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Necronym: the effects of bearing a dead little sibling's name

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the emotional experiences of people who bear the necronym of a deceased sibling in order to describe the possible psychological implications of this experience. Using the grounded theory approach in interviews with 22 Italian participants and qualitative analysis of resulting texts, we found that some of the main themes that emerged confirmed the figure of the 'replacement child' described by previous literature. The three fundamental themes were: 'complicated grief, removal and fear of death'; 'identity problems related to the necronym'; and 'sad gratitude'. The study highlights some existential difficulties that spring from this experience and, after reviewing these themes in detail, we present a brief discussion on whether to dissuade bereaved parents from naming a new child with the necronym of a deceased child.

KEYWORDS

Necronym; replacement child; perinatal grief; complicated grief; personal identity

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Introduction

The selection of a particular name to give to a child is almost always a relational event that connects people within the community. According to Himes (2016), names are never neutral because they define one's relationships with others and shape individual identity, which is somehow internalised, and therefore shared by those who bear the same name within a family. According to Frazer (1966), a name is a connection between personal identity and social identity, as it is the reference that identifies the individual, differentiating him/her from others and making him/her recognisable. Names could disappear with the death of those who bear them, but this is uncommon. Instead, they characterise countries and cultures because they pass from generation to generation. Within this phenomenon there is a specific motivation to keep certain names in existence, which consists in a family's or community's will to remember someone after their death. The term 'necronym' (from νεκρός, nekros, 'dead' and ὄνομα, ónoma, 'name') refers to the name of a deceased person, usually given to a newborn to carry on the legacy and memory of a deceased family member. The necronym is used by the family to remember important people or loved ones, usually a grandparent (Rév, 1998). Sometimes, however, the necronym is used to remember a deceased child. In this research, we wanted to consider the phenomenon of the necronym that is bestowed on a child after the death of another child. In particular, we wanted to consider the effects of this passage on those who bear such names.

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Anthropological background

This cultural phenomenon is not often explored. We can find few mentions in the works of anthropologists, though we have testimonies of its use – sometimes under the term ‘death-names’¹ – among the Temiar of Malaysia (Benjamin, 1966), the Penan of Borneo (Brosius, 1995; Needham, 1954), and in Tasmania (Clendon, 2006). Different cultures have different taboos and traditions associated with the name of a deceased person. These vary from no longer mentioning the name to, on the contrary, using the name as a necronym to commemorate the dead and preserve memories about important or beloved ancestors (Rév, 1998). In his magnum opus *The Savage Mind* (1966, p. 192), Lévi-Strauss affirms that: ‘The necronym contains no proper names at all and consists in the statement of kinship relation, which is that of an unnamed “other’s” relation with a self equally unnamed. It can therefore be defined as an “other” relation. And finally, this relation is negative since the necronym mentions it only to declare it extinct’. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss (1966, p. 192) emphasises that the act of naming serves an individuating function by implying a distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Analysing the naming system of the Penan – a group of forest nomads living in the interior of north-western Borneo who were also studied by Rodney Needham (1954) – Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between ‘personal names’, ‘tekonyms’ (e.g., father of so and so) and ‘necronyms’, in which a kinship relation to a deceased relative comes to replace the proper name. Each of these name types affords a different degree of freedom depending on the ‘self-other’ distinction that they establish. For example, Rajah explains (Rajah, 2008, p. 65):

in the Palokhi naming system, this individuating function of autonyms and the ‘self-other’ distinction is carried to the extreme. In fact, the autonyms are not drawn from a common pool of names available to all members of the society but, on the contrary, are formed from unique events. The ‘self-other’ distinction and the distinctiveness of individual social identities in Palokhi are therefore, highlighted by the very uniqueness of all autonyms which, incidentally, accords with a high degree of personal or individual autonomy in Palokhi.

While some anthropologists have addressed this custom in Africa and Asia, we are not aware of works realised in North America or Europe, even those of a general nature. Famous examples of European individuals who bore necronyms in different times and cultures are Ludwig Van Beethoven, Vincent Van Gogh, and Salvador Dalí. Ludwig Van Beethoven (Germany, 1770) was named after his brother, who lived only six days and died the year before the composer’s own birth (Swafford, 2014, p. 2). The painter Vincent Van Gogh (The Netherlands, 1853) shared a name and birthday with his older brother – a phenomenon widely explored by Humberto Nagera in his *Vincent Van Gogh: A psychological study* (Nagera, 1967). Salvador Dalí (Spain, 1904) had the same name as his deceased brother (Dalí, 1993, p. 4). The artist offers a fascinating description of the impact of this relationship with the dead brother:

My brother died at the age of seven from an attack of meningitis, three years before I was born. His death plunged my father and mother into the depths of despair; they found consolation only upon my arrival into the world. My brother and I resembled each other like two drops of water, but we had different reflections. Like myself, he had the unmistakable facial morphology of a genius. [...] My brother was probably a first version of myself, but conceived too much in the absolute. (Dalí, 1993, p. 2)

Similarly, in the autobiographic article ‘What’s in a Necronym?’, we have an interesting testimony of the diffusion of the phenomenon in the USA: “When your dad was a boy,” my mother told me, “and this was long ago – you have to remember he lived through the Great Depression – it wasn’t unheard of to name a child after a dead relative, especially a dead child” (Venasco, 2015).

Regrettably, we are not aware of any modern work done on the use and cultural value of necronyms, or death-names, in Europe or North America. Indeed, this article calls for wider research on the phenomenon and its effects on the name bearers.

Subsequent children

Often in intergenerational family relationships, the name of grandparents and parents is given to children as a sign of honour, expressing the will to preserve the elder’s legacy within the ongoing family narrative. However, the use of necronyms as an instrument for the elaboration of grief departs from this tradition. The death of a family member is always a critical event that can compromise even the most consolidated relational structures (Walsh, 2002), and the death of a child, in particular, can be even more devastating. Although infant mortality was once a ubiquitous problem, today it is commonly perceived as an exceptional occurrence in many parts of the world.²

Indeed, nowadays, parents can perform their role with expectations and hopes nurtured by the certainty that their children will survive them and have a better life (Christ et al., 2003). As such, the death of young children has the potential to destroy not only parental relationships but also the entire representational dimension that supports the family project. This experience often causes post-traumatic symptoms (Wheeler, 2001) and psychological, psychosomatic and psychosocial problems (Harper et al., 2011; Johansen & Olsen, 1997), including traits of complicated grief that persist for years (Arnold et al., 2005). In cases of perinatal and neonatal grief, the bestowal of a necronym may be an attempt to elaborate the mourning process, sealing in the new child a special and ongoing relationship with the deceased despite never having met them.

Previous literature has already considered how children born after the death of older siblings assume a particular role with respect to their parents. Children born after a loss, such as a miscarriage or the death of a child, are called ‘subsequent’ children. These children are affected by the events and family emotions surrounding the loss (Roose & Blanford, 2011; Zeanah, 1989; Zeanah & Harmon, 1995). They are often born into families with characteristics that can hinder their development, including idealisation of the dead child, pre-existing maternal attachment difficulties, and a history of loss in the parents’ own childhoods (Grout & Romanoff, 2009). A previous study (Warland et al., 2010) found that a group of bereaved parents who were raising children born after infant loss reported a ‘paradoxical’ parenting style, wherein they simultaneously attempted to be emotionally close to their subsequent children and emotionally distant.

One group of parents who may be particularly vulnerable to developing an over-protective parenting style and/or problematic emotional attachments are those who have been bereaved through perinatal or postnatal loss. They may delay emotional attachment to their new infant for fear of another loss (Cote-Arsenault & Marshall, 2000; Powell, 1995; Robertson & Kavanaugh, 1998). Also, the child born shortly after a sibling’s death – the so-called ‘replacement’ or ‘vulnerable child’ – may be subject to increased risk of

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psychopathology (Anisfeld & Richards, 2000; Lewis, 1979; Sabbadini, 1988). As indicated by the anthropological studies mentioned above, if a name can be considered as a symbol of one's identity within the family and society, assuming the identity of someone who is no longer present can create problems, especially when the role that this identity implies involves replacing a deceased person. 130

Whereas 'subsequent child' entails all children born after the loss of an older sibling, the term 'replacement child' refers to a child conceived shortly after this loss (Cain & Cain, Q7 1964; Olmsted & Poznanski, 1972). Krell and Rabkin (1980) identified three types of replacement embodied in surviving children, all of which derive from parents' conscious and unconscious expectations: the 'haunted child', who often knows nothing about their predecessor, causing the parents to suffer from guilt and shame; the 'bound child', characterised by excessive protection; and the 'resurrected child', who is treated as a reincarnation. The concept of 'parents' unconscious expectations' refers to the inter-generational transmission framework in which many of the effects of parents' traumatic experiences can be passed on to the next generation. Psychoanalytically orientated studies suggest that children unknowingly assume parts of their parents' – and especially their mothers' – emotional state. In a stressed family climate, children react with utmost sensitivity to fulfil their parents' needs, thereby suppressing their own feelings (Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2009). 135 140 145

Grout et al. (2000), following the studies of Cain and Cain (1964), describe the replacement child syndrome deriving from this condition, wherein parents' attempt to replace the deceased child causes them to idealise the newcomer as a 'gift child'. From this dynamic, children may develop 'survivor syndrome', which is characterised by feelings of guilt (Wolfe, 2004), stress about parents' expectations and constant comparison with the deceased (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). Although such consequences are not always psycho-pathogenic, children bearing a necronym can develop problems in the area of self-identity as they may not feel fully entitled to be themselves (Sabbadini, 1988). Some qualitative studies have tried to describe this 'replacement child syndrome' (Hughes et al., Q8 2001; Turton et al., 2001) as a strategy to cope with loss and grief (Kohner & Henley, 1995; Rosoff, 1994). The ambivalence of this situation produces two contradictory effects in survivors: a positive self-perception as the 'gift child', and a negative self-perception as a mere substitute for another person (Vollmann, 2014). Necronyms in this scenario can be considered as a vector for the vehiculation of unconscious contents (Schutzenberger, Q9 2014; Schwab, 2012), which constitute an 'inner crypt' – that is, the incorporation of 160 165
Q10 psychic material from one individual (in this case, the deceased child) into another (the surviving child) (Abraham & Torok, 1993; Wojciech, 2010; Yassa, 2002).

However, research on necronyms and their role in managing grief is vague and exceedingly rare, mostly cited in literature relating to specific cultural traditions and common use (Das, 2015; Rév, 1998). This could derive from the different meanings of names and necronyms in different cultures, such that necronyms are mainly used only in certain cultures, like Italian culture. There are, in fact, no studies either on the effects of using necronyms to elaborate the mourning process or on the management of necronyms by those who carry them. Necronyms may be used a long time after a person's death or shortly thereafter, but in this article, we want to consider how they are used by 170 families to cope with mourning in cases of perinatal/neonatal grief.

Materials and methods

This study followed a qualitative research design based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which is particularly useful for studying death and mourning (Testoni, Di Lucia Sposito, et al., 2015; Testoni et al., 2013). In fact, grounded theory was born thanks to the intuition of Anselm Strauss, who discovered during his time at the University of California's medical school that dying was an issue that had been insufficiently studied and that there was a consequent lack of literature. The method devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) makes it possible to delve deeply into subjects that are little studied or difficult to deal with, such as those concerning death. We used this approach to study the effects of bearing the necronym of a deceased sibling. Specifically, our study investigated the emotional dimension of this experience, the role of the name in the subject's life and the representations these foster about the deceased.

Respondents were recruited through a Facebook, Instagram and website advertisements, and 22 people from all over Italy (12 women and 10 men between 21 and 80 years old [average age: 51.5; SD: 20.03]) who bear the necronym of a deceased sibling participated in the study. The sibling's death occurred between 12 and 24 months prior to the participant's birth, and the average age of the deceased sibling was 18 months (SD: 6 months). In 10 cases, the participant's name was identical to that of the deceased sibling; 5 participants had the same name but adapted to their gender; 7 had a part of the sibling's name (Table 1).

The interviews were conducted in Italian in one of two ways: in person, where possible, and via Skype in cases of considerable geographical distance (some participants resided in different regions of Italy). In relation to this second modality, though it did present a disadvantage by excluding direct contact with the participant, it allowed us to reach a greater number of people, who in turn were able to share their experiences.

Table 1. Demographic relations between participants and siblings.

Name	Age	Gender	Sibl. Age	Sibl. Gender	Death/Birth
Giovanna	80	Female	17 days	Female	1 year
Alberto	24	Male	1 week	Male	1 year
Michele	63	Male	1 year	Male	2 years
Sofia	58	Female	2 years	Female	2 years
Simone	61	Male	2 years	Female	1 year
Paola	32	Female	8 years	Female	1 year
Anna Maria	21	Female	3 months	Female	1 year
Gianfranco	38	Male	post-partum	Male	10 years
Maria Elena	25	Female	post-partum	Female	1 year
Matteo	27	Male	1 month	Male	1 year
Alice	27	Female	2 years	Female	9 months
Pier Giorgio	59	Male	2 years	Female	6 years
Enrica	76	Female	3 years	Male	3 years
Lucia	55	Female	Post-partum	Male	2 years
Emanuele	61	Male	3 months	Male	6 years
Bruno	42	Male	post-partum	Male	2 years
Giancarlo	43	Male	6 months	Male	6 years
Assunta	45	Female	post-partum	Female	7 years
Ilaria	76	Female	2 years	Female	1 year
Adele	73	Female	1 year	Female	2 years
Francesco	67	Male	4 months	Female	5 years
Silvia	82	Femele	2 years	Female	3 years

The interviews were all conducted in Italian because this is the language normally spoken by the participants. The texts were then translated into English. The dialogues lasted about one and a half hours. They explored a number of different topics: personal biography; family story; the name of the deceased; representations of the relationships between the subject, the deceased sibling, and the parents; and the motivation to participate in the study, among other things. The interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed, and the resulting corpus was analysed using thematic analysis, which allows sources to be examined in terms of their principal content (Testoni, Pesci, et al., 2019). The process was structured according to six main phases: preparatory organisation; reading and re-reading to recognise key concepts; coding data; interpreting themes; searching for alternative explanations; and producing the final report (Zamperini et al., 2016, 2017). The analysis proceeded in a ‘bottom-up’ manner, wherein categories only became clear after repeatedly exploring the connections between explicit statements and implicit meanings (Testoni, Francescon, et al., 2019). The analysis was performed with ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH), a computer program that facilitates the identification of thematic networks (Testoni et al., 2016).

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The study followed the Ethical Principles of the American Psychological Association and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, and it received the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Padua (n. 31D661F7C242E753362639F3385B5B84).

Results

From the qualitative analysis, three fundamental themes emerged: ‘complicated grief, removal and fear of death’; ‘identity problems related to the necronym’; and ‘sad gratitude’.

Theme 1: complicated grief, removal and fear of death

The first theme relates to family history and, in particular, to the trauma of loss, mothers’ complicated grief and the effects of parents’ fear of death on the replacement child. Participants acknowledged their families’ discomfort and tried to give this perception a meaning. For example, Matteo tried to elaborate his family’s problem by speaking explicitly of ‘complicated mourning’ – a technical term not commonly used in daily life. He realised that his mother still suffers from the death of her son:

It was precisely the classic ‘complicated mourning’, which my mother now recognises and continues to suffer from even now. When she hears about dead children, for example, she still cries. There was a friend whose daughter died and my mother told me that for three, four days she experienced the same feelings as if her son had died and cried in secret [Matteo 10:3].³

Indeed, the issue of mothers’ complicated grief characterised most of the narratives. For example, Maria Elena did not explicitly mention complicated grief, but she described its contours more or less exactly, citing depression and suffering as if death had happened recently, and as if it were not possible to re-establish a normal life:

Mom started suffering from depression, powerful panic attacks due to her fear of death. She did not leave the house for 40 days. Then she couldn’t breastfeed me because this action reminded her of the first child and the death. She hired a babysitter who followed me for 9

months. My father had to work a lot while my mom was always at home because of depression and death anxiety [Maria Elena 9:3].

Another characteristic of complicated grief appeared in Paola's narrative, as she described the overflowing presence of the dead sibling, still capable of inspiring sadness and mourning: 240

The phantom of my brother is a very strong presence in my house, in the sense that there are photographs everywhere, even in my room there is still a photograph of him. Such photos are sacred and my parents always become sad when they touch or look at them. I feel that they still suffer from this loss and this is the basic foundation of our family life [Paola 6:5]. 245

Alberto's story, on the other hand, speaks of removal and an inability to deal with the subject. His name therefore becomes the testimony of something that must be denied. However, Alberto explicitly said that he tried to understand what his name was hiding, and he sought information from other people because his parents were incapable of dealing with the subject: 250

My parents never wanted to narrate their loss experience. Some things I know from grandparents, from other relatives, who told me that it was a very difficult event for my parents, in particular for my mother [Alberto 2:1].

The death of the older sibling caused a pronounced fear of death in the parents, resulting in excessive protection of the surviving child – an over-investment that inexorably affected family relationships: 255

Fear of death made my parents too protective: I hated it. For example, dressing: I was like an astronaut with how many layers of clothes I had to wear in winter. I had to be super covered to avoid sickness or any kind of risk to my health. Everything – education, dressing, eating – was controlled, creating hindrances, limits that were really oppressive and absolutely hard to manage [Maria Elena 9:9]. 260

Theme 2: identity problems related to the necronym

The name itself was mostly associated with a deep feeling of loss. The narratives of Sofia, Simone and Ilaria continually evoked the oxymoron of absent presence:

My name continually reminds me of this loss. The sorrow has become deeper since I visited his grave and saw my name on the tombstone; tears came down on me like a river. Very sorry, I'm still very sorry for this loss [Sofia 4:7]. 265

I would have liked to have had a sister with her name, different from me and with a name different from my own name, perhaps a younger or older sister, but concrete – not a dead one with my name. Not something that is nothing. Somehow my name suggests to me that it indicates non-existence [Simone 5:23]. 270

I never wished for her. I never wanted to visit her at the cemetery. Never. I don't want to see my name on the tombstone. To me, she doesn't exist. I have only to carry on the condemnation of inheriting the name [Ilaria 19:12].

In other cases, the name became a placeholder that indicated absent presence as the impending void of death – a void that the replacement child was made to fill to assuage their parents' unconscious needs. 275

I didn't feel like a substitute for someone, but somehow my name reminded me that I had taken the place of the person who was wearing it before me. I felt like someone who had to do something different than an invisible namesake in order to be himself [Simone 5:12]. 380

It was heavy to carry the same name as a sister who died just before I was born. I always felt like it was a name that didn't concern me and therefore as though I couldn't be recognised. I had to gain the strength to say 'this name is me not her' and I am not replacing anyone. How many times have I told my parents they should have given me another name! [Paula 6:12].

Carrying the name of a dead sister made me feel as if I didn't have my own name and therefore as if this prevented me from having the right to have my own identity [Alice 11:6]. 385

The ambivalence of assuming the place of someone who is no longer present made it difficult for replacement children to recognise parental love. They sometimes suspected that they were loved not as themselves but as stopgaps, and this complicated their construction of an individual identity as a person worthy of being loved in their own right. Giovanna and Paola described it: 390

I always wondered if my parents were thinking of me or their dead daughter when they called me. I have always wondered what my parents remembered about her and whether this name was a mark that made me seem like a surrogate [Giovanna 1:2].

This name constantly reminds me of someone who is not me. This name reminds me that I'm taking the place of someone who was less fortunate than I am and it makes me feel indebted [Paola 6:7]. 395

For Adele, this experience was further exacerbated by her parents' continual and explicit recollection of the deceased:

My mother mentioned her constantly and described her with great regret and pain, making me feel that, although I wore the same name, I was not as beautiful and good as her [Adele 19:5]. 300

The adjustment of the necronym to its feminine or masculine version highlights an additional aspect of family dynamics linked to gender identity. If, as discussed by the anthropological literature, a name can be considered as an important aspect of an individual's identity – given that it supports his or her (re)presentation to/by family, community and society – then the cases of Simone and Daniele are emblematic. In fact, their narratives show how the vagueness of having to bear the masculine name of a sister throws the problems of the necronym into sharp relief: 305

My name is the masculine version of my deceased sister's name. This made me feel like the male who erases the female and replaces it. In this way, I felt male by chance and perhaps not desired by my parents as a male, because to be a perfect substitute I would have had to be a female and not a male [Simone 5:5]. 310

My name is the masculine version of the name that had been given to my dead sister when she was born. My parents didn't let me miss anything, but I always felt the trauma they suffered and somehow tried to compensate for their pain with the success I achieved as a musician. But that death lurked in my unconscious and I've always had a fixation with the diphthong 'ae', composed of the final vowels of the male 'e' and female 'a' gender declinations. Now, I write my name using not simply the final 'e' that corresponds with the masculine version of my name, but with 'ae', thus combining the feminine part of the sister who died before I was born and who was not as lucky as I was. In my band we also use this diphthong in our song titles [Daniele 16:10]. 315 320

Theme 3: *sad gratitude*

Since the necronym evokes both the annihilation of the referent (caused by death) and the alienation of the reference (caused by renaming), it was inevitable that the narratives described a sense of denied identity. The task of building one's own identity is greatly complicated by constant comparison with one's deceased sibling, who in many cases has been transformed into a ghost of incomparable and enviable beauty and goodness: 325

My mother described my brother as an incredibly beautiful and intelligent child. Unfortunately, I've always seen myself as ugly and not too smart, so I don't like taking pictures, I never have; I hate when they paint me – I always try to hide. On the contrary, my parents have lots of pictures of my brother [Joan 1:28]. 330

Indeed, several participants described exactly this experience:

It's unbearable. It is an awful weight, a lack of recognition that I would have liked to be me [Paola 6:12].

I was considered an imperfect substitute because I was the second child, who by pure chance was male, but been a girl [Simone 5:5]. 335

My most important feeling was that of never being enough because, obviously, you can never reach the perfection of a little girl who died at 2 years old. She was so nice, so tender, so good ... It's hard to talk about this because I became aware of so many things over time, but at the same time they are things that hurt so much and impeded my happiness, [my ability] to be entirely myself [Alice 11:9]. 340

Parents' unconscious expectations engendered feelings of inadequacy because the task that replacement children were implicitly asked to perform was impossible to fulfil. In particular, most of the participants described their struggle to build a restorative identity with respect to their parents' loss, as Anna explained: 345

I always live trying to repair my parents' wound. I experienced this feeling of being the patch that closes the hole that the death of my homonymous sibling created [Paola 6:8].

As for the relationship with the deceased child, participants reported that the sense of inferiority produced by their parents' idealised portrayal of the deceased child generated a sense of competition between siblings: 350

She was so beautiful, they always said. She was so different from all of us. These were the expressions my mother always used to mention her. She always emphasised her and all this weighed me down because I wasn't so nice and beautiful. She was brunette and I was blonde. When all those rashes came out on my face, I was ashamed that I wasn't as perfect as my sister. In short, I was not exactly put aside, but I don't know how I was – I was not exactly my sister [Adele 19:4]. 355

Contrastingly, gratitude is another important consequence of maintaining the memory of a deceased older sibling through a necronym. About one third of the participants were grateful to their sibling, because their death enabled their own birth:

Yes, it is very difficult to bear this name, but I think that I can stand it because I always say to myself: but if she hadn't been born before me, would I be here? If she hadn't died before me, would I be here? I think that my parents, if my sister did not die, wouldn't have had any other child, because they wanted only one child. My name always reminds me of this contradiction: 360

I couldn't have existed if my sister did not die, so I must be grateful to her for dying ... This is not a simple thought, but it is inextricably related to my name [Daniele 16:32].

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I have always imagined her as a little angel, someone who opened the way a little bit, and somehow, I am also grateful to her because, if she had lived, I would probably not be here. I cannot be an angel, so I'm not as perfect as she is. However, ... destiny might not have allowed me to be here without this sacrifice. So, somehow, I always thank her because she permitted me to exist, right?' [Assunta 18:7].

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Discussion

This study endeavoured to analyse the effect of necronyms – and particularly necronyms recalling deceased children (perinatal, neonatal or very young child) – on the people who bear them, in an attempt to frame critical considerations about the future of this practice.

Reflecting on the effects of necronyms for 22 research participants, we identified three prevalent themes, all indicating some form of suffering experienced by the replacement children: 'complicated grief, removal and fear of death'; 'identity problems related to the necronym'; and 'sad gratitude'. The three themes are interconnected, showing how parents' attempt to deny their loss by replacing the deceased child (through the bestowal of the necronym upon a subsequent child) did not ultimately mitigate their grief. In fact, the use of the necronym seemed to emphasise the loss, both for the parents, who were reminded of it constantly, and for the replacement child, who became acutely aware of the absence of their sibling. Additionally, the bestowal of the necronym introduced new problems within the family, straining the replacement child's relationship with both their deceased sibling and their parents. Participants struggled to identify with their phantom sibling – as demonstrated in the second prevailing theme – and to satisfy their parents' unconscious needs. This suffering is only partly mitigated by the feeling of sad gratitude some replacement children express towards their dead sibling, by virtue of the latter's death allowing the former's birth.

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As indicated in previous literature (Sandelowski et al., 1994), the first theme goes in the direction in which parents seemed to use necronyms as a grief work strategy to cope with loss. However, literature says that rather than alleviating pain, this action potentially may have given rise to depression and complicated mourning, thereby showing that the replacement tactic (Cain & Cain, 1964; Olmsted & Poznanski, 1972) failed, subsequently burdening the surviving children with feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Anisfeld & Richards, 2000; Lewis, 1979; Sabbadini, 1988). In this study, replacement children's relationships with their parents seemed to be characterised by (1) the need to help the sorrowful mother, who often assumed an avoidant attitude towards the newcomer, and (2) the need to meet parents' exorbitant expectations based on the idealisation of the dead sibling – a phenomenon already described by Johansen and Olsen (1997). Furthermore, almost all participants reported that their parents exceeded normal levels of control and protectiveness due to overwhelming concerns and anxiety – a trend previously observed by Krell and Rabkin (1980).

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The second theme, 'identity problems related to the necronym', underlined how the 'replacement of loss' became a 'replacement of person' through the necronym, and this might exacerbate the effect already described in literature on the replacement child (Cain & Cain, 1964). Those who bear a necronym linked to perinatal/neonatal mourning are

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faced with paradoxes that are difficult to manage. Although the creation of commemorative spaces (for example, a tomb and photographs) may allow the deceased to remain integral to the family structure, as indicated by Grout et al.'s (2000) discussion of 'replacing loss', the maintenance of the deceased child's presence through the bestowal of their necronym upon a younger child compromises the place of both the deceased and the surviving child within the family structure. And since the necronym represents the emptiness left by death, whoever bears that name is marked by the stigma of annihilation. Since, in logical terms, nothingness is a negative concept that causes the implosion of meaning (Solomon et al., 2017; Testoni, Ancona, et al., 2015), assuming this absence of dimension as part of one's identity inevitably causes disorientation and confusion. Seeing one's own name and surname on a tombstone with a photograph of a child in swaddling clothes, and attributing one's own existence to the death of this child, requires a complex work of elaboration between gratitude, guilt and resentment. Moreover, special attention must be paid to the theme of gratitude (explored in the third theme). Replacement children feel grateful to their dead sibling because, if the sibling had survived, the replacement child would not exist. This is a complex and paradoxical thought that requires a great deal of energy and emotional maturity to manage.

The important issue of identify construction (Frazer, 1966; Himes, 2016) also emerged as part of the second theme. When asked what it meant to replace a deceased sibling, all participants expressed regret and pain, as they felt that they were not totally and truly recognised by their parents. They felt that their personal identity was shared with the deceased through the common name. The dominant emotions in all the narratives oscillated between gratitude and anger, jealousy, rivalry or resentment, in line with the findings of previous literature (Corman, 1964; Dunn & Kendrick, 1980; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Assuming the substitutive function symbolised and expressed through the necronym, all these negative feelings could be caused by (1) the feeling of being a secondary person who cannot replace anything because it is impossible to give life back to someone who has died; (2) subjects perceiving themselves as a bad copy of an ineffable, perfect sibling; (3) a sense of responsibility to make good on the loss that occurred before their birth, paired with the inability to make their parents happy; and (4) the will to delimit a personal identity separate from and better than the overshadowing identity of the deceased.

The coherence between these three themes seems to validate existing psychoanalytic perspectives (Christ et al., 2003; Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2009), which indicate that unconscious dynamics intervene in the relationship between parents and surviving children. On the one hand, these unconscious dynamics prevent the resolution of parents' bereavement; on the other, they push the replacement child to manage the loss of their phantom sibling. From this point of view, the necronym can also create an experience of loss for the surviving children, who suffer the death of a sibling they have never met. Psychoanalytic literature shows that it is difficult enough to identify with living siblings (Coles, 2003; Mitchell, 2003) and to mourn the death of a known sibling (Kaës, 2008), let alone to identify with or mourn a deceased and unknown sibling.

Participants talked about depression, sadness and symptoms that could be attributed to complicated grief, exhibited especially by their mothers. This reflects the fact that parental grief is one of the most intense and overwhelming forms of grief, and that the loss of a child impacts not only the individual parent, but the parent dyad, family system and society itself. As such, it is imperative that we support the grief work of these

mourners to help them achieve closure, despite (or even because of) the difficulty of this process (Rando, 1986; Riches & Dawson, 2000). This applies also to perinatal grief, which follows losses that occur before or after birth (Blood & Cacciatore, 2013). This variety of loss can have devastating repercussions for the whole family (Martinčeková & Klatt, 2016) due to both the strong feelings of guilt, rage and anxiety it instigates and the social disenfranchisement that often follows (Doka, 2014; Hughes et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2011).

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While 90% of bereaved parents eventually have another child, 50–80% of these children are conceived shortly after the initial loss (Huberty et al., 2016), and these pregnancies might be affected by feelings of distress, hope or fear of a stillbirth (Hunter et al., 2017). Because these feelings influence the mother's relationships with subsequent children (Lee et al., 2016), they must be addressed as early as possible in the mourning process. However, literature till now considers only mothers and is silent on fathers.

In light of these results, it is fair to wonder: does the use of the necronym provide sufficient value as a coping mechanism to justify its harm, or should the practice be discouraged altogether in cases of perinatal/neonatal death? It is difficult to navigate the mourning process following the loss of a child (Sandelowski et al., 1994), and sometimes necronyms are used to cope with this event. This kind of loss is always a shock, and the work of grief is complicated by the lack of social recognition of this problem ('disenfranchised grief') (Doka, 2002; Doka & Martin, 2014).

Despite Grout et al.'s (2000) critique of the 'replacement child' concept, this study confirmed Cain and Cain (1964) figuration of this concept and highlighted the difficulties it entails for constructing one's self-identity (Sabbadini, 1988). Indeed, Grout et al.'s (2000) qualitative research follows the precedent of McClowry et al. (1987) insofar as it describes the different rites that can help parents to face their loss. However, all of these researchers considered only the mourning and grief work processes of parents, demonstrating that parents were able to 'replace' their loss by having additional children and focusing on their daily parenting duties. In other words, parents could overcome their grief and pain by concentrating on and attending to their roles as parents to living children.

Grout and Romanoff affirm that 'there is a distinction between replacing a loss and replacing a person' (2000, p. 109), implying that the 'replacement child' case studies

described in Poznanski's (1972) and Cain and Cain (1964) research were merely expressions of particular replacements, and therefore did not present any psychological risk to

a subsequent child. In the same theoretical line, some literature emphasises the positive implications of this parental coping mechanism, describing how parents' efforts to inform younger children of their deceased older sibling preserves the deceased child as part of the family, either as a missing part or a continuing part (Klass, 1997). Certainly, such strategies can be useful for parents, but it cannot be said that all this does not adversely affect children born after the loss. As indicated by more recent studies (Ünstündag-Budak, 2015), researchers must pay special attention to instances of stillbirth and perinatal loss (Testoni et al., [in press](#)) for precisely this reason.

Conclusions

Despite the lower frequency of infant mortality in contemporary developed countries, perinatal/neonatal grief is an experience that still requires adequate social and psychiatric

support, particularly because it is a type of loss that is socially and culturally underestimated and disenfranchised.

Although there are several reasons why parents might reuse the name of a prematurely deceased child, we can identify two trends: the first one takes into account a centuries-old tradition wherein names are handed down from generation to generation, sustaining a legacy; the second one relates to a failure to recognise loss that brings with it a desire for replacement. It is worth considering whether this latter variety helps or hurts the grief work process, and how we might help parents who have experienced perinatal or neonatal loss to face this grief in other ways. In fact, our qualitative study highlights a problem with the use of names in these second cases, addressing the necronym as a contradictory expedient is in fact often used for such purposes even though it effectively denies the individual identity of the deceased.

As such, any attempt to give the deceased a place in the family structure is undermined by the fact that the name now belongs to another child. This negation links the name to death, dramatising the reality that the older sibling, who, through their sacrifice, made it possible for a younger sibling to be born, is no longer present. If it is true that helping parents to recognise the identity of the dead baby offers this child a space within the family structure, it is also true that surviving siblings need not bear the same name to preserve this child's legacy. The use of the necronym puts the replacement child in the position of having to face a great number of contradictions in the process of family mourning and in the construction of his or her own identity.

Future prospects

This research could be further developed in multiple ways. First, quantitative research methods could be incorporated alongside qualitative methods to improve the generalisability of results through the introduction of specific tests. Second, additional interviews could be conducted with the parents of the present survey participants in order to understand their perceived relationship to both the missing child and the replacement child, as well as the role of the necronym in mediating these relationships.

Notes

1. Regarding this choice, Brosius (1995, p. 143) states: 'I should note why I prefer the term "death-name" over the more recent neologism "necronym" [. . .]. The Greek word nekros refers to a dead body, not to the event of death or bereavement. Most English terms incorporating the Greek root preserve this direct reference to dead bodies or dead matter (necrophagy, necrophilia). The connotations of the term "necronym" are, therefore, at odds with what these terms represent. Thus, while the term "death-name" may not be ideal, the term "necronym" is inaccurate. A perhaps better term would be something such as "thanatonym", though such a neologism would likely introduce yet more confusion into the literature'
2. ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, states: 'the Italian mortality rate is one of the lowest in the world, better than in the U.S.A., but higher than in Sweden (7.3 and 3.0 per 1,000 live births, respectively)' (<https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/109877>). According to childmortality.org, the death per 1,000 live births has steadily decreased in Italy, from 89 per 1,000 live births in 1950 to 3 per 1,000 live births in 2018 (<https://childmortality.org/data/Italy>).
3. The two numbers following the quotations indicate their position in the dataset after the coding process: the first number refers to the 'primary document' to which the given

quotation belongs (each document produced from the interviews is marked with a number). The second is a progressive number indicating the order in which the quotations in a given document have been encoded.

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