

Family tree research can open a 'Pandora's Box' of secrets that may cause rifts, research says

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People researching their ancestors can open a "Pandora's Box" of secrets that may cause conflict and widen rifts in the family, new research says.

While most people derive pleasure and satisfaction from researching their [ancestry](#), for some it brings to light "secrets and skeletons", the study says.

Dr Anne-Marie Kramer, of the University of Warwick, told the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow today [9 April] that of 224 people who gave her details of [family history](#) research, around 30 mentioned conflict.

The main causes were: uncovering unwelcome information, wanting information from relatives who didn't wish to give it, giving relatives inaccurate information, spending more time researching than with loved ones, and coming into contact with hostile relatives. [see below for examples]

Dr Kramer analysed responses to questions about family history research put to people taking part in the Mass Observation Project, based at the University of Sussex, in which people volunteer to write about their lives as a record of everyday life.

Of the 224 replies, 140 were from women and 83 from men (and one

gender unknown), aged between 16 and 95 and based across the UK. The accounts are from people researching their family history or from the relatives and friends of those carrying out the research.

Dr Kramer noted that in most cases people wrote positively about researching their family's history. People found pleasure in making discoveries, investigating family myths and mysteries and making their ancestors real by finding out more about their lives. In some cases, the research could help mend rifts in families. However, not all experiences were entirely positive.

Dr Kramer told the conference: "Along with the USA, Canada and Australia, contemporary British society is immersed in a seemingly unprecedented boom in the family heritage industry.

"The public is enjoying unparalleled public access to historical records in archives both material and digital, while social networking genealogy websites such as Genes Reunited facilitate the publication of virtual family trees alongside the 'rediscovery' of long-lost 'cousins'.

"Meanwhile, the media has been flooded with celebrity genealogy stories, with the BBC TV flagship programme, Who Do You Think You Are? reaching audiences of over five million.

"But in investigating their family history, researchers could open up a Pandora's Box of secrets and skeletons, such as finding there are family issues around paternity, illegitimacy or marriage close to birth of children, criminality, health and mental health and previously unknown humble origins.

"The rifts are not confined to the historic past - bitterness and resentment towards siblings or parents can result where information is not disclosed."

Dr Kramer gave some examples:

Bringing hostile relatives into contact:

One 56-year-old woman wrote: "After my father died in 1999, my brother actually fought me over the [family] tree, despite his previous total lack of interest. He insisted my grandfather's WWI medals be split between us, and took photocopies of all my letters to Dad that Dad had kept."

Forgetting the living:

A 31-year-old man wrote: "It is something of an annoyance to my mother that her own sister can travel to [places abroad] to speak to a distant cousin she never knew existed but cannot get on a train to come and see her own sister as it is deemed too far. Such is family life: spoonfuls of love but bubbling beneath lots of grudges, bruised feelings and massive chips on shoulders - none of which are ever discussed with the offending party!"

Uncovering unwelcome information:

A 72-year-old woman wrote: "I have a friend, who, when his mother died, found information to the effect that his sister was adopted. He has not given the information to his sister and is very uncomfortable about holding the knowledge. "

One 70-year-old woman wrote: "The fact that my grandmother was pregnant when she was married and that my parents were also in the same situation before I was born were matters that some felt were better not revealed. For some this information was unwelcome and an elderly cousin accused me of uncovering secrets that were best left hidden."

A 64-year-old woman wrote: "Family history research can stir up a nest of hornets. For example, it emerged that my mother-in-law 'had' to get married. She had always been very dismissive about their [wedding] anniversary, but when we looked into the records, it was rather too close to my elder brother's birthday! Of course, nobody minds about that these days, but she feels deeply ashamed."

A 40-year-old woman wrote: "I was very interested in family history research but then decided I didn't like most of the people I'm related to, so have partially abandoned the research. Sometimes you reveal more about your ancestors than you bargain for, and not all of it is nice to know."

A 68-year-old woman wrote: "My mother and her sister didn't know they had had an older sister who had died when she was three."

One 45-year-old woman wrote that they found that a relative was not a naval officer, as had been thought: "When we announced that fact - ooooh what an outcry. It took a lot of persuading, and they still resist to this day. We are more careful now, about what we say to the older aunties and grandparents. They have their cherished ideas about the family and there is no point to our upsetting them."

The same woman wrote about the shock and anger experienced by her mother-in-law on discovering that her grandparents had been less 'respectable' than outward appearances suggested: "My mother-in-law had always known that her grandfather had married the woman who had been a maid in his father's house... when we revealed that her grandmother... had given birth to a child, who had died within a few weeks at most, before they married - she denied it completely, at first. Later, when convinced, she was absolutely furious. It transpired that she had suffered much at the hands of the 'respectable' grandparents with their rigid Edwardian morality and preaching about respect and 'the right

way to do things'. To discover such a degree of hypocrisy was a great shock."

Passing judgment on the living:

One 67-year-old woman without children who had been married several times wrote of a [family tree](#) sent to her by a cousin: "I also hated the fact that there was a line following each marriage with the words 'No issue'."

Creating tensions in the family:

A 40-year -old woman wrote: "My father talks at length about his background (whether you want to hear it or not!) and it's very much his interpretation of events, very biased. Fortunately we met his parents ourselves and were able to form our own opinions (quite different to his). As I said, he holds most of the information on our family history and is unwilling to part with anything of real interest, which is a shame."

One 70-year-old woman said that the invitation to write about family history research had: "...raised a wry smile because my husband is into family history research in a big way. It is his constant topic of conversation and it is driving us up the wall."

Wanting information they have no right to:

A 67-year-old woman (mentioned above) wrote: "About 40 years ago a male cousin on my mother's side, whom I had never met, got in touch having been given my address by the cousin I'm friendly with. He was, it seems, compiling a family tree. My cousin had given him details of myself and my three marriages and he wanted further details of my husbands and former husbands. What cheek, I thought and how intrusive."

Positive aspects of family tree research:

One 56-year-old woman wrote: "It's great to be able to pass on memories of family members no longer with us, and to learn more about the life they would have had. I think it helps you to feel connected - and also to do honour to people who are no longer with us."

A 56-year-old man wrote: "My parents and grandparents all died before I was 25 and as many youngsters suddenly find it was too late to ask the questions that now seem most important. So when I had the chance I gathered little bits of information when I could. When my daughter's mother died when my daughter was three I thought it would be good to have some information about her family roots if ever she needed it."

Dr Kramer said the growing popularity was under-researched, and further work was needed to understand the role of family history in people's everyday individual and family lives, as well as why so many felt it was important to explore their family history.

Provided by University of Warwick

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