CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM AND INTEREST IN ANCESTRY

JACK JEDWAB

Jack Jedwab is the President of the Association for Canadian Studies and the Canadian Institute for Identities and Migration. Holding a PhD in Canadian History from Concordia University, he taught at Université du Québec à Montréal and McGill University. He has taught courses on the history of immigration in Quebec, on ethnic minorities in Quebec, on official language minorities in Canada and on sport in Canada. He has also authored essays for books, journals and newspapers across the country, in addition to being the author of various publications and government reports on issues of immigration, multiculturalism, human rights and official languages.

INTRODUCTION

You may recall constructing your family tree as an assignment during your early school years. If so, you were asked to identify the names of various family members at the end of the branches of some modestly designed tree.

In part, the aim of this exercise was to remind youth that they had roots – though it was more about from whom they originated rather than from the place they came. The family tree assignment also served as an initial attempt to comprehend genealogy which, in turn, sought to highlight the importance of family and offer some basic understanding of time, generations and the order of things. By giving history a personal connection, it also may have encouraged some young people to develop a greater interest in the past.

Across North America, tracing one's ancestry has become a 'thing to do' and thus it has been a profitable venture for a select few companies that have benefitted from an increasing number of clients. According to research commissioned in 2016 by the world's largest online family history resource, Ancestry, almost one-third (32%) of Canadians admit that they don't know when the first member of their family immigrated to Canada, with an additional one-quarter (24%) saying they don't know where their ancestors emigrated from. Canada has often been described as a nation of immigrants and thus offers a potentially important market for persons who might be attracted to undertaking such

searches into their heritage. A Leger survey conducted for the Association for Canadian Studies reveals that some two-thirds of Canadians report that they're interested in conducting research into their family history.

Genealogy was once a paper trail of charts, notes and documents in folders and filing cabinets tucked away somewhere in a basement. Technology has changed that by making it far simpler to find and access information on the Internet about one's origins. Once-expensive DNA tests are now relatively inexpensive and millions of people are having their genetic background analyzed by 23andme, Ancestry.com and others. (The tests are not without problems; different companies can give different results and assigning DNA sequences to geographic ancestry is probabilistic). If your family tree goes back a few generations, it is almost certain to contain an error or two. In fact, there could be entire branches that are based on a lie and you would have no way of ever knowing.

But the ancestral inquiries that once seemed the purview of the more privileged segment of society have gone increasingly mainstream. As one American observer points out, "genealogy has always had a following.... but prior to the civil rights movement, which encouraged racial and ethnic minorities to embrace their previously marginalized identities," that following was more limited. Alex Haley's 1976 book and made-for-television film *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* have been widely credited with popularizing identities that were previously marginalized. The story of Kunta Kinte – an 18th-century African who was captured as an adolescent, sold into slavery in Africa and transported to North America – followed his life and the lives of his descendants in the United States down to Haley. It was regarded as one of the most important publications of the 20th century and instilled pride in many persons who chose to situate themselves and their identities in what were previously considered uncharted and unworthy realms of cultural heritage.

To some extent, the idea persists that it is important for some of us to transmit our customs and traditions, but not so for others. As observed below in a Leger survey for the Association for Canadian Studies, nearly one in three Canadians who strongly agree that it is important to transmit their customs and traditions to their children also want immigrants to abandon their customs and traditions.

TABLE 1. STRONGLY AGREE THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO TRANSMIT MY CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO MY CHILDREN AND AGREE THAT IMMIGRANTS SHOULD GIVE UP THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

IMMIGRANTS SHOULD GIVE UP THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS	IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO TRANSMIT MY CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO MY CHILDREN
Total Strongly and Somewhat Agree	32.4%
Strongly agree	12.7%
Somewhat agree	19.7%
Somewhat disagree	29.7%
Strongly disagree	35.7%
I prefer not to answer	2.2%
TOTAL	**100%**

Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

Table 2 reveals that the nearly 37% of Canadians who do not identify as a visible minority and strongly agree on the importance of transmitting their cultures and traditions to their children are most likely to ask immigrants to give up their customs and traditions. That sentiment is shared by 18% of persons who identify as visible minorities.

TABLE 2. STRONGLY AGREE THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO TRANSMIT MY CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO MY CHILDREN AND AGREE THAT IMMIGRANTS SHOULD GIVE UP THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS BY VISIBLE MINORITY STATUS

IMMIGRANTS SHOULD GIVE UP THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS	STRONGLY AGREE THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO TRANSMIT MY CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO MY CHILDREN	
	VISIBLE MINORITY	NOT VISIBLE MINORITY
Strongly agree	6.5%	14.3%
Somewhat agree	11.6%	22.2%
Somewhat disagree	21.6%	32.7%
Strongly disagree	57.8%	28.9%
I prefer not to answer	2.5%	1.9%
TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**

Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

What motivates those persons who choose to trace their ancestry? In the collection of essays entitled *Genealogy and the Librarian*, Vera Gubnitskaia provides a list of the key motivators behind genealogical inquiry. First is the sense of family that has attracted those wishing to chart ancestors or adoptees seeking to connect. Next is the sense of place that sees someone attempting to understand their family's role in the history of a community. For others it is the desire to leave a legacy by preserving their family's historical identity for future generations. For some it is a death in the family that can be the watershed moment that prompts a genealogical journey. Health concerns can be a motivator as some may require more information about a past medical history. Finally, there is the desire to connect to celebrity and/or finding famous people in the family tree.

As observed in Table 3, the majority of Canadians who are highly interested in conducting research into their family histories strongly agree (58.6%) that it is important to transmit their customs and traditions to their children.

TABLE 3. AGREEMENT THAT I AM VERY INTERESTED IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH INTO MY FAMILY HISTORY AND/OR ANCESTRY AND AGREEMENT THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO TRANSMIT MY CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO MY CHILDREN

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO TRANSMIT MY CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO MY CHILDREN	I AM VERY INTERESTED IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH INTO MY FAMILY HISTORY AND/OR ANCESTRY			
	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Strongly agree	58.6%	36.0%	19.9%	21.4%
Somewhat agree	31.8%	50.6%	53.0%	44.3%
Somewhat disagree	5.3%	6.5%	15.1%	13.0%
Strongly disagree	1.2%	1.7%	2.8%	13.7%
I don' know	1.4%	3.4%	5.6%	5.3%
I prefer not to answer	1.7%	1.8%	3.6%	2.3%

Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

The Association for Canadian Studies survey of the factors driving those Canadians to trace their family history supports some of the findings identified previously. For the largest plurality, it is simply described as an attempt to learn more about their families. But nearly one in four Canadians who have conducted such searches prefer to keep their motivation private – an inclination that merits greater attention. Yet others are motivated by mere curiosity.

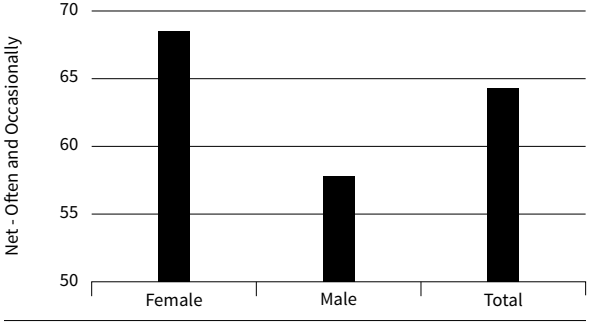
TABLE 4. YOU MENTIONED BEING INTERESTED IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH INTO YOUR FAMILY HISTORY AND/OR ANCESTRY. PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY IN ONE SENTENCE:

Learn / Know more about my family history	39%
I prefer not to answer	23%
Interest / Interested / Interesting	11%
Curiosity	7%

Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

Who searches for family histories? Those companies that promote ancestry searches likely target certain demographic groups that might be more inclined to take up the quest. As revealed in Chart 1, the 2018 ACS-Leger survey reveals that women are far more interested in talking with family members to get information about their ancestors.

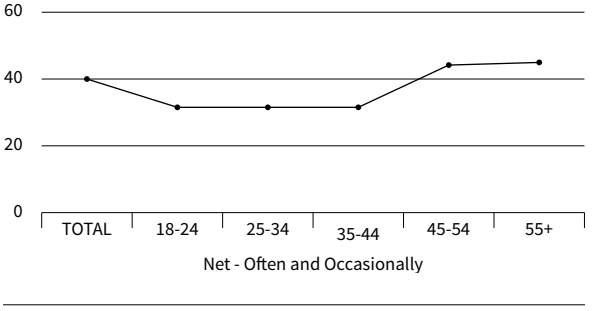
CHART 1. TALKED WITH FAMILY MEMBERS OR INDIVIDUALS TO GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT MY ANCESTORS



Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

On the basis of age, the two cohorts that were most interested in undertaking searches of their family histories were those between the ages of 18 and 24 and those over the age of 45.

CHART 2. SEARCHED ONLINE FOR RECORDS OR INFORMATION PERTAINING TO MY ANCESTORS BY AGE COHORT



Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

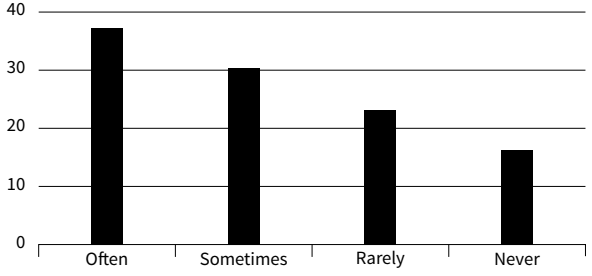
MIXED RESULTS

Some individuals who have done the ancestral search are surprised to learn about the degree of ethnic variation in their backgrounds and may question the accuracy of the findings. Companies such as Ancestry and 23andme thrive on clients who discover things about their origins that are counterintuitive and often showcase such individuals. Anthropological geneticist Deborah Bolnick has said that the companies giving such specific, precise numbers down to the decimal point are likely not as nuanced, sensitive and fine as they appear to be.

Testing her ancestral origins with several companies, geneticist Tina Hesman Saey found ethnicity estimates that were "all over the European map," as she noted in a 2018 Science News article. National Geographic's Geno 2.0 found that she was 45% Southwestern European. Veritas Genetics pegged her Southwestern European heritage at just 4%, while indicating she's mostly (91.1%) north-central European. The estimates "often didn't match what I know about my family tree," she reported. 23andMe said she was 16.6% Scandinavian while MyHeritage reported no Scandinavian ancestry in her background and said she was 16.9% Italian. As far as she knew, she had no ancestors from Italy or Scandinavia. Ethnicity estimates clearly vary widely depending on which company is doing the testing.

As revealed in Chart 3 those Canadians who often do online ancestral searches are more likely to be very attached to their ethnic group.

GRAPHIC 3. SEARCHED ONLINE FOR RECORDS OR INFORMATION PERTAINING TO MY ANCESTORS AND ATTACHMENT TO MY ETHNIC GROUP



Sources: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, November 2018.

CONCLUSION

We don't know very much about how the discovery of multiple ethnic origins via ancestral testing impacts on the salience of identities. Ancestry.com clients who are showcased in company ads often flaunt some ethnic wardrobe connected to the newly discovered origin(s). But these symbolic displays of ethnic identity may not have much effect on the identity markers that have traditionally conditioned interaction(s).

According to Wade, "researchers have found that a significant percentage of African Americans, European Americans, and Latinos carry ancestry from outside their self-identified ethnicity. The average African-American genome, for example, is nearly a quarter European, and almost 4% of European Americans carry African ancestry."

In the case of the Jewish diaspora, following centuries of migration across Africa, Europe, and Asia, genetic testing has revealed that Jews throughout the world have, to varying degrees, the distinct genetic fingerprints of their non-Jewish neighbours. While Jewish law and custom generally forbade intermarriage, it is evident that such marriages have had a powerful impact on the ethnic mix of present-day Jewry. As Lents (2018) contends "…genetics is a poor proxy for marking the character of a culture. From medieval times through the Shoah (holocaust), few cultural identities were as distinct and cohesive as Jewry."

In North America, genealogy is often presented as a celebration of cultural diversity. While the multiple ratios of ethnic origins are open to question, they nonetheless testify to a degree of mixing across

cultures that is very much underestimated in societies that have traditionally liked to think of identities in singular terms. In some ways, the ancestry craze has served to validate multiple identities and challenged assimilationist models and their accompanying narratives in North America. In that sense, it is a reaffirmation of the importance of multiculturalism in those societies where immigration has played an important role.

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