DIBLINGS ASKING 'WHO AM I?'
SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS, FINDING MORE QUESTIONS

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"Who am I?" is an age-old question. A growing number of people around the world who are looking at this question, through a family lens, are discovering that they are part of a unique, emerging family relationship, as a "dibling." The term *dibling*, which stems from "donor sibling" or "DNA sibling," is someone with whom you share genetic material – from at least one or both parents – resulting from reproductive technologies or fertility treatments.

People's curiosity about their origins has been ignited thanks to the mass digitization of historical documents and increased access to records, including birth records, immigration papers and marriage certificates. The growing availability and affordability of DNA testing has meant more people are spitting into a tube or swabbing a cheek and sending off their genetic material for analysis. Pop culture has provided a mirror of this trend in society through television shows such as *Who Do You Think You Are?*, *Long Lost Family*, *Genealogy Roadshow*, *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* and *Ancestors in the Attic*. Fictitious TV dramas profiling diblings – such as Sisters in Australia or its American remake, *Almost Family* – are also generating popular interest in the dibling phenomenon.

According to estimates published in *MIT Technology Review*[1] in 2019, more than 26 million people have submitted their DNA to the four leading commercial ancestry and health databases (e.g. AncestryDNA and 23andMe). As a result, family

1 Antonio Regalado, "More than 26 million people have taken an at-home ancestry test: The genetic genie is out of the bottle. And it's not going back," *MIT Technology Review* (February 11, 2019). www.technologyreview.com/2019/02/11/103446/more-than-26-million-people-have-taken-an-at-home-ancestry-test.

lore is being rewritten, family mythology is being debunked, decade- or century-old questions are being answered, subsequent questions are being asked, and some previously unknown facts are being revealed. Truth is coming to light about ancestors who had once been hailed as heroes, only for DNA or genealogy to reveal that there was more to the story than what had been passed down from one generation to the next, such as a sister who's actually a mother or a father who's not a blood relative.

DEBUNKING FAMILY LORE

Family lore often glamourizes, exaggerates, or even covers up the truth – including socially unacceptable behaviour, crimes, or dishonour brought upon the family. Family lore reduces stigma, helps foster public acceptance or changes family members' perceptions of a person or event. Consider the story shared at a recent Listening Tour event hosted by the Vanier Institute about a revered late uncle:

> The participant's great-grandmother's brother – a fearless countryman, who was well-respected – was a hard-working farmer and fiercely protective of his family. Family lore claims he was thrown from his horse on his way to help a neighbour during a terrible storm and died tragically on the side of the road, not to be found for days. Since his death he has been hailed as a hero, though now-accessible records reveal that your uncle was an alcoholic and had had several run-ins with the law. His death – though still tragic – was, in fact, the result of a late night at the local watering hole.

And, just like that, the truth is revealed, family stories and identities altered, and the perceptions of others changed, all as a result of access to DNA testing and to public and genealogical records. Our ancestors could never have imagined what would exist one day – for all to see.

A NEW TYPE OF 'FAMILY'

For M. (name withheld to protect privacy), submitting her DNA for testing was just for fun. Though she had recently learned, in her 30s, that the dad she had always known was not her biological father, she had no desire to find the latter. However, like many others, she took the test, shipped it off and waited. When the results arrived, there were no real surprises. Her ancestors came from the countries she expected and easily explained certain physical characteristics. However, within hours, she started receiving notifications that revealed "close DNA matches" from around the world. Within days, the number kept increasing, eventually exceeding 30 – that is, 30 biological half-siblings, previously unknown to her, now confirmed through DNA testing.

"It was quite overwhelming, to be honest," M. stated in a recent interview with the Vanier Institute of the Family. "I never imagined I'd find anyone who was related to me, except for perhaps a distant cousin. I had no reason to think I had multiple diblings."

M.'s family story may seem unique, yet she is not alone in her experience or discovery. Many others are finding new or lost relatives, sometimes asking their parents or extended family awkward questions, and considering tough decisions about whether to foster new relationships with their diblings.

DELAYING MOTHERHOOD IN CANADA

Families in Canada, like elsewhere, are diverse,

complex and ever evolving. Families are formed through various means, such as birth, adoption, coupling, uncoupling or by choice. In Canada, the fertility rate, or average number of children per woman, has been steadily decreasing since 2009, reaching a low point in 2018, at 1.5 children, compared with 3.94 in 1959).[2,3]

Women across the country are increasingly waiting longer to have children. In fact, the fertility rates of women in their early 20s and late 30s flipped over the past 20 years. In 2018, the fertility rate in Canada for women aged 20 to 24 stood at 33.8 live births per 1,000 women, down from 58 per 1,000 in 2000, while the fertility rate in Canada for women aged 35 to 39 was 57.1 live births per 1,000 women, nearly double the rate in 2000 (34 per 1,000).[4,5] Given that many women are delaying having children – either by choice or circumstance – the mean age of mothers at time of delivery was nearly 31 years of age in 2018 (30.7 years), a trend that has been on the rise since the mid-1960s.[6,7]

MOTHERHOOD AND REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY

The choice to delay motherhood for women may be the result of focusing first on post-secondary education and career development – continuing a long-term trend observed over the past several decades.[8] Sometimes *circumstance* – not choice – is the driving factor, such as for those who have not met a partner with whom they want to have a child. As a result, some women are choosing to embark on the journey solo, with recent figures showing that the proportion of babies born to single (never married) women in 2014–2018 (the most recent years in which data is available) hovers around 30%.[9,10] This road to motherhood may include the use of reproductive technologies or adoption, either domestically or internationally (within countries and jurisdictions that allow women to adopt without a partner).

2 Claudine Provencher et al., "Fertility: Overview, 2012 to 2016," *Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 91-209-X (June 5, 2018). www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub//91-209-x/2018001/article/54956-eng.htm.

3 Statistics Canada, *Crude birth rate, age-specific fertility rates and total fertility rate (live births), Canada* (Table: 13-10-0418-01) (page last updated May 22, 2020). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310041801.

4 The Vanier Institute of the Family, "Mother's Day 2019: New Moms Older, More Likely to Be Employed Than in the Past" (May 5, 2019). https://vanierinstitute.ca/mothers-day-2019-new-moms-older-more-likely-to-be-employed-than-in-the-past.

5 Statistics Canada, *Crude birth rate, age-specific fertility rates and total fertility rate (live births)*.

6 Statistics Canada, *Mean age of mother at time of delivery (live births)*, Canada (Table: 13-10-0417-01) (page last updated May 22, 2020). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310041701.

7 Claudine Provencher *et al.*, "Fertility: Overview, 2012 to 2016."

8 The Vanier Institute of the Family, "Mother's Day 2019: New Moms Older, More Likely to Be Employed Than in the Past".

9 Statistics Canada, *Live births, by marital status of mother, Canada* (Table: 13-10-0419-01) (page last updated May 22, 2020). www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310041901.

10 This figure may also include women who are living common-law and who are therefore partnered but not legally married.

Among couples, reproductive technologies and adoption are becoming more common routes to parenthood – particularly among LGBTQ couples. Since the 1980s,[11] the proportion of couples who experience infertility has doubled, now 16% (or roughly 1 in 6 couples). These couples may choose insemination or invitro fertilization with the use of a sperm donor or egg donor, or both, which come with their own DNA and physical traits. For adoptees or adults who do not have information or a relationship with one or both biological parents, DNA testing provides an opportunity to reveal ethnicity, cultural background and affiliations, country of origin and close or distant relatives. As M. stated:

> "At first, I was reluctant to engage with any of these DNA matches. Part of me questioned the accuracy of the testing and I had so many more questions than when I started. I was confused as to how I was connected to these people. Within a few days of getting my results, I had to turn off the notifications on my phone. I just couldn't keep up with all of them. This process led to even more soul-searching. I really had to think about and decide whether I was interested in getting to know these people, whether I was willing to put in the time, learn about them, share things about myself and my life, and genuinely foster relationships. Eventually, I went for it. I began replying to messages, receiving pictures and learning about how each one of my diblings came to be. Each story was so unique. All of a sudden, these 30+ strangers and I were trying to piece together a giant, global puzzle".

CONNECTING WITH YOUR DIBLINGS

For M., deciding to connect with her new family members included creating a list of pros and cons. The pros included the excitement of discovering the biological traits that stood out, whether others had the same interests or aptitudes as she did, and getting the chance to meet people from around the world – all of whom had the same starting point. The cons included managing her own expectations about what and how the relationships would develop (would they be forced or organic?), dealing with how her family would react to this discovery, and taking into account the feelings of the sibling she had grown up with. It also meant considering what all this meant for her biological father's family, since, thanks to the DNA testing, it revealed that he had been married, and fathered and raised children in the area where she was currently living. She ultimately decided that the pros outweighed the cons, and within a few short months, an in-person meeting of some of the local diblings took place:

> "The night before the gathering, I didn't sleep a wink. I was so nervous about what I would learn and wondered whether I had made a mistake. And yet, upon arrival at the venue, I was struck by how familiar some of the other faces were, as if I had seen them before or met them before in a different context. I also couldn't help but notice that some of us had some very similar features, more so than I had expected. Though the first few minutes felt a bit like speed dating or an awkward job interview, the conversation began to flow quite easily afterwards. Since then, we have

11 Public Health Agency of Canada, Fertility (page last updated May 28, 2019). www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/fertility/fertility.html.

met several times and are planning a diblings retreat where all of us come together from around the world".

Though M.'s DNA discovery has a happy ending so far, others who have unlocked the DNA mystery door have dealt with unfortunate or difficult experiences. In a world where access, privacy, Big Data and DNA are colliding at a rapid pace, it is too soon to tell what the next few years will reveal about people's personal histories and ancestry. All we can do is try to prepare ourselves for the unknown, the questions, the answers and the family stories, and whether we should decide to embark on the journey to discover "Who am I?".