WHY ARE CANADIANS RESEARCHING THEIR FAMILY HISTORY?

RESULTS FROM THE CANADIAN GENEALOGY SURVEY

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Interest in family history seems to be growing globally – some would say exploding – and Canadians are no exception. Just over 2,000 Canadians responded to the online Canadian Genealogy Survey, conducted in 2011. Results of the survey revealed that the average number of hours spent on family history in the month previous to the survey was 39, the equivalent of one workweek per month.

Survey respondents also indicated that they attended 12 family history related events, on average, per year. This is quite a commitment to attending formal events, considering that many family history societies do not hold regular meetings over the summer months. In addition, survey respondents revealed that, on average, they had taken nine trips outside their country of residence for the primary purpose of conducting family history research. While these numbers may seem high, they are supported to some extent by results from the Canadians and Their Pasts survey. In that survey, 73% of people who had worked on their family history in the past year said they had visited sites associated with their family's history (compared to just 56% for those who had not worked on their family history in the past year) (Conrad *et al.*, 2013).

When asked to provide the primary reason they started researching their family history, respondents provided a wide variety of answers. Some of the reasons that scholars think typically motivate family historians did appear in our data. For example, 2% of respondents said they conducted family history research to qualify for ancestral society membership, such United Empire Loyalists; 1% said they were attempting to trace the existence of a medical condition within their family; and for 0.3% of Canadian family historians, finding links to rich or famous people was a motivator. But the top four motivators for survey respondents were quite

different from assumptions scholars typically make about family historians' motivations. 22% of people completing the survey said their motivation was to learn about their family, their ancestors and themselves. A 53-year-old man from Springhill, Nova Scotia with 25 years of genealogy experience said, for example: "I wanted to know more about where my ancestors came from and who they were."

The second most frequent reason, given by 13% of respondents, was that they started researching their family history as the result of a family member's influence. A 51-year-old man from Thornhill, Ontario with 20 years of family history experience, said: "My father asked me to continue the research he started." Other family members (e.g., cousins, aunts/uncles) were identified as the source of the influence by 3.1% of respondents, while children or grandchildren were named by 2.9% and grandparents by 2.3% of respondents. Many respondents (7.5%) said they were "just curious" or started family history research "out of curiosity", while 6.5% said they wanted to research a specific person or family line. A 64-year-old woman from Trenton, Ontario with 20 years of family history experience, said: "(I) started with curiosity about my mother's ancestry."

Some informants spoke of "trigger events", such as the death of a parent or planning for a family reunion, as sparking their interest. One woman from Toronto said: "After the death of my parents, I found scattered notes and bits of info on my grandparents and their siblings and decided to sort them out so as to leave them for my children, if they were interested." This orientation towards both the past and the future appeared frequently in our data. A 67-year-old woman from Innisfail, Alberta said: "I wanted to pass along the stories I grew up with, and to learn more about the people who shaped my parents, and then me." And a 58-year-old woman from Calgary identified her reason for starting family history research as: "To research and record our family history for posterity. Elders in the family were dying and with them the stories and knowledge of the history of our family."

To a certain extent, these comments reflect societal changes – the "storytellers" of previous generations are no longer living in the same home as, or even geographically near, their children and grandchildren. The family history, organized and recorded, provides a bridging mechanism for maintaining the family's sense of itself and its past.

Although it was not one of the top reasons for beginning family history research, 2.1% of respondents noted that the impetus behind their decision to research their family history was a general interest in history. It seems that the process of doing family history research gets people even more interested in history; 7.5% of respondents indicated this was the most important outcome of doing family history research. The type of history most frequently mentioned was the history of Canada and then of various home countries. A woman from Hamilton, Ontario with 25 years of experience researching her family history summarized her feelings this way: "(Doing family history) made me more aware of Canada's history and how my ancestors were part of the founding of this country."

When asked to consider what role doing family history played in their lives, 5.3% responded that it was simply a "nice hobby" or an activity that "fills up time" (2.2%). A 64-year-old woman from Ontario with seven years of experience summarized

this point nicely by saying: "Basically it is a challenging hobby." But for others, researching their family history was quite a meaningful activity and in many ways had become central to their identity, both as individuals and members of larger family networks. Many survey respondents identified multiple differences that doing family history had made in their lives. The figures below capture only the first thing they wrote down.

1. A "sense of connection and belonging" within an extended network of kin was identified by 9.6% of respondents.

2. A feeling of gratitude and deep respect for the life experience of their ancestors was the second most frequent difference, mentioned by 8.3% of respondents.

3. A new or increased interest in history was reported by 7.5%.

4. A better sense of "who I am" (as an individual) was noted by 6.7% of family historians.

5. Knowing more about family, in terms of the typical birth, marriage and death information recorded in family trees, was the difference recorded by 5.3% of respondents.

It seems that the impact of doing family history research is felt as much, if not more, with the heart as in the head. Typical comments from respondents included: "It has given me a great deal of pleasure in knowing who I am, (and) where I came from. And an appreciation of my ancestors whose hard work and personal sacrifices made it possible for me to be here!!" (62-year-old man from Amherst, Nova Scotia); "It has been a journey unlike any others I have made and opened vistas beyond what I had dreamed possible." (62 year old woman from Pictou County, Nova Scotia); A 41-year-old woman from Delta, British Columbia said: "(It) makes me feel more connected to my family, which is spread around the country, and also to my family that I never got to know because they were gone before I was born." Her thoughts were echoed by a 52-year-old woman from Toronto who commented: "I feel part of a greater whole and have experienced feelings of endurance, resolve, and diligence in handling life."

There were, of course, some outcomes that might be considered "negative", depending upon your views about getting housework done and marital harmony. For example, a 54-year-old woman from Judique, Nova Scotia said, "Using my time for family history means less time spent housekeeping and it's much more stimulating... My husband feels it takes up too much of my time." Some people even called it an addiction or obsession, although usually they phrased the comment in a humorous way. A 54-year-old woman from Campbell River, B.C., confessed: "It has become an addiction and I spend a huge amount of time on it," while a woman of the same age from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, said: "It is an obsession! It takes up a huge amount of time."

It seems that for many Canadians, time spent researching one's family history is deemed to be "time well spent" and provides a great source of personal satisfaction. Respondents discussed this satisfaction in terms of both intellectual outcomes – new skills learned, the gratification of solving a "puzzle" or "mystery", keeping their mental processes sharp – and social outcomes: meeting new

friends with similar interests, forming bonds with extended family members, and creating something of value to be passed along to future generations.

REFERENCES

Conrad, Margaret, Kadriye Ercikan, Gerald Freisen, Jocelyn Létourneau, D.A. Muise, David Northrup and Peter Seixas (2013), *Canadians and Their Pasts*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.