“Things Are Coming Out That Are Questionable, We Never Knew About”: DNA and the New Family History

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Abstract
Family history is undertaken by millions around the world seeking to understand their past. This practice is understudied, and we need to work hard to understand how it works. Over the past decade, family history has been transformed through the use of DNA sequencing to enable genetic genealogy. Through analyzing data generated in a number of focus groups with family historians, this article contributes to our understanding of family history as a practice by engaging closely with the community. In particular, the article considers the responses of family historians to the challenge of the new data generated through DNA sequencing. Looking at the ways in which the practice is changing enables a clearer view of how family history works and how scholarship might engage with it.

Keywords
DNA, genetic genealogy, family history, focus groups, historiography

Family history is one of the biggest leisure activities in the world.1 Millions of people use online tools and digitized resources to investigate their family’s past, organize evidence, and create kinship trees and narratives. Interest is driven by various cultural phenomena such as the worldwide success of the celebrity genealogy documentary Who Do You Think You Are? (2004).2 Undertaken increasingly as a global enterprise, and supported by online resources provided by commercial companies, the activity is clearly a complex one.3 However, family historians have been regularly marginalized by mainstream historical practice, “their findings and practices deemed irrelevant to the wider historical community,” and their “conservative” work, part of a “supposedly nostalgic search for a golden age of the family.”4 This simplistic characterization is increasingly under challenge, as it becomes clear that genealogy is a significant part of what might be termed “citizen history,” collecting, interpreting, transcribing, and generating huge amounts of historical data.5

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The definitions and boundaries of family history research are being expanded as major online data providers offer DNA sequencing to augment traditional approaches. DNA and genetic services have grown to be major commercial activities of platforms that previously had provided access to largely textual information such as census data or marriage registers. These companies operate globally and offer an increasingly affordable service and a range of outputs. They generate ethnicity estimates, suggest matches with other users of the service with detailed triangulations and deductions about relationships, and generate new family history research leads. Such working models have allowed DNA investigation to become prevalent among users who have very little background in the area.

The major companies in the sector, AncestryDNA, 23andMe, FamilyTreeDNA, MyHeritage DNA and Living DNA, have aggressively expanded their businesses in the past eight years, driven by extensive advertising and smart marketing campaigns that make sweeping and emotive assertions about DNA testing: “uncover your ethnic origins and find new relatives” with a “simple test”; “The story of your family’s history is written in your DNA”; “Find out where you really come from”; “Discover the detailed story of your origins.” AncestryDNA’s customer DNA database expanded from around 3 million users in 2016 to over 15 million in 2019. In the same period, the other major genetic genealogical testing companies, particularly 23andMe, also grew rapidly, aided by relaxation in regulation and increasing economies of scale in sequencing. Only founded in 2012 as a subsidiary of Ancestry.com, AncestryDNA now finds itself a biodata firm, with one of the world’s biggest commercial databases. Their DNA customer database dwarfs the number of subscribers to their family history services (around 2.6 million). This expansion has given the organizations a great deal of information very fast, and their strategies for growth depend on the continuing development of new product and its aggressive marketing. Many family historians are suspicious of the large genealogy companies and how they use the data produced:

I guess the thing occurs to me is that they’re not presumably doing it for public good? Although that might be their argument but presumably they’re selling the data, which we paid to actually give to them. That sort of commercial arrangement annoys me—you pay for the test and then they sell the data that you paid them for.

These companies dominate family history research, and genetic genealogy is nearly impossible to conduct without engaging with the organizations, leading to a huge growth in information as the databases expand, but a concomitant concern among practitioners. Family historians and scholars have raised concerns ranging from issues relating to privacy to the selling of genetic data to pharmaceutical companies.

The work of articulating the historiographical and methodological implications of family history research finds itself at a crux as the practice itself develops. Family history was initially a text-based activity, and this remains the case generally, but digital resources and tools now dominate the practice. Indeed, family history practitioners have generally been early adopters of technology, from databases to web forum discussions, and this remains the case. Over the past decade, the insights afforded by DNA sequencing have transformed family history as a mode of approaching the past. In order to reflect these profound shifts, this article investigates the impact of this new genetic dimension. We look at how DNA and genetic genealogies are changing family history practice but also illustrate how it is enabling users to develop genuinely new ways of approaching the past. In particular, the article looks at the ways in which family historians themselves conceive of the challenges of DNA sequencing to their practice. We seek to understand how this community might use such new information and embed it in their own investigations. This has implications for the use of genetic information in historical work in the future. The article also seeks to understand how this group conceives of their own practice and self-identify. As one contributor to the focus groups that
form the basis of this work put it, “DNA is important to me because in the long term it has the ability to enable a political counter argument to the notion of nationhood, religion and xenophobia.”13 We show a community struggling with innovation and illustrate how DNA data change their traditional sense of family, transforming their practice and giving them new contexts for their work.

The article begins with a methodological section that demonstrates how the collection of data was itself a collaborative process encouraging self-reflection among the family history community. The second section outlines our findings relating to how DNA data are changing the practice of family history, the new skills, and research methods being developed and the importance of the global and local, online, and real-world family history community to this process. The third and fourth sections elaborate the emotive and affective impacts of family history on personal identity, relationship to the past, conceptualization of family, and ethical attitudes to secrets and revelation. The sections demonstrate the ways in which these have been reconfigured in response to the new genetic genealogy. The fifth section moves to demonstrate how new genetic techniques and contexts are challenging conceptions of the “family” among this user community.

Methodological Approach and Collection of Qualitative Data

To understand family history as a practice-based but innately personal activity, it was important to investigate it through discussion. The research for this article grew from a conviction that working in collaboration with family historians was a key in order to understand them as a community. Much has been written about family historians, but often they are not involved in scholarly discussions of methodology and ethics.14 By including them and developing a shared way of investigating their practice, we were able to gain invaluable insight. Family historians are a group with a strong sense of group identity configured via a practice which itself teaches that individual identity is part of a nexus including past generations and ways of engaging with them. Thus, our methodology was inherently collaborative from the outset, and we strove to generate qualitative data that we could present and discuss in order to understand more fully the motivations and concerns of a particular community group.

Focus groups were an approach that enabled us to investigate and discuss family history identity. These group discussions were a way of surveying the thoughts of family historians in a structured context. It was also clear that the family historians themselves were comfortable with this mode of data collection, with most of them having used forms of oral history and group discursive techniques in their own research.15 Focus groups are an appropriate mode for working with family historians, as their activity is engaged with personal reflection and experience.16 Family history is an incredibly diverse practice, with each researcher considering a unique data set, so research in the field needs to be able to reflect this complexity. The group discussions showed a cross section of a practice in flux, enabling us to survey firsthand the attitudes of family historians to their work and to understand the new challenges posed by DNA sequencing. These data would have been difficult to generate in individual interview or through observation, as it was important that the participants shared their experiences, noticed and elaborated points of contact, or disagreed with one another. Only this would establish the diversity and complexity of the practice, but it would only work with a community that is comfortable in such a discursive environment. This work might enable us “to yield data that truly reflect the rich and variegated fabric of the social life one is studying.”17 Furthermore, the focus group model meant that discussion was fluid and developed according to the importance of each concept to each individual group. We have shared this article with participants and taken on board their comments, ensuring that there is a collective understanding of what was discussed and what was deemed important.

The template for this small group investigation was established in summer of 2017. We established a set of key questions in order to frame discussion and a discursive practice. At each 60–
120 minute meeting, we asked the same set of questions (see Appendix). The meetings were recorded and then transcribed, and we developed our results through consideration of this raw qualitative data and established thematic focus. Focus groups were held in between September 2017 and March 2019 in Buxton, Liverpool, Leeds, Solihull, Manchester, Sheffield (all UK); Ann Arbor, MI, New Orleans, LA (United States); Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne (Australia); Bunnik (Netherlands). Each group had between three and twelve participants, and we worked with 114 people in total. We asked the same set of questions in each group although each meeting developed its own particular character, clearly influenced by the different personnel and different locations.

Participants were family historians with an interest in genetic genealogy. The groups were organized in collaboration with family history societies and by using social media genealogy discussion groups. The meetings mainly took place in familiar surroundings that were part of the researchers’ regular work, such as in the Nederlandse Genealogische Vereniging building in Bunnik. The geographical range enabled a plurality of responses and ensured that we could understand genetic genealogy as an international activity. The social backgrounds, ethnic makeup, and educational attainment of our participants varied considerably, reflecting the diversity of the family history community. Our participants all shared a commitment to DNA as an approach and to discussing it in a group setting, and most of them were members of genetic genealogy groups set up within family history societies. The majority (ca. 78 percent) were women, predominantly retired. We did not ask for precise ethnicity information, religious background, or data on age, so we cannot comment on these issues specifically. That said the vast majority of our participants were retired or above the age of sixty. In order to diversify our responses, we ran sessions with Birmingham and Solihull Jamaican and Caribbean Family History Society (one of the only such groups in the UK) and with African American participants in the United States. We also spoke with a few younger members of the family history community during events at the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney, although such participants are rare and difficult to find. We did not find a way to engage with Aboriginal groups in Australia where the issue of genetic heritage is highly complex and politically fraught. As mentioned above, the community is extremely wide-ranging and this clearly has an impact upon the ways in which individuals conceive of their families, and the variety of responses that we generated demonstrates this. Attempts therefore to study this community need to be attentive to this multiplicity of voice.

Hence, our approach was not intended to produce hard data. Instead, these groups afforded insights into the ways in which genetic testing is changing social and cultural understanding of the past. We were able to gain insight into the local and domestic contexts for family history work. The strengths of this approach are that we can generate a large amount of data relating to the ways in which individuals engage with genetic genealogy. The group setting allows for comfortable discussion and the exchange of approaches and information, and we regularly saw people learn things (and also disagree about interpretation). The sessions were an opportunity for our participants to reflect upon their practice within a wider (and supportive) environment. A weakness of the approach is that it generates a large amount of data that is difficult to read given that the experience of each participant is unique. Our discussions dealt with ethics, professional conduct, and methodology. They encouraged self-reflection, with the understanding that family historians are a keenly self-conscious group of researchers. The focus groups showed the ways in which historical practice, methodologies, and historiography are evolving and changing in the light of new genetic techniques and the widespread uses of DNA testing. Our findings trace the impact of these new tests upon a particular set of users around the world. The article enables an insight into the self-fashioning of family historians and the ways in which this sense of identity is being challenged by new technique.
DNA Data Requiring New Knowledge and Skills

What is apparent from our focus groups are the extensive ways in which the advent of mass genetic genealogical testing has impacted on the techniques of family historians: augmenting existing research practices, generating new research challenges, and creating sources of enjoyment and achievement. In order to engage in this new branch of genealogy, researchers have been required to develop a new range of skills; reevaluate their existing research practices; and forge new links and resources for education, training, and collaboration within the family history community.

Genealogical DNA testing allows relationships to be determined by comparing the DNA sample of each individual tester with every other sample in a database and calculating the amount of genetic material shared. By analyzing and sorting these matches and combining these data with information from “traditional” genealogical sources, researchers can potentially calculate how they are related to other testers. Successful results of this process can verify existing research results, break through “brick walls” where “traditional” records do not exist or are not accurate, and/or find living relatives in branches of the family not previously researched. Test results are only shared with the individual by the major companies, which have very strong privacy rules. However, this information can be downloaded and shared on various databases and websites.

DNA has therefore become an historical source, albeit one whose nature imparts an assumption of objective factuality that is different from other historical sources. This scientific cachet means that DNA data can be incorporated into genealogical practice as a confirmatory source for “traditional” research:

One of the things with the DNA is that people like us have done the paper trail for so long, people that have started on this before there was an internet when you’d be sitting writing letters and spending hours in libraries and then to have this and know that on paper it’s right but do you really know that it’s right. In DNA it’s just satisfying to have it confirm your paperwork and have it confirmed in almost every direction.22

For a lot of genealogists, their previous research practice and activities had continued in a reasonably similar fashion but with DNA techniques built in. As one interviewee explained when questioned about the impact of genetics on their research practice: “I don’t think it’s changed it but it’s added an extra verification level to my tree [...] it has probably refined or added an extra source to my paper records that I can say yes, I have DNA verification.”23 For most researchers, it goes hand-in-hand with existing techniques: “You need the traditional way [...] just knowing doesn’t help, you can trust the just knowing but you still need to do the research.”24

Particularly for those logically minded individuals who are deeply engaged in analyzing and sorting DNA matches, the complexity and logical, scientific nature of genetic genealogy generates a definite sense of achievement when patterns are identified:

It’s a detective thing, like solving a puzzle... sense of achievement... it’s like a puzzle, it just keeps getting bigger and bigger.25

I love it, I think it’s solving a puzzle, a mathematical puzzle, I used to do Sudoku now I do [DNA]... Oh yes, me too!26

The added challenge of genetic information and its concomitant technical complexity mean that rather than the common family history trope of feeling like a “detective,” many participants preferred to talk about a “jigsaw,” “treasure hunt,” “sudoku,” “computer game,” or “word puzzle.”27 The connection between technical work and individual attachment is strong: “Another reason why we keep doing it, is when we do have a discovery like that, it’s just so fantastic and exciting, I’m thinking, I’ve done something there, I’ve really worked something out that’s been really tricky.”28
Family history is a “serious leisure,” but DNA investigation is regarded by those who undertake it as something more complex than simple upskilling. At the same time, the notion of historical work as some kind of sophisticated game, rather than the more traditional investigative quality associated with “detective,” signals a shift in attitude to genealogical inquiry. The sense of achievement is a key to the practice. The complexity of DNA investigation appears to mean that for some individuals their elation is greater. This is often linked to individual’s career or skill set, but it is also clear that some participants use DNA genealogy to offset stress: “You don’t focus on anything else, it grabs you. My husband used to drag me away from the computer and say your family needs you.” Others expressed concern regarding their compulsive connection to the work: “I took the DNA test and I took another one and another one. It’s just like a detective story and I also find myself totally obsessed. I work, I’m a teacher and those things have kind of gone to the sideline lately, and sleep.”

In order to progress with DNA matching research, a sophisticated suite of knowledge and skills need to be acquired and honed by genealogists. These include understanding the nature of genetic inheritance, genetic variation, and genetic changes across multiple generations as well as a complex appreciation of statistics and analytical and sorting tools and diagrams. It is highly complicated material to work with. Family history has always been a practice that required and encouraged a broadening of skills and knowledge across subjects. As one researcher remarked: “it continues your education in a way that you wouldn’t otherwise: history, geography, politics, economics . . . it’s gone much deeper and broader than it ever would have been.” Research practice and skills are often conceived of as a tool used with others within a disciplinary framework:

I’m not interested in science . . . I agree technology and genealogists work hand in hand . . . I don’t think it is very far from history—history is about analysing data—history is a science in the humanities—it is a tool to get what I want to know—DNA is a tool to bridge a gap.

A number of researchers commented on the importance of general, nondiscipline-specific research skills to conduct competent and successful family history work, which also predisposed them to working with genetic information: “you need . . . patience and methodicalism . . . the DNA side of things, even if it’s a technical IT side of things, again, it’s methodical.” Another interviewee commented on the crossover between genealogical and genetic research skills: “genealogy reminds me of science in a lot of ways . . . coming from a science background . . . one of the reasons I did it was, it’s not my particular science field but I get to use the skills and things I like doing in genealogy . . . it’s a different outlet . . . [it] helps if you are analytical.”

Previous scientific professional and educational experience informed other genealogists too, one researcher having studied “biology and genetics in first year uni” and, as a result, “dabbled early, it was 2008 and it was yDNA.” Those with scientific backgrounds represented the researchers with the highest level of pretesting knowledge, within a full spectrum of other starting points, including those who recognized they were unable to interrogate the information fully: “I think DNA is quite like magic. How from a bit of saliva or a bit of hair . . . How they’ve ever found out . . . [from your] teeth what you ate . . . Dig up all these bones you can date it . . . And what it is they show you and it’s like Lego . . . It’s like magic to me.”

A large number of researchers had started with limited knowledge but had acquired complex understanding of genetics and genomics as well as the computerized statistical techniques and technologies required to use DNA matching effectively, despite the initial learning curve being potentially overwhelming: “the DNA business can get very complicated very quickly and it scares off a lot of people who want to use it for genealogical purposes . . . I don’t want to have to go back to college to get a Master’s in genetics to figure out what I should be doing.” This engagement is clearly challenging but brings with it rewards: “What I know about DNA is just improving every day. I started
off thinking I’ll never get to grips with this.” Similarly to “traditional” family history skills, this knowledge is often gained through autodidactic education:

this was a subject not taught when I was at school... [so I took out] library books to find out what they were talking about.

It’s actually trial and error for me. You try something that doesn’t work, you adapt... I haven’t done a course or anything to teach me... it’s just general skills that you have from other things that you apply.

IT and statistical skills are particularly important to participating fully in DNA matching, as with “some of the tools you need very good knowledge of computers,” which was often improved through engagement with genetic genealogy, like the researcher who’d “become an expert on spreadsheets.” DNA in this regard is a new, scientific-based extension of a long-term synergy between genealogy and computing. “Genealogists as a whole have been quick on the uptake of technology and tools,” identifying the potential utility of new practices and developments and then acquiring the tools and learning the necessary skills. Indeed, genealogists were some of the earliest adopters of online databases, message boards, social media, and wikis to store and share information. A small number of researchers have created their own innovative genetic analysis tools, based on their advanced, self-taught skills: “I actually built myself an Access database... [so that I could] shove it all in and work it all out segment by segment.”

As well as the well-established autodidactic trends within genealogical education, much information sharing and skills improvement occurs through interaction within the family history community, both online and in “real life.” Facebook is the premier forum for the sharing of genetic genealogical skills and knowledge, with DNA discussion groups in particular an important resource utilized by a large number of the researchers we interviewed. One member’s story is enlightening on the process of support and development that is seen around the world in these communities:

I’m not highly trained and therefore the whole DNA thing was really overwhelming at the start and I joined a few Facebook groups that specifically deal with DNA and I didn’t say anything. I just sat back and read their posts. Just as they were posting day in and day out I would look at my data and see what they were saying and really compare it... I’m nowhere near good at it but being able to work with it in those groups... shared knowledge, family history groups are highly trained and self-trained... and there’s that collaboration and I’m starting to see that with the DNA groups as well.

We’ve got people who are knowledge people, who are science trained or genetics trained, who have come in, sharing their knowledge free of charge on Facebook, then we’re seeing amateur DNA people growing with their knowledge and they’re able to start working out their own DNA, data mining their own DNA, and they can help other people who are starting to come into the community.

We can see this participant using the social media sites to learn complex processes. This model of learning and support they outlined here shows the self-motivation of family historians and the tendency toward autodidactic education. This account also reveals the architecture of information and learning which has begun to grow around genetic genealogy. Most important from the point of view of family history studies is the focus on training and support from within the community: “the information is in forums online.” As the researcher above explains, “family history groups are highly trained” and largely “self-trained.” The community works quickly and responsively to support itself, recognizing research gaps and problems and then using a highly sophisticated set of communications (workshops, conferences, webinars, social media groups).

Our research demonstrates that family historians engage with a sophisticated structure of support and collaboration, particularly on training and education. This is a community that shares an
extensive amount of resources and hence has developed collaborative historical practice over the past decades. The online genetic genealogical community consists of an eclectic mix of individuals from across the globe, collaborating in what has rapidly become one of the largest science education exercises in history. It allows family historians to connect far quicker than formerly and has led to a huge crowdsourcing of information about genetic genealogy largely hidden from academic view. Participants used networks around the world, from Australia to Ukraine, with groups ranging from small (35) to relatively large (1,500–3,000), with important, close, and generous personal links regularly being built. An Australian researcher explained:

Family history is very much: I’m interested, I have a question—and you don’t get knocked back. They say I can give you an answer or I can direct you . . . . These people who write books . . . . They’re just often without any money coming into them . . . . I’ve got some random stranger in Cornwall who’s just driven 40 miles yesterday to look at something in a graveyard for me and I’ve never met him!46

This sharing and collaboration, often across great geographical distance, is common and combines networked relationships with historical activity and evidence gathering. Yet as well as sharing knowledge and collaborate with peers, the online groups enable direct interaction with experts in the field:

Blaine Bettinger is one of the primary resources . . . . Steven Fox chips in and actually answers people’s questions directly, so it’s kind of a self-help group where anyone can post a picture of their work or where they’re up to and ask the question and anyone can answer . . . . the people who developed the tools are the administrators in that group.47

The lack of filter and open nature can, however, be overwhelming: “so many people threw so much information . . . . I think they wanted to outsmart each other.” While the groups offer one space to learn, there was a clear desire for more didactic and specific training as one researcher explained: “that’s not what the average genealogist is looking for. They’re looking for a checklist that says: spit in tube, get results . . . . upload results to this, run this thing, this is how that works.”48 This need for a streamlined template for DNA work was repeated, despite recognition that the area is highly complicated for such a straightforward solution. This comment reflects the frustration with many among the community that DNA must be engaged with in depth in order to be used effectively.

Another key source of training and support, providing different types of education and interaction, is genealogical societies. For decades, these organizations have taken the role of knowledge centers for traditional family history practices. They are increasingly engaging with DNA sequencing technologies. This move on the part of the major societies suggests that any understanding of family history as a phenomenon needs to understand the complex interrelationships between individuals and the groups: “working together? . . . . I think you have to, you don’t know everything. I know very little when compared to other genealogists, especially in our genealogy society.”49 Society- and self-organized genetic genealogy groups have been set up in many locations, providing a valuable “real-world” forum for working on problems collaboratively and exchanging knowledge: “After I come to these meetings and someone says something I go home and I think ‘Ah, Great!’ . . . . I have a mentor as well, I’m very lucky.”50 Family history societies provide hierarchies of knowledge and ways of organizing engagement with DNA work. These groups were generally of “very informal structure” but important in creating networks of support: “I think group working does help, especially brick walls . . . . You raise, I’ve got a problem with this, chances are someone in the group has been there and done that.”51 Others benefited from collaboration: “it’s been very beneficial being able to come together as a group and discuss problems, discuss ideas because everyone has a different way of working. I think that’s what’s its real strength.”52
Yet catering to the new technology has proved more challenging for some existing “real-world” community groups than the fast-moving and global-scale online groups, with skills and experience not necessarily in place among the existing pool of volunteers. One participant complained: “I don’t think we do have enough support for the DNA stuff . . . it’s still new, if you . . . [compare it with] the sort of support that you can get for the paper trail stuff.”53 Some societies have been able to move more quickly than others in this regard, holding lecture and workshop sessions, and creating new genetic genealogy special interest groups to develop capacity in this area. Most subgroups report a sizable increase in numbers over the past two years.54 There are also opportunities in the genetic genealogy boom to bring in new members. Previously “people came in the research pathways, now they’re coming in . . . with a DNA background and no research.”55 The pivot toward genetic genealogy and the rising popularity of testing is a potentially transformative development for the genealogical community, with its novelty meaning that there is perhaps some way to go before a full suite of support and training can be put into place in all locations.

As well as opportunities, introducing a new demographic of noresearchers into the genealogical ferment has created problems for researchers testing in order to augment existing family history projects: “The hardest thing is that there’s so many people who’ve had their DNA analysed and they’ve got no family trees or history . . . the only thing they’re advertising still is ethnic origins.”56 DNA matching is a reciprocal research practice. Making a genealogical connection, particularly outside of very close genetic relationships, relies on both testers having a decent amount of existing genealogical research in order to identify their shared ancestors. The phenomenon of mass testing for the “novelty” of finding your “genetic ethnicity” can significantly hamper genealogical research. Many researchers made comments about the mass public understanding of and motivation for DNA ancestry testing, recognizing that “if you look at the advertisements for, particularly Ancestry, for DNA companies, that’s the thing they push, where do you come from, what is your ethnicity? And yet we know that it’s very rubbery and to be honest, I don’t even look at it.”57 Many genealogists expressed skepticism for the “gimmicky ethnicity part”58 and bemoaned a lack of understanding among the wider public about the genealogical process: “On these groups a lot of people [say], ‘I don’t know what to do with this, can you tell me’ and they don’t want to do any of the work.”59 While genealogists are increasing their knowledge and skills, there is a sense that, in the wider consciousness, the products offered and results displayed by DNA testing companies are blindly accepted.

“It Increases Your Sense of Self”: DNA Enabling New Connections to the Past

Family history is an activity that blends rigorous skill with an affective understanding of the individual’s relationship to the past. It is an historical practice that necessitates a keen self-reflection and changes the way in which the family historians think about the past. The central effect outlined by researchers is that conducting genealogical research leads to greater engagement with the past and a broadening of one’s own historical knowledge. This is driven by the desire to contextualize the stories and discoveries made about ancestors into a wider historical framework: “It’s interesting just seeing what went off at that time and then be like, they were alive when this happened, this happened? That would explain why they moved or they did this and this.”60 Family history has a radical impact on the way in which historical individuals are perceived, and this personal engagement tends to engender a bottom-up, microlevel view of social history: “For me it’s about the people and the richness of their lives and telling our journey, celebrating who we are.”61 While any present-day individual could theoretically generate this imaginative and emotional connection to any historical individual, the fact that these pertain to relatives is particularly important: “I sometimes . . . feel as if I’ve got closer contacts with cousins I’ve never met and with dead cousins.”62 The affective aspect of genealogy is enhanced by the perceived importance of familial connection: “It’s family . . . they
made you and they’re part of you . . . it increases your sense of self in a way . . . you get a sense of family. I feel closer to ancestors than cousins I’ve never known personally.”

Family historians have a clear, strong sense of the importance of family as a social and emotional construct, although they also recognize that “family” is something itself constituted in numerous complex ways.

These emotional connections to ancestors generate empathetic reflections on how the lived experiences of past individuals were dictated and shaped by their circumstances and the social mores of the time: “I really am more interested in the people, how they lived and things like that.”

There is a certain satisfaction and enjoyment in finding these stories and building imagined connections with past individuals: “my 3rd or 4th great-grandmother had 5 children that were all baptised at the local church in Somerset as a single woman. And then she got married and had two more kids and then she saw him off and she ended up marrying the lodger. You’re thinking, “Oh my God! This is one hell of a woman!”

Acknowledging the affective power of this individual’s story, the same genealogist reflected on how it had changed the way in which they’d conceived of the past: “you realise why they did it . . . they had to get married again for a provider . . . for me it’s given a greater understanding of how life was and why they did it, it wasn’t a kind of moralistic approach at all was it, it was practical.”

This emotional connection to past individuals often generates a feeling of obligation to not only capture the stories of individuals who might otherwise be lost or unacknowledged but also ensure that ancestors are commemorated, both in the present and by future generations. Commemoration can take many forms; indeed, family history practice itself can be thought of as a form of commemoration, searching for information about specific, previously unknown, and unacknowledged ancestors and recording findings in various formats. This work is affective and emotional, rendering historical practice as memorial, and constantly reconfiguring the idea of “family”: “I don’t know anything about [him] and I can’t think who he belonged to . . . Who did he belong to? . . . nobody’s ever mentioned him . . . down here somewhere I need to find him, I need to give him a place in my family.”

One researcher had found burials of a number of ancestors which were unmarked and incorporated this commemorative project into their research:

I wonder how many other people are in that grave because they were poor, people were poor . . . a lot of times they . . . didn’t have money to put a plaque up. My project now which is harder than I thought it was going to be, I want a plaque for whoever else is in there beside which is on the wall because one of them has a whole bunch of names but that’s not all the ones that are in there.

As well as gravestones and tombs, researchers commemorate their ancestors in a range of media, from war memorials to embroidered quilts, through stories written and presented online (including on genealogical platforms, blogs, and social media) and in paper format, photograph scrapbooks, and sound recordings, as well as family trees, both online and in physical copies.

In this context, the seeming promise of genetic genealogy, for many, is revelation, new connections, and new knowledge. This is how the major companies sell their product, but it is also why many family historians approach the tests, embedded as they already are in complex processes of reimagining and forging new, often emotional, and commemorative connections with the past. DNA matching had led to discoveries researchers had been hoping for, which was often a thrilling and rewarding experience:

I only did the test this year and was really lucky, unlocked a mystery I’ve had for thirty years. Paper wouldn’t have told me . . . I’m very pleased I did the test . . . it has open[ed] other avenues.

for me the big thrill was a particular family that I’d been looking for forty years . . . I was able to match with the descendants of this person’s sister’s children . . . got a family tree back to 1219 on that branch which is very exciting.
This language of revelation and affective surprise is regularly used by family historians and reflects the larger conceptual shift that DNA effects. Rather than approach the past as something complex and partial, to be thoughtfully sifted through, DNA sequencing offers a quick way to new knowledge. Even seasoned family historians are susceptible to this appeal. The broadening impact of genetic genealogy means that “with the DNA you’re casting your net so wide and you don’t know what you’re going to catch.”72

Particularly demonstrated by these examples is the direct impact of genetic evidence on extending the scope of family history research. Practitioners discovered geographic areas that they had no previously known links to and found new individual stories to research and connect with. One participant “started off with a purely Australian-type focus but then it changed, especially with doing the genetics,” broadening their interest and scope into European ancestors and history.73 In another, where “DNA was my only shot here, this man had put this test together and had only had one match . . . until I submitted mine . . . we matched and we still can’t find where we match because it’s in Scotland, that’s how far back it goes.”74 In these situations, DNA provides the only link that is the transformative technology that opens up novel and unknown loci of connection.

One aspect of family history where DNA data are particularly radical and transformative, can break significant new ground, and improve the sense of reward for researchers is in investigating female lines, particularly in countries like England, where paper records contain far less information on female ancestors than male. Because of archival biases, “unfortunately we go down the male line and the women lose their names and the further back you get the more difficult it is to find the lady’s surname.”75 DNA can often unlock these maternal “brick walls,” making research a more holistic and rewarding experience: “I find I enjoy it far more now I can follow my female line back and not be so obsessed with following my name and, also, their lives were just so much more interesting and harder.”76 By generating new subjects of research through DNA testing, family historians make radical reclaims of their female ancestors who generally “get kind of left out of it all, they’re just somebody’s wife and somebody’s mother, and you don’t know anything about them.”77 Filling in this information is a valuable and unforeseen effect of DNA sequencing, providing a new “type” of knowledge about the past that enables a new way of narrating or accounting for lives.

“We’re the Last of the Family . . . I Feel If I Don’t Do It . . . It’s Not Going to Be Done”—Family History, DNA, and Legacy

Family historians have a strong conception of legacy, seeing the individual researcher building an archive of past people, experiences, and events to be transmitted to the future: “I’m aiming to tell a story for my children . . . I’m less inclined to think of myself as the end of a process and just part of a gradual story that I eventually will pass onto somebody else.”78 This practice includes situating oneself within the chronological narrative and ensuring that you are remembered accurately in the future: “[I] started collating my history, based on groups of photographs . . . I’m continually adding that as it goes [. . .] it is important that we realise that we are also history—you spend so much time digging around in the past that you almost don’t have time.”79

As a consequence of the large time commitment the practice demands, most of those undertaking genealogy seriously are retired. Echoing many experiences, one researcher had been interested for a number of years but said that “I really was putting it off until I retired,”80 while another explained that, although they’d “been actually doing this since the early ’80s . . . not going at great speed,” they were “glad I retired and I have the time to do that.”81 While being liberated to spend time on research is a major factor in the prevalence of retired persons among the genealogical community, the motivations behind this demographic becoming involved in family history are manifold and are tied to the stage of life where one’s relationship to other generations and time is altered significantly. At the age of retirement, many people become the senior members of their family. Particularly as members...
of older generations begin to pass away, and newer generations are born, awareness of the chain of history, of mortality, and the ephemerality of memory becomes more acute. One genealogist was motivated when their “father retired in 1984 as a shopkeeper all his life . . . never done a bit of history . . . of writing . . . and said, ‘someone has to tell our story’. And his memoirs, I started with him. Someone has to tell our journey.”82 The fact that younger generations had never met or forged an emotional connection with the individuals to be commemorated or recorded made the projects particularly pressing, even obligatory: “we’re the last of the family . . . I feel if I don’t do it . . . It’s not going to be done.”83 A regular reflection of researchers was melancholic comments about memories that had been lost because “nobody wrote it down,”84 as well as remorse for not capturing stories when the chance was there: “I bitterly regret that my aunt never really talked about the topic, I found out my mother got a lot from her and her own mother.”85

The family history archive, the research outputs intended to be transmitted, and the practice itself are often inherited or passed on to younger family members. It becomes an intergenerational project, extended and reinvented in each generation. This inherited practice is often maternal: “I inherited a family tree from my grandmother when I was 16”; “I became interested because of my grandmother on dad’s side had written a story about her family, which ended with her.”86 Many of our participants mentioned parents, most often mothers, who had created some kind of archive for communication of the family’s memory: “I got into it by default. My mother taped on cheap little K-mart tapes 14 tapes of her life.”87 The communication of practice is often intergenerational: “my mother and I had great interest in history, and my grandfather; mother had done family history to the 1600s.”88 The practice is often shared, a way of communicating with family members and bringing the idea of family into some kind of new focus. The activity is often affective or enables discussion of important issues: “something I can speak about with father that was completely safe territory; he couldn’t be mad at me for going to law school and not giving him more grandchildren.”89

Mirroring the way in which a number of our interviewees had begun genealogy through collaboration with or inheritance of research from older family members, a lot of researchers were actively aiming to recruit and train younger relatives, particularly children and grandchildren: “my oldest daughter, she’s quite interested, so I’ve involved her in some of the research. She doesn’t mind going over graveyards!”90 Some take the opportunity to actively train, inspire, and even pass on elements of the physical archive:

My grandson, who is 14, [and] spent a few days with me. He and I stayed up all night going through pieces of paper and I took pictures and I gave him a couple of original documents . . . I said, “This is yours, when I go, this is yours so do something with it.” he thought it was great.91

Sometimes persistence is employed to try and create the conditions for passing on research: “So far neither of my sons are interested and my grandchildren are too young to know yet. Although I do keep talking to them about it in the hope that I might start something off in them.”92 However as the family members most concerned with capturing the family’s history and ensuring its transmission to the future, many of our participants expressed skepticism and, sometimes, anxiety about the level of interest among other members, like the wife who is “not really interested [and] just thinks I waste a lot of time clacking around,”93 or “my husband and my daughter [who], at first they were interested and now they go, ‘Oh no!’”94 Particularly pertinent to this idea of legacy is the potential lack of interest among younger generations, amid the general feeling that “it is exceedingly rare in my experience to find anyone below 30 who has a significant interest in this topic.”95 The community is troubled by this diminishing interest: “it is very difficult to get younger people . . . to be asking these questions.”96

In contrast, DNA testing offers an appealing and often successful way to broaden engagement with genealogical research, with many researchers encouraging other family members to undertake
DNA tests in order to understand the complexity of their descent and to make more genetic matches
and thus generate new genealogical findings: “once I started to realise that as an individual I’ve only
inherited small parts of my DNA and I’ve not got the whole picture, I’ve got 3 siblings—2 tested
now, just need to get an offer on Australia DNA to get my sister done, this is what they’re getting
for presents now . . . my brother lives in Thailand so I got my son done first—now it’s getting all
mixed up with my husband’s DNA—then I have to get my brother done.”97 This acquisitive mode
of family history shifts the dynamic from textual investigation to the collection of genetic informa-
tion. When some relatives are reticent about engaging in traditional research or even hearing about
its results, DNA kits offer a way to include others which involves minimal effort on their part and a
novel “scientific” or “experimental” experience, with the added potential to find out their “genetic
ethnicity,” a cachet increased by the prevalence of marketing by companies and growing public
awareness of the technology. Kits are relatively inexpensive, so the cost is often covered by the
researcher, who may even try “giving them out as Christmas presents,”98 to gain family data, a gift
with an added cultural and family relational (rather than economic) value.

Some family members query this, normally due to some kind of concern about data security:
“mine haven’t been too resistant, my brother’s a physicist so he wanted to know who is holding this
data and can I get the raw data.”99 Indeed, many family historians are highly skeptical of DNA test-
ing. Others were delighted: “he was thrilled about the DNA, he thought it was magic.”100 DNA is
providing a new gateway for including nonresearchers in genealogy. While some are actively inter-
ested in finding out more and hearing about research outcomes even if they are not interested in fol-
lowing up their results, they can give the researcher authorization to do so. Many participants
commented that, “I manage my immediate family”101 or “I can go into the ones that I have permis-
sion to do. They’re not offended at all with it. Even my little brother sent me his results but he’s not
going to go any further with his tree.”102 DNA allows researchers to claim new family history data
from living relatives, using it to make further research breakthroughs, and also to store the genetic
data within their family archive, becoming part of the researcher’s legacy to future generations.

“I Don’t Think the DNA Lies”: Changing Definitions of Family

DNA testing’s utility in giving direct evidence of genetic relationship makes it particularly effec-
tive in generating unprecedented genealogical intervention, revealing long-hidden or long-
forgotten secrets, many of which were previously irretrievable through documentary or oral
sources. Genetic genealogy has been imposed into an existing nexus of search, discovery, secrets,
and truth, engendering its own emotional impacts and a new suite of ethical considerations for
researchers to grapple with.

Each discovery of a new family member or branch of the family, whether living or dead, close or
distant, reconfigures to some extent the definition of who is or isn’t family and the way in which the
researcher imagines their relationship to other, past or present, family members. Many genealogists,
however, when self-reporting if they felt that their findings, either from “traditional” or genetic
research had radically changed the way they thought about themselves, replied similarly to one who
said: “No. Not really. You can’t change the past, you can uncover it and it may surprise you, it may
even shock you but there’s nothing you can do about it.”103 Another reflected: “I don’t know if it
changes the way I think about myself […] whether it affects me or not, I don’t know.”104 There
were, however, numerous individuals within our cohort of interviewees for whom revelations and
discoveries through genetic research had considerable impact on their conception of their families
and their place within them. A new ethical aspect of family history research has been inaugurated
through the intervention of new data.

Often the decision to DNA test is driven by an unknown element in recent ancestry: an unknown
parent or grandparent or a person who was adopted searching for their birth family. In these cases,
DNA’s potential as a revelatory silver bullet is appealing, and testers are hoping or expecting to discover results that could significantly reconfigure their familial identity and relationships. One researcher explained that “I found out after my mother had died...my father always thought that her older sister was her mother...So that’s another reason why I got into DNA only to find that—there’s no way I can trace it.”

While another was considering the approach, saying that, “There was always this myth that grandma slept around, that these 8 kids all had a different Dad and I’m gonna go to my cousin and say: ‘Are you ready?’” DNA matching only works if close relatives have tested online, and if your and their existing genealogical research are comprehensive enough to calculate a relationship. Complicating this further, the matches are also predicated on random genetic inheritance. While DNA has the potential to generate connections that other historical sources do not, it is highly contingent on who has tested with the particular platforms that you have and what their relationship to you is.

Even if one is successful in finding the information they are seeking, the reactions of relatives connected with are unpredictable, as outlined by a genealogist who had “an adopted first cousin and she’s found quite a lot of her family through DNA testing. Some of it’s quite positive but her mother is not a positive story for her, but she’s still quite determined to proceed with it.” An adoptee who’d met relatives they’d found through genealogical research explained “it’s not always like Surprise is it? Or Long Lost Families? You don’t always immediately love people who you’ve never know before.”

While some testers enter the process with known close genealogical lacunae, hoping for discoveries to help fill these, testers with established knowledge of their close ancestry and relationships can potentially generate unexpected revelations with profound effects on relationships and families. These new insights can be made particularly impactful by the potentially disruptive immediacy and unsentimentality of the technology: “I don’t think the DNA lies.” As traditional historical sources are fully appreciated to be subject to deliberate or accidental error, obfuscation, misunderstanding, or mistranscription, when they are contradicted by genetic data, DNA trumps the man-made: “I think it’s more accurate than trusting a BMD [Births, Marriages and Deaths register].”

Thus, even within our small group of interviewees, DNA-derived revelations were regularly reported: “We’ve discovered a huge skeleton in the closet...It’s not a good ending.” Another researcher “thought [they] never had siblings” but then “found out I had 3 brothers last year...then I found out I have a half-sister.” While the end results of discoveries can be mixed (“this DNA will either open a can of worms or create new and positive relationships”) in terms of how testers and their families come to terms with the revelations, even in a best case scenario, there is significant upheaval and challenge to existing attitudes to close family members. New information can significantly impact upon the narrative of the family and the idea of who is or isn’t considered a member. There are also potentially significant financial implications: “where there’s a will there’s an argument.”

The role of the family historian, even before DNA testing, had been conceptualized as that of truth seeker, secret keeper: “as a family historian you do find out things and you do upset people sometimes.” Family historians begin their research attempting to discover new information about the family’s past, but if those discoveries are controversial, difficult, or painful, this creates an added responsibility of how to record this, who to tell, and how to tell them. Sometimes family historians make the decision not to share this knowledge at all because of its potentially detrimental impact on people and relationships. The responsibility of discovering a powerful revelation about a relative is a burden on many: “I have a terrible secret, I have a relative, I know he’s another man’s child.”
Revelation is particularly problematic for those whose families had trauma or sadness in the past: “I researched my older relatives and many of their stories were painful and they didn’t want to share.”118 Others had found evidence of behavior they were uncomfortable with, of new children, and unacknowledged family members: “with grandma having 8 different lovers, I don’t know that I’m going to go public with that”; “none of her children know she was married before, she didn’t have any children with him, she’s Catholic.”119 There is a clear understanding that shame, particularly in the less accepting and understanding social mores of past generations, had led people to suppress difficult topics:

My grandmother, for example, was illegitimate but none of her children knew about it, I was the first one who uncovered it... our generation doesn’t care. I’ve got a distant cousin found that her... grandfather was in jail early in life, but she didn’t know... her parents’ generation didn’t talk about those sort of things because they were ashamed. And the other one I’ve found is suicide, that was never spoken out and when you uncover 3 or 4 generations back, no one living today in the family knew anything about it.120

The growing prevalence of DNA and its widely experienced impacts has brought the dilemma of truth and secrets into greater focus: “the truth which for many generations has been able to be kept hidden [...] once upon a time it was very easy to forget and just talk it out of the family story.”121 Indeed, most or all participants were familiar with “real horror stories”122 and many could report disruptive DNA anecdotes of people they knew, if not for themselves directly. The potential personal and familial impact of these cases is such that family historians are now grappling with the ethical implications of data sharing. One interviewee knew a researcher who found “someone who was a match, that’s a really close match, and it’s got to be an uncle,” leaving them with the dilemma of asking, “now do I go to my mother and say your brother has a child that we didn’t [know of]?”123 Another interviewee outlined this ethical framework by asking: “whose responsibility comes with it? You really have to noodle about who these people are and do they want to know?”124 After close consideration, researchers may well make the decision not to share: “you find it isn’t your place to tell somebody—you have to be discrete and it’s not your place to say.”125 This is particularly the case with highly upsetting findings: “I just can’t tell her, some things are harrowing aren’t they?”126

DNA testing also adds another dimension to the ethical considerations researchers have to deal with around the sharing of secrets. Unlike private research and personally stored records, in an online DNA database, all of your genetic matches are displayed. If an unexpected or controversial match is up there, any other matching person can see it and “you don’t have to be a very good detective to try and make a match. Sometimes it’s shocking what you can discover about other people from the DNA and limited information.”127 Even if one researcher is unsure about whether to share a revelation, they must also consider that any other related family member could potentially “let it out of the bag”128 in a less considerate or constructive way.

These new contexts for family history information are forcing researchers to reassess how they approach their practice. The potential for revelatory, highly impacting, and surprising revelations has led a number of researchers to consider deeply whether to test or not, weighing up the potential emotional, personal, and ethical dilemmas. One genealogist said, “I was a bit sensitive about putting mine online because I’m adopted,”129 while another explained: “I think my mom was initially hesitant—their father abandoned them when she was only four.”130 Known nonpaternity events carried great potential for unexpected results, one potential tester checked by the “number of people in my husband’s and my family with unknown fathers.”131 Some researchers have actively decided to focus only on the research areas they are comfortable with because of the potential for creating or adding to trauma, as one interviewee explained: “my own second cousin blocked me on ancestry because she was scared of family secrets, I’m 61 and she’s 73 and she couldn’t bear it was going to
One person who had made an unexpected and upsetting DNA discovery reflected that, “I’d think twice now about having it done. Are you really prepared?” The ethics of such genetically enabled revelation are complex, emotive, and wide-ranging. This issue demonstrates clearly the new paradigms that genetic genealogy is demanding of users, as privacy and revelation become entwined with bioethical discussion and increasing concerns about genetic privacy. The internal debates about ethics within the family history community suggest that those in the field will need to work hard to establish working practice over the next decades, but, further, that family history as a community needs to take care to develop ways of protecting this information. This debate has become hardened in the last few years with high-profile cases such as that of the “Golden State Killer” showing how seemingly benign genetic genealogical data might be read to help law enforcement solve violent crime. The sheer range of responses we had to discussions of this case—some highly critical, some keen that their data be shared this way—reflects a complicated diversity of opinion over ethics and privacy in the community.

Conclusions

Family history enables the creation of personal narratives, and genetic genealogy is changing how this works. This is a new way of thinking about the self, and hence there are consequences for thinking about modes of narration and self-conceptualization. DNA seems to broaden and complicate the idea of “family.” It has the potential to reveal new, living relatives who are easily contactable through the social media aspects of online genetic genealogical websites. This can be disruptive, and often individuals are resistant to redefining the family group. In the case of special groups like adoptees, those with unknown parents, those with half-sibs and stepsiblings, new information can shatter the model of family identity that had been built up for many years. Often, though, participants are expectant of such change and welcome the reconfigurations that are attendant upon such work. DNA works to connect users with a wider range of living people, producing family networks that are more elaborated but more distant. The appeal of the process is to open up new avenues for research and to understand family in more depth. The reality seems to be an addition of complication and, in particular, an expansion of living relatives to the family network. However, DNA work is selective, privileging genetic relationship inheritance over other forms, and needs to be considered within a nexus of other family history research.

The qualitative data produced from the focus groups illustrate a community struggling to deal with a new and possibly transformative technology. The thoughts described here show the development of a set of ethical and methodological approaches being established through practice. DNA sequencing is challenging models of working, undermining models of family structures, and introducing new ethical quandaries for researchers. It is a demanding and complex new way of harvesting material about the past, and the innovations in these data demand a lot of the user. This has led to a shift toward more collaborative investigation and the formation of groups for discussion (online or in real life). DNA revelation is forcing researchers to rethink their definition of family and to engage in complex ethical consideration. It is troubling and developing their understanding of historical knowledge and the ways that they might approach using it. Furthermore, our findings suggest the development of a new hybrid approach for studying family history. As mentioned earlier, family historians are often marginalized, even from work on their own field. They are rarely involved in historical scholarship and too often presented as an homogenous group. Through discussion, collaboration, and the valuing of their testimony, it is possible to gain valuable insight into the ways that family historians conceive of their practice. Rather than suggest that the community is regular and static, working via focus group discussion and the thematic presentation of testimony has opened up new avenues for research and illustrated thoroughly the depth and range of attitudes.
Appendix

List of Focus Group Questions

How did you become a family historian?
Why do you do it?
What attracts you to it?
Why do you enjoy it?
What have you discovered? Has it changed the way you think about yourself?
What kinds of skills have you learnt?
What do you know about DNA?
How might DNA affect your life now?
How does DNA connect you to the rest of the human race?
How aware were you of genetics and DNA before you took the test?
How was the test sold to you? What were the aspects of it that engaged you?
Did you understand how the test worked and what the resulting data would mean?
How do you feel about having your DNA tested?
What did you think about the results?
Did you get the results you expected?
Did you understand the data you were given and what it means?
Did the results change the way you think about yourself? About your family? About your past?
Has testing your DNA changed your family story?
Has testing your DNA changed your practice as a family historian?

Authors’ Note

The quote in the title comes from focus group, Clements Library, Ann Arbor, MI, USA, November 30, 2018 (FG: Ann Arbor).

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Notes

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23. Research interview, Sydney, NSW, July 20, 2018 (RI: Sydney).

24. Focus group, HAGSOC, Canberra, ACT, August 9, 2018 (FG: Canberra 1).

25. FG: Melbourne 2.

26. Focus group, Australian Society of Genealogists, Sydney, NSW, July 21, 2018 (FG: Sydney).

27. Focus group, Washtenaw Genealogical Society, Saline District Library, Saline, MI, USA, November 30, 2018 (FG: Saline); Focus group, Liverpool Central Library, UK, September 5, 2018 (FG: Liverpool); Research Interview, Stockport, UK, September 19, 2018; Focus group, Clements Library, Ann Arbor, MI, USA, November 30, 2018 (FG: Ann Arbor).

28. FG: Canberra 1.

29. FG: Ann Arbor.

30. FG: Saline.

31. Focus group, HAGSOC, Canberra, ACT, September 5, 2018 (FG: Canberra 2).

32. FG: Sydney.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Focus group, Leeds City Art Gallery, UK, September 12, 2018 (FG: Leeds 1).

37. FG: Ann Arbor.

38. Focus group, Manchester Central Library, UK, June 26, 2018 (FG: Manchester).

39. FG: Melbourne 2.

40. FG: Sydney.

41. FG: Canberra 1.

42. Focus group, Genealogical Society of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria, July 25, 2018 (FG: Melbourne 1).

43. FG: Canberra 1.

44. RI: Sydney.

45. FG: Canberra 2.

46. Ibid.

47. FG: Melbourne 1.

48. FG: Ann Arbor.

49. Focus group, East Bank Jefferson Parish Library, New Orleans, LA, USA, December 13, 2018 (FG: New Orleans 2).

50. FG: Sydney.

51. FG: Liverpool; Focus group, U3A Buxton, Buxton Fire Station, UK, October 26, 2018 (FG: Buxton).

52. FG: Sydney.

53. Ibid.

54. FG: Ann Arbor; FG: Saline; FG: Melbourne 1.

55. FG: Sydney.

56. FG: Canberra 2; FG: Sydney.

57. FG: Melbourne 1.

58. FG: Melbourne 2.
59. FG: Manchester.
60. FG: Leeds 1.
61. FG: Melbourne 1.
62. FG: Manchester.
63. FG: Ann Arbor.
64. FG: Saline.
65. Focus group, Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society, Voluntary Action Leeds, UK, November 7, 2018 (FG: Leeds 2).
66. FG: Liverpool.
67. Ibid.
68. FG: Leeds 1.
69. FG: New Orleans 2.
70. FG: Sydney.
71. FG: Canberra 2.
72. FG: Liverpool.
73. FG: Canberra 2.
74. FG: New Orleans 1.
75. FG: Liverpool.
76. FG: Manchester.
77. Ibid.
78. FG: Melbourne 1.
79. FG: Buxton.
80. FG: Liverpool.
81. FG: New Orleans 2.
82. FG: Melbourne 1.
83. FG: New Orleans 2.
84. FG: Buxton.
85. FG: New Orleans 2.
86. FG: Saline. On the importance of the maternal line, see Gloyn, Crewe, King, and Woodham, “The Ties That Bind,” 2018.
87. FG: Buxton.
88. Ibid.
89. FG: Ann Arbor.
90. FG: Buxton.
91. FG: New Orleans.
92. FG: Leeds 2.
93. FG: Manchester.
94. Ibid.
95. FG: Liverpool.
96. FG: Manchester.
97. Ibid.
98. FG: New Orleans 2.
99. FG: Manchester.
100. FG: Leeds 1.
101. FG: New Orleans 1.
102. FG: New Orleans 2.
103. FG: Liverpool.
104. FG: Buxton.
105. FG: Melbourne 2.
106. FG: Ann Arbor.
107. FG: Manchester.
108. FG: Sydney.
109. FG: Manchester.
110. FG: Canberra 1.
111. Ibid.
112. FG: Melbourne 1.
113. FG Leeds 1; FG: Ann Arbor.
114. FG: New Orleans 1.
115. FG: Manchester.
116. FG: Leeds 2.
117. FG: Leeds 1.
118. FG: Saline.
119. FG: Ann Arbor.
120. FG: Canberra 2.
121. FG: Canberra 1.
122. FG: Sydney.
123. FG: Ann Arbor.
124. Ibid.
125. FG: Leeds 1.
126. Ibid.
127. FG: Melbourne 2.
128. FG: Melbourne 1.
129. FG: New Orleans 2.
130. FG: New Orleans 1.
131. FG: Canberra 1.
132. FG: Manchester.
133. FG: Melbourne 1.
134. See the bioethical discussions in Ann-Marie Kramer, “The Genomic Imaginary: Genealogical Heritage and the Shaping of Bioconvergent Identities,” *Media Tropes* 5, no. 1 (2015): 80–104; Petra Nordqvist, “Genetic Thinking and Everyday Living: On Family Practices and Family Imaginaries,” *The Sociological Review* 5, no. 4 (2017): 865–81.
135. This has been happening in Oral History, for instance, for some time, see Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, “Who’s Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety About Ethics,” *Oral History Review* 43, no. 2 (2016): 338–66.
136. See the discussions of law enforcement using family history databases in Yaniv Erlich, Tal Shor, and Shai Carmi, “Identity Inference of Genomic Data Using Long-range Familial Searches,” *Science* 362, no. 6415 (2018): 690–94; Natalie Ram and Jessica L. Roberts, “Forensic Genealogy and the Power of Defaults,” *Nature Biotechnology* 37, no. 7 (2019): 707–08.
137. See, for instance, Pramod K. Nayar, “Autobiogenography: Genomes and Life Writing,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 3 (2016): 509–25.

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