve the past itself.

Wilson-Kleekamp complicates the matter by comparing two oral history interviews with descendants of a slave owner and an enslaved woman who murdered him because he had raped her repeatedly. She also compares the oral histories with archival records and popular memory about the case. Gaps in memory and interpretation, and gaps in the archival sources themselves, suggest the importance of accessing as many sources as possible. Wilson-Kleekamp also highlights the impact of racism on which memories and whose records survive.

Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick combine use of DNA with historical evidence to trace the multiple identities and narratives embodied in their surnames. They show that, rather than names indicating a single origin or narrative, our names represent multiple origins, stories and identities because people continually alter surnames as they respond to social and political realities in which they live.

One article in this Special Issue shows how critical family history can disrupt contemporary ideologies and narratives. Pollock uses critical family history as a lens to disrupt common beliefs about undocumented immigrants, namely, that they are law-breakers who are refusing to go through the immigration process European immigrants went through. Using the example of her own family's immigration, contextualized within a discussion of immigration policy, Pollock asks us to use such histories to dismantle dominant stereotypes.

Finally, two articles in this Special Issue highlight critical family history in university teaching. Family history has long been the focus of school projects, and these projects have helped to popularize family history research. For example, [Allen and Ziller \(2015\)](#) integrate family history into their teaching of middle school history to involve students in active learning and to help them to make connections between the personal and larger issues. Family history is also becoming increasingly visible in the university curriculum (e.g., [Chittester 2019](#)).

In this Special Issue, Cross shares a course she teaches in which students write life stories to create a critical family history book or memoir, in a way that combines historical research with poetry and art. In the course, she challenges students to move away from an individualistic way of looking at one's family story and to situate their stories within contexts shaped by race, social class, capitalism, and other collective experiences.

Mokuria, Williams and Page also describe a course that began with gathering family stories. The authors ask what digging through a family's history can reveal, and how gaining a deeper understanding of one's family's history from a critical perspective affects instructors and learners. In particular, the authors focus on an African American student's reckoning with her enslaved ancestors' experiences with severe violence.

All of these articles contribute to critical family history as a field of study, as they illustrate the varied approaches researchers can take and the varied questions that can be asked. I am pleased to offer this Special Issue as the first collection of its kind.

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