

Article

What Motivates Family Historians? A Pilot Scale to Measure Psychosocial Drivers of Research into Personal Ancestry

Susan M. Moore ^{1,*}  and Doreen A. Rosenthal ²¹ Department of Psychology, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne 3122, Australia² School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne 3010, Australia; d.rosenthal@unimelb.edu.au

* Correspondence: smoore@swin.edu.au

Abstract: Participation in family history research may be a passing phase for some, but for others, it is a recreational pursuit exciting passionate intensity that goes beyond idle curiosity or short-term interest. In this paper, we explore some of the underlying motives that drive amateur genealogists, including the search for self-understanding, the desire to give something of value to others and the enjoyment of the many intellectual challenges that this hobby can provide. Using data accessed from an online survey of 775 Australian family historians, we developed a reliable and valid measure of the intensity of these psychosocial motives and used research participants' qualitative data to suggest four further motives of interest for future research and measure development.

Keywords: genealogical motivation; family history and identity; family history and altruism; family history and curiosity



Citation: Moore, Susan M., and Doreen A. Rosenthal. 2021. What Motivates Family Historians? A Pilot Scale to Measure Psychosocial Drivers of Research into Personal Ancestry. *Genealogy* 5: 83. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5030083>

Received: 21 July 2021

Accepted: 13 September 2021

Published: 15 September 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Family history has always been a popular pastime, whether it involves drawing up family trees or recording stories from the past. In recent years, the availability of so many records online, and the possibility of finding DNA matches, has escalated this 'hobby' into a worldwide craze. Amateur genealogists can spend many hours and often a significant amount of money drawing up family pedigrees and researching the lives of their forebears. What is the attraction? Sometimes the reasons are practical and short-term, such as validating a family story, writing a eulogy or helping a child with a homework assignment. However, a surprising number of amateur genealogists find themselves 'addicted', such as one who described her hobby as "*an all-consuming passion that's hard to walk away from . . .*" (Moore et al. 2021, p. 2). What psychosocial factors might motivate this intense interest, raising it to something beyond an occasional recreational pursuit? The major aim of this study was to develop a measure of the nature and intensity of psychosocial motives that drive family historians to persist in their quest to discover more about the ancestral past.

One motivator for exploring family history, popularised by the 'Who do you think you are?' television programs, is the search for self-understanding—finding your 'true self' or identity through knowing more about where you come from, not only in terms of individual ancestors but in relation to cultural heritage (e.g., Bottero 2012; Darongkamas and Lorenc 2008; Walters 2020). The notion of identity, popularised by psychologist Eric Erikson (1980) refers to our sense of who we are and where we're going; a personal narrative that we create as we experience the vagaries of life and come to understand our strengths, weaknesses and the forces that have shaped us. McAdams (2001) argues that this personal narrative provides a sense of unity, meaning and purpose in life. Bottero (2015) extends the idea further to include not only self-understanding, but cultural identification and connectedness to others. Additionally, understanding the lives of our ancestors awakens

us to the history of how people lived in the past, a lens through which understanding of one's present circumstances may be enhanced (Kramer 2011a; Lambert 1996; Parham 2008).

Some family historians do their 'identity work' by very specifically searching for a lost relative, biological parent or sibling (Hertz 1998; Müller and Perry 2001; Sobol and Cardiff 1983), or for clues about their medical history and inherited risk factors (Birt et al. 2014; Spector 2013). Others take a more exploratory approach, collecting stories of ancestors and thinking about them in relation to a general family narrative or personal identity development. For example, discovery that one's ancestral 'story' involves overcoming hardships by direct action can provide personal inspiration in current difficult times, while noting the character flaws of our forebears can be an impetus toward avoiding certain pitfalls in life, such as addictive behaviours. We predict that those whose family history research is intensely motivated by the quest for self-discovery are likely to be those who are less secure in their sense of self and, thus, more likely to demonstrate lower levels of emotional stability than those less motivated by identity concerns. Possible reasons include that they are missing some crucial information about family (for example the identity of a parent or grandparent) or that they have made discoveries or experienced events that shake their sense of self, such as migrating to a new country, a relationship breakdown or the uncovering of a distasteful family secret.

On a different note, there is also research suggesting that many family historians see themselves as 'kin keepers', inspired by wanting to acknowledge and honour their ancestors by passing on their stories to a new generation, often with the goal of strengthening family feeling and family ties (Bishop 2005; Chance 1988; Kramer 2011b; Walters 2020) or 'leaving a legacy' to one's descendants that helps new generations to understand themselves. Both Erikson (1980) and McAdams (2001) theorise the importance for older adults of establishing a sense of generativity, by which they mean making a contribution toward the next generation through nurturing and mentoring of young people and/or providing some kind of legacy for future generations. It has been argued that family history research is a way of fulfilling this drive toward generativity, in that by passing down their stories, people experience the satisfaction of knowing they are contributing to the lives of those who will succeed them (Hadis 2002).

Indeed, research has shown that intergenerational narratives shared within families are positively related to well-being among adolescent children (Duke et al. 2003, 2008; Merrill and Fivush 2016) and also to stronger family bonding, satisfaction and functioning (Koenig Kellas 2007). It is feasible that the desire to share their stories with family may be more evident among family historians who have developed a stronger sense of generativity, as well as among those who have children and grandchildren with whom they share a common ancestry.

A third psychosocial motive that has been postulated for intense interest in family history research is the cognitive challenge of a complex puzzle to be solved, one that requires new learning, organisation and persistence. A few studies suggest that the detective work of the genealogical research process becomes, for some, an end in itself, with genealogists often reporting elation and other strong emotions as they discover a new link or break down a 'brick wall' (Bishop 2008; Darby and Clough 2013; Hershkovitz and Hardof-Jaffe 2017). Shaw (2020), in a large-scale study of the motives of Australian family historians, described the largest group of her sample (44%) as 'seekers' who were trying to solve a mystery or puzzle associated with their heritage. Additionally, curiosity and love of history were key motivators of a further 16%. An expectation regarding this cognitive challenge motive is that it is likely to be stronger among those with higher educational levels.

The current research was designed to describe the psychosocial motives driving amateur family historians and to pilot an internally reliable measure of the strength of these motives. The construct validity of the measure was examined through factor analysis and correlations with demographic and personality variables. It was postulated that a valid measure of motivational strength would correlate with time spent doing family history re-

search and the perceived importance attributed to this leisure activity, and that motivational factors would show meaningful relationships with personality and demographic data.

The study focusses on non-professional (i.e., amateur) family historians, because this is a group who participate in genealogy research for motives other than to earn a living. Studying this group means that there is less likelihood of conflating psychosocial motives with working life constraints.

A measure of psychosocial motives for and strength of participation in family history research has the potential to be useful as a counselling tool. For example, clients can be made aware that their family history research might assist—or present possible setbacks—to managing and achieving life and relationship goals, such as healing broken relationships, coming to terms with past trauma, or finding life meaning (e.g., Bohanek et al. 2006; Champagne 1990; Green 2013; Merrill and Fivush 2016). Getting counselling clients to focus on their family history through the use of a motive measure can be a stimulus for life review (e.g., Bhar 2017) or point the way to processes for dealing with grief following the death of a loved one (e.g., Darongkamas and Lorenc 2008). Additionally, it can stimulate analysis of how negative behaviour patterns of ancestors can be repeated through generations—an insight that can assist in breaking maladaptive patterns such as domestic violence or addiction (e.g., Allen 2013). The motive measure may also be useful for educational planning, such as assessing student interests, or for marketing of genealogical products and further research.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The selection criteria for participants were that they must be Australian citizens or residents, 18 years or over, and engaged in family history research as a leisure pursuit (rather than a profession). Data from those who did not meet the selection criteria or who did not complete the Motivations Scale (see Method) were not included in analysis. Eligible surveys were completed by 775 adult Australian men and women who self-described as amateur family historians. They were aged between 21 and 93 years, with a median age of 63 years. The majority ($N = 657$; 85%) were women, probably a reasonably accurate reflection of the gender balance in this area. All states of Australia were represented, with the majority from the most populous states, Victoria (35.5%) and NSW (30.1%). Given the predominance of older age groups, it is not surprising that just over half lived with a partner only (51.5%), 18.0% lived alone, and just 18.8% still had children living at home (the remainder were in a variety of different living situations).

Most participants were married or in a long-term relationship (71.8%), 11.5% were single, 11.1% were divorced or separated, and 5.6% were widowed. Most were born in Australia (91.7%) or the UK (5.7%), limiting the possibility of cross-cultural comparisons within this study. They were a highly educated group, with 53.5% having completed a university degree or post-graduate studies. Just over 80% had at least one child, and 50.4% had at least one grandchild. Most (88.3%) had at least one sibling, and 14.1% had one or more half-siblings. Interestingly, 22 people in the sample (2.8%) self-identified as adopted or conceived via donor egg or sperm.

The average amount of time participants spent per week on family history research varied widely from between 5 h or fewer (35.7%), to 6–10 h (27.5%), 11–20 h (19.8%), and more than 20 h (17.1%). When asked to compare the perceived importance of their family history activity to other leisure activities, only 4.2% viewed it as less important, 36.3% as 'about the same', 35.4% as more important, and 24.1% as much more important.

2.2. Ethics

Ethics approval of the project was obtained in July 2018 from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the first author's university, following our submission of materials showing how informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality would be assured (detailed information statement to all participants, anonymous survey, potentially identifying infor-

mation removed from any published quotes). Non-coercive recruitment processes were used, such that participants had to 'opt in' to complete the survey after viewing an advertisement, Facebook post, or general email from their family history or other interest group. Permission was given for the survey to be conducted in Australia only, given that other countries may have different legislation, regulations, permissions, and customs associated with data collection online. Data collection from other countries would require overseas contact persons to negotiate these constraints, and this was considered beyond the scope of our pilot project.

2.3. Recruitment

An online survey was set up using Qualtrics software. We contacted major genealogical societies throughout Australia, describing the project and asking them to share the survey link. We also placed a brief description of the project and the survey link on several Facebook pages dedicated to family history and DNA research. Additionally, the survey link was shared with students in the University of Tasmania's Diploma of Family History course and on the Australian Psychological Society's members website. The survey remained open for six weeks. The selection criteria were: aged 18 years or older; currently live in Australia; self-describe as 'amateur family historian' (defined as engaging in family history research in an unpaid or mostly unpaid capacity).

2.4. Measures

The following measures relevant to the current analysis were part of a longer online survey of family historian characteristics.

2.5. Psychosocial Motivations for Family History Research (Motivation Scale)

We designed a list of possible motives for engaging in family history research by examining motives suggested in the current literature, and brainstorming items associated with these motives. The list of items was piloted by asking several active family historian researchers to comment and make suggestions about content and format. Feedback was incorporated into a final scale of 20 items, this number considered as being of manageable length while adequately covering a range of content. The scale was designed to measure the strength of motivation to research family history, in general and potentially across different motivational categories.

Participants were given the following instructions: "Below are some reasons that people participate in family history research. Please rate the importance of these reasons for you, in the table below". The rating scale comprised 'very important' (scored 2), 'somewhat important' (scored 1), or 'not important' (scored 0). Item 20, 'other reasons' was not scored, but if participants checked this as either somewhat or very important, they were asked to list these reasons. This open-ended option provided the opportunity for us to collect qualitative data and to potentially develop the scale for future research, in an area where previous research has been limited. The scale used is presented in full in Table 1.

Table 1. Per cent responses to reasons for participating in family history ($N = 775$).

I Participate in Family History Research:		Very Important %	Somewhat Important %	Not Important %
1	It's intellectually stimulating	59.1	33.5	7.4
2	To meet like-minded people	13.3	48.4	38.3
3	To give something to my family	49.3	42.1	8.6
4	To bring my family together	17.0	48.4	34.6
5	To make a contribution to future generations	58.8	34.1	7.1
6	To acknowledge those who came before me	75.0	20.9	4.1
7	To find out more about who I am	61.7	30.3	8.0
8	To improve my self-esteem and sense of worth	7.0	27.2	65.8
9	To discover why I am like I am	16.8	47.5	35.7
10	To find out more about my ethnic background	33.3	44.8	21.9

Table 1. Cont.

I Participate in Family History Research:		Very Important %	Somewhat Important %	Not Important %
11	Curiosity about my roots	76.3	22.5	1.3
12	It is something to talk about to others	10.1	48.4	41.5
13	It keeps my mind active	57.9	34.1	8.0
14	To find out more about my health history and risk factors	9.9	34.8	55.2
15	To solve a family mystery or prove a family story	39.7	33.5	26.7
16	To find a lost relative	25.2	32.4	42.5
17	To become a professional family historian	9.9	21.4	68.6
18	To use my talents and skills	43.7	41.3	15.0
19	Because I love history	68.0	24.8	7.2
20	Other reasons (if you have other reasons please list them below)	12.3	8.8	79.0

2.6. Demographic Data

Participants were asked to respond to survey items concerning their age, gender, educational and relationship status, family characteristics, living situation, country of birth, whether they were adopted or donor-conceived, whether they had undertaken a DNA test, number of hours per week spent researching family history, and the perceived importance of their family history research in relation to other leisure activities.

2.7. Personality

Two measures of personality were used: the first to obtain a broad picture of the strength of major personality characteristics among this sample of family historian researchers and the second to target the extent to which different motives for conducting family history research relate to generativity, a developmental characteristic associated with the desire to provide for younger generations through nurturing, mentoring, and leaving a legacy.

- (a) Big Five Personality Inventory (Shortened Version). The 10-item short version of the Big Five Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; [Costa and McCrae 1992](#)) was used ([Rammstedt and John 2007](#)). This scale is designed to measure personality through five factors, which have been described as its key overarching variables, these being extraversion (sociable and outgoing), agreeableness (compliant, trusting, and warm), conscientiousness (organised and strong work ethic), neuroticism (anxious, opposite to emotional stability) and openness (enjoys new experiences, creative, and nonjudgmental) ([Costa and McCrae 1992](#)). The shortened scale has two items each for each factor and has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity across several studies ([Rammstedt 2007](#); [Rammstedt et al. 2020](#); [Rammstedt and John 2007](#)). Respondents are asked to self-describe (I see myself as someone who is . . .) in relation to 10 words or phrases (e.g., relaxed; gets nervous easily). There are five response options ranging from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (5). One item is reversed for each personality factor.
- (b) Generativity. The generativity scale is an eight-item scale based on Erikson's description of generativity as an individual's perception that they have engaged in activities that nurture the next generation or create things that will outlast them ([Moore and Rosenthal 2014](#)). Items are designed to cover the range of general life domains in which one can make a contribution, as well as an individual's overview of the extent to which they assess their life as worthwhile and productive (e.g., "So far my life has been worthwhile; I have made a contribution to society through my family"). Responses can range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Items are summed to form a generativity scale with a possible range of 8–40. The scale shows high alpha reliability in the current study (0.86) and there is evidence of strong alpha reliability and construct validity from a previous study ([Moore and Rosenthal 2014](#)).

2.8. Analyses

The motives items were factor analysed. Scales were developed for the total measure of motive strength and the subscale factors. These scales/subscales were assessed for internal reliability and construct validity. The qualitative data derived from the 'other' response was examined to ascertain whether respondents identified motives not assessed in our pilot scale.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the per cent response to each item on the Motivation Scale. Curiosity (item 11), love of history (item 15), acknowledging ancestors (item 6), and 'finding out more about who I am' (item 7) were the most popular reasons given for participating in family history. Most items were rated as somewhat or very important by more than half the participants, the exceptions being item 8 (improving self-esteem), item 14 (finding out about health risks), and item 17 (becoming a professional family historian).

The 19 items were subjected to a Principal Components factor analysis with Varimax Rotation. The Scree test suggested that a three-factor solution most economically and meaningfully grouped the data. Three items with cross loadings were removed (Items 2, 8, and 12). The remaining 16 items were re-analysed and produced three distinct factors (shown with factor loadings in Table 2), which together accounted for 46.23% of the variance of the items.

Table 2. Rotated component matrix for factor analysis of the Psychosocial Motivations for Family History Research Scale.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
To find out more about my ethnic background	0.675		
To find a lost relative	0.664		
To solve a family mystery/disprove a family story	0.641		
To discover reasons why I am like I am	0.626		
To find out more about health history/risk factors	0.569		
To find out more about who I am	0.547		
Curiosity about my roots	0.472		
To give something to my family		0.809	
To make a contribution to future generations		0.782	
To bring my family together		0.712	
To acknowledge who came before me		0.612	
To use my talents and skills			0.778
It keeps my mind active			0.727
Because it is intellectually stimulating			0.715
Because I love history			0.536
To become a professional family historian			0.452

Factor 1 (17.39% of the rotated variance) comprised seven items relating to being motivated by the desire to find out more about oneself and one's ancestral/cultural influences. It was labelled *Self-Understanding Motive*. Factor 2 (14.94% of the variance) consisted of four items relating to altruistic motives for engaging in family history, for example the desire to contribute to future generations. It was labelled *Altruism Motive*. Factor 3 (five items, 13.90% of the variance) concerned the intellectual challenges of family history research, for example keeping the mind active. This factor was labelled *Cognitive Challenge*.

Scales were formed by adding the ratings of items that made up the factors. The Self-Understanding Motive scale comprised items 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, and 16. The Altruism Motive scale comprised items 3, 4, 5, and 6, and the Cognitive Challenge scale comprised items 1, 3, 17, 18, and 19. The Total Motivation scale was the sum of all items except 2, 8, and 12, which were removed from the final version because of their cross loadings.

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, possible ranges, and alpha reliability coefficients of the total scale and the subscales. Reliabilities were considered adequate for research purposes, although the alpha for Cognitive Challenge is a little low. Conven-

tionally, in test development, an alpha level of 0.7 and above is considered satisfactory, while 0.8 and above is considered high; however, a range of qualitative descriptors has been used for this index. Several writers have described alphas of 0.6 to 0.69 as ‘adequate’ or ‘acceptable’, the implication being that a higher level of the index would increase trust (Taber 2018). Alphas were not improved by the removal of items.

Table 3. Motive Scale Statistics.

	No. Items	Mean	SD	Possible Range	Alpha
Motive Strength (total scale)	16	19.50	5.31	0–32	0.80
Factor 1 Self Understanding Motive	7	7.71	3.03	0–14	0.74
Factor 2 Altruism Motive	4	5.46	1.91	0–8	0.76
Factor 3 Cognitive Challenge Motive	5	6.33	2.17	0–10	0.68

Intercorrelations between subscales were as follows: Self-Understanding and Altruism, 0.42; Self-Understanding and Cognitive Challenge, 0.28; Altruism and Cognitive Challenge, 0.25. These moderate intercorrelations indicate that while the subscales were somewhat related, they are also relatively independent.

Construct Validity

Table 4 shows correlations between the motive scales and several demographic and personality variables.

Table 4. Correlations between factors, demographic and personality variables.

Factors	Strength Motive	Self Understanding Motive	Altruism Motive	Cognitive Challenge Motive
Age	−0.13 *	−0.12 *	−0.02	−0.13 *
Gender (1 = M, 2 = F)	0.14 *	0.15 *	0.06	0.08
Education	−0.06	−0.14 *	−0.09	0.12 *
No. children	0.07	0.05	0.15 *	−0.03
No. grandchildren	0.04	0.04	0.10 *	−0.04
Half-sibs?	0.07	0.15 *	0.01	−0.05
Adopted?	0.06	0.12 *	0.02	−0.03
Importance of FH	24 *	0.13 *	0.17 *	0.26 *
Hrs/week on FH	0.06	0.00	0.03	0.11 *
DNA test?	0.07	0.11 *	0.02	0.01
Generativity	0.21 *	0.09	0.24 *	0.18 *
Extraversion	0.05	0.06	0.08	−0.04
Agreeableness	−0.02	−0.05	0.05	0.00
Conscientiousness	0.12 *	0.05	0.14 *	0.10 *
Emotional stability	−0.08	−0.11 *	−0.03	−0.03
Openness	0.10 *	0.08	0.11 *	0.05

Notes: * $p < 0.01$; FH = family history.

With respect to the total scale, those who expressed stronger motives to research family history were significantly younger (within an older population), more likely to be female, and to rate their family history hobby as relatively more important than other leisure activities. Interestingly, however, time spent on family history did not correlate with total motivational strength, only to the Cognitive Challenge subscale. In terms of personality and developmental stage, greater motive strength was associated with higher levels of conscientiousness, openness, and generativity.

With respect to the subscales, those who scored higher on any of the three motivational factors were also more likely to rate their family history hobby as relatively more important than their other leisure pursuits. On other variables, however, the profiles differed.

Those with stronger motives to search for self-understanding were also younger and less educated than the sample as a whole. They were more likely to be female, have half-siblings, be adopted or donor-conceived, have taken a genealogical DNA test, and be somewhat less emotionally stable than the rest of the sample.

Those characterised by stronger altruistic motives for their family history research did not differ from the rest of the sample on age, gender, or education but they were likely to have more children and grandchildren than those with weaker altruistic motives. High altruism was associated with a stronger sense of generativity plus greater conscientious and openness to experience.

Finally, those more strongly motivated by the cognitive challenges of family history research were younger, better educated, and spent more time on their genealogical hobby than those with lower levels of this motive. These ‘genealogical detectives’ were characterised by high generativity and conscientiousness.

Twenty-one per cent of the sample rated ‘other’ motives as very or somewhat important as drivers of their family history research, resulting in 163 (mostly very brief) descriptions of such motives. The initial stimulus for taking an interest in family history was frequently mentioned. People said they were challenged to engage in family history research after events such as “when my father died”, “because my daughter had a school project”, or “after I inherited a box full of old family photos”. We chose not to categorise these stimuli as psychosocial motives; although they may account for getting started, they do not explain persistence with the hobby.

Most of the remaining responses were a restatement of one of the three motives already described, or a combination of these, sometimes with specific family examples or stories attached. For example, different aspects of self-understanding were mentioned, including personal, cultural, and biological identity (respectively), as shown in the quotes below (responding to the stem, I participate in family history research):

To really try to understand my place in the world

I am Aboriginal so it is important to discover and uncover those who were taken from us, understand our huge mob and extensive family connections.

I am an adoptee and wanted to find out who my father and mother were and also to find out about my biological parents’ background and where they came from.

Altruistic motives were also commonly mentioned, for example:

It gives me a buzz when I find a relative, or when helping others with their research—i.e., brick walls. I love it when I can break down a brick wall for someone, it gives them great pleasure and me also.

I am simply interested in where we came from and would like to pass that information on to future generations in our family.

I want, in at least some small way, to honour those who went before me by telling their stories.

Thirdly, the cognitive challenge motive was reiterated frequently, for example:

I enjoy the challenge.

I love the intellectual challenge of family research, the insights I gain into ancestors’ lives in their country of origin and in Australia, and the historical context in which they lived.

I love a mystery and want to solve as many family mysteries as I can. I am very curious and want to satisfy that in me.

A combination of the three motives occurred in some responses:

I am an only child and feel that family trees encourage me to understand my family’s lives. I also love the chase, the problem-solving part gives me a pat on the back that once I retired, wasn’t there anymore. But my strongest reason is that I love my family, I knew

two great grandmothers, and it shows me a young person was there inside all the time. I'm seeing and understanding this now.

Were any new reasons for participating in family history research revealed? A few respondents gave examples of motives that we had not included in our measure. We isolated four different reasons, each of which was mentioned by more than one person (but fewer than 10). The reasons were:

(a) Spiritual or life-meaning motives. These responses mentioned a specific religion, or some spiritual or transcendental reason for engaging in family history research. For example:

My paternal grandmother read tea leaves and tarot cards and my maternal grandmother could intuit future events. Both my parents were Spiritualists able to "see" and "hear" messages from beyond the veil. My oldest daughter is now a professional psychic. Those of us in our family who follow this tradition believe we have an ongoing connection to those ancestors who have passed on and it stimulates our interest in their lives.

I'm getting older, and family history is part of my wondering about why are we all here/what's life all about?

I went to a clairvoyant and she talked about my family members that had passed over. I wanted to know something about them and 22 years later still finding out information.

I am a Latter-Day Saint and it is important to us to know our ancestry.

(b) Comfort motives. Comfort was viewed as a motive for family history participation by several people. These feelings seemed to go beyond the relaxation that is generally provided by hobbies and included relief from strong negative emotions, such as those associated with serious illness and grief. For example:

It is a major stress relieving hobby—you have to concentrate to do it well so you forget other life pressures.

I am terminally ill although I wasn't when I started. I find it gives me comfort.

I have lived with chronic illness for 33 years. It has been a life saver when times are tough. I can focus on research and forget about problems.

My father passed away suddenly then three close relatives also died within six weeks. I didn't want to answer the phone anymore. But this is when I started looking for deceased people [in the family tree]. It helped me come to terms with the loss of my father.

(c) Making social connections. Another motive for persisting with family history research was the enjoyment of the social connections made. We had included two items relating to social connections in the initial measure, but they did not form a clear factor. Inclusion of more items tapping this concept may be advisable, given that there were several different aspects of social connection mentioned, including getting to know other amateur family historians, becoming more engaged with the professional genealogical community, and meeting previously unknown relatives. Examples include being motivated to engage in family history because:

I enjoy being part of the genealogical community.

For social purposes: giving an infrastructure or reason for meeting and interacting with distant relations.

I attend local, state, national and international conferences now and meet a wide range of likeminded people. It gives me more opportunity to make connections that weren't around when I started.

(d) Travel enhancement. Finally, several people commented on how their family history research enhanced their travel experiences and perceived this as a motive for continuing their research. For example:

It makes travel more interesting by merging historical context into places you travel and if you specifically travel for family history it brings alive the context of past times (and can make our modern life pressures seem trivial in comparison to the barriers faced by ancestors).

[It's] a reason to travel. For geographical and nature study reasons: exploring beautifully placed old cemeteries with their own wild gardens in far flung places. For a sense of belonging in a place: to be driving through a town or even a street and noting that that's where a certain relative lived or be driving past a cemetery where another relative is buried.

I have travelled all over Britain to where my ancestors come from and walked the streets they walked, stayed on the islands they lived on, walked the graveyards, visited the churches, and enriched my travels in the process. And now I'm "hooked"!

4. Discussion

In this study, three psychosocial motives for engaging in family history research were described and assessed, and scales were developed to measure their strength. The motives were conceptualised as relating to underlying and relatively persistent psychological processes rather than to initiating events that led to short-term interest only, for example the need to write a eulogy or help a child with a school assignment (although events of this type may also trigger longer-term engagement with genealogical research). The measure of motive strength and its factorially obtained subscales of motive strength in specific areas (Self-Understanding Motive, Altruism Motive, and Cognitive Challenge) all showed adequate Cronbach alpha reliabilities, although piloting with additional items might be worthwhile to strengthen these reliabilities further, particularly for Cognitive Challenge.

The total scale and the subscales also showed evidence of construct validity. As might be expected, higher scores on each of the four measures related to greater perceived importance of participants' family history engagement in comparison with their other hobbies and interests. Additionally, the subscales demonstrated differing patterns of association with demographic and personality variables that were consistent with the different motivational constructs we were aiming to measure, as described below.

Individuals whose motives toward self-understanding were stronger were also more likely to be adopted, have half-siblings, and/or have had a DNA test. These associations independently suggest a lack of knowledge about biological and ancestral roots (for example, possibly unknown biological parents or grandparents). The finding of lower levels of emotional stability among those with higher scores on the self-understanding motive fits with the notion that there may be some distress associated with lack of knowledge about one's ancestral and cultural background. The lack of knowledge may point to feelings of not belonging and of not being sure of one's place in the world, and even a weakened sense of identity.

Higher scores on the altruism motive were characteristic of those who had more descendants and who were more generative, that is, oriented toward assisting and leaving a legacy for the next generation. The higher levels of conscientiousness and openness to experience of these individuals also points to a sense of personal maturity that might reasonably characterise those with the psychosocial resources to contribute toward the welfare of others, particularly with activities that strengthen family ties.

Finally, those more strongly motivated by the cognitive challenges of family history research tended to be more highly educated and to spend more time on their genealogical activities; this pattern of associations is consistent with the motivational construct we were attempting to measure with the Cognitive Challenge subscale. It indicates an interest in intellectual endeavours, puzzles and mysteries, and the at-times addictive quality of these interests.

The question arises as to whether the three motives we delineated and measured are adequate to describe the major psychosocial motivating forces behind strong engagement with family history. Certainly, each of the scale items was viewed by survey participants as

an important or very important reason for participating in their hobby, which for the majority of the sample was viewed as more important than their other leisure pursuits. Given the opportunity to indicate other major motives, study participants mostly redescribed those motives we had already assessed, or indicated an initial stimulus for beginning their genealogical research rather than a motive for continued engagement. Only a small number of people described motives for their genealogical research that were different from our initial conceptualisations.

However, it may be of value in further research to expand our pilot measure through the inclusion of items that could form subscales to assess the four additional motives described in the qualitative data: spiritual/life meaning motives, comfort motives, making social connections, and travel enhancement. With respect to social connections, we had included two items relating to this motive/reason in the original measure, but they did not form a clear factor (nor were they assessed as very important overall). As mentioned previously, several more social connection items could be added to our scale in order to tap various aspects of this concept. Items could include the desire to meet previously unknown relatives, make new friendships, join groups with like-minded interests and engage in professional networking. Social connection is a motive underlying many if not most leisure activities. Unless one is seeking a specific living relative, it may not seem an obvious stimulus for starting out genealogical research, but the plethora of interest and support groups in this area suggest it may provide a motive to persist.

As well as for social connections, items assessing spiritual/religious, comfort/stress relief, and travel enhancement motives could be developed through attention to the qualitative research described above, along with brainstorming or further surveying of family historians. Using a new participant sample, rating and factor analysis of a new, longer scale of around 50 or more items could assess the viability of the original factors and the existence of new ones. The comfort motive is particularly interesting from the point of view of more widely incorporating family history discussion and research into counselling practice. The potential of genealogy to assist individuals in dealing with trauma, grief, and life transitions has been recognised in the literature (e.g., [Champagne 1990](#); [Darongkamas and Lorenc 2008](#)) and has also been noted by some of our research participants. Development of this aspect of a revised motives scale could both highlight and assess to what extent family history research contributes to mental health outcomes, especially among older individuals, for whom the value of life review and reminiscence has been demonstrated ([Bhar 2017](#)).

Our study is limited in so far as our sample, while large, comprised Australian residents only, most of them from older age groups. Additionally, the multiculturalism of Australian society was not reflected in the sample, with almost all participants having been born in Australia. We did not examine cultural background in a more general way, for example through assessing religion, perceived ethnicity, or parents' and grandparents' countries of birth, nor were we able to compare Australian data with that from other countries. We did not examine (or ask about) race or indigenous background. These limitations are important because genetic connections ("blood ties") may not be as significant to feelings of identity and belongingness in some cultures as they are in others, for example in cultures where parenting duties are shared across a tribe, clan, or neighbourhood, or cultures where identity is as much tied to place as it is to parentage. Further, the honouring of ancestors may play a more important role in strongly religious cultures than it does in those that are more secular, given that most religions emphasise respect for one's forebears. Examples include the fourth commandment of the Judeo-Christian religions and the filial piety and obedience expectations of Confucianism. Further research could, for example, examine popularity and motivation to conduct family history research among cultures differing on dimensions such as religiosity, individualism/collectivism, and parenting styles, as well as among younger age groups.

Despite these limitations, we believe our scale provides a starting point for further study of the intensity and differentiation of motives to research one's ancestry, and to

examine how these motives relate to characteristics of the researcher and to the range of both positive and negative psychosocial outcomes they derive from their searches. To date, we know little about genealogy as a leisure pursuit and how it compares to other hobbies in terms of its contribution to self-understanding and mental health. It is hoped that the measure we have piloted will be of use to other researchers who wish to build on the recent work of Moore et al. (2021), Shaw (2020), and Walters (2020) in examining the psychology underpinning this popular pastime.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed equally to the conceptualisation of this paper. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Swinburne University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol code 2018/242; date of approval: 19 July 2018).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Queries about data can be directed to Emeritus Professor Susan Moore, e-mail: smooore@swin.edu.au.

Acknowledgments: We thank those genealogical organisations who assisted us in recruiting study participants and the Australian Psychological Society and the University of Tasmania Diploma of Family History staff who posted links to the study on their websites. We also thank the study participants for their thoughtful contributions, and research assistant Alex Poll who helped us set up the survey on Qualtrics and in many other ways.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Allen, David M. 2013. The Historical Backdrop of Family Dysfunction. Family Dysfunction and Mental Health Blog. Available online: <http://davidmallenmd.blogspot.com/2013/06/the-historical-backdrop-of-family.html> (accessed on 8 August 2021).
- Bhar, Sunil. 2017. Reminiscence therapy. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*. Edited by A. Wenzel. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, pp. 2848–49.
- Birt, Linda, Jon D. Emery, A. Toby Prevost, Stephen Sutton, and Fiona M. Walter. 2014. Psychological impact of family history risk assessment in primary care: A mixed methods study. *Family Practice* 31: 409–18. [CrossRef]
- Bishop, Ronald. 2005. “The essential force of the clan”: Developing a collecting-inspired ideology of genealogy through textual analysis. *Journal of Popular Culture* 38: 990–1010. [CrossRef]
- Bishop, Ronald. 2008. In the grand scheme of things: An exploration of the meaning of genealogical research. *Journal of Popular Culture* 41: 393–412. [CrossRef]
- Bohanek, Jennifer, Kelly Marin, Robyn Fivush, and Marshall Duke. 2006. Family narrative interaction and children’s sense of self. *Family Process* 45: 39–54. [CrossRef]
- Bottero, Wendy. 2012. Who do you think they were? How family historians make sense of social position and inequality in the past. *British Journal of Sociology* 63: 54–74. [CrossRef]
- Bottero, Wendy. 2015. Practising family history: ‘Identity’ as a category of social practice. *British Journal of Sociology* 66: 534–56. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Champagne, Delight E. 1990. The genealogical search as a counseling technique. *Journal of Counseling & Development* 69: 85–87.
- Chance, Sue. 1988. The psychological functions of genealogy in the aged. *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology* 1: 113–15. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Costa, Paul T., and Robert R. McCrae. 1992. *NEO-PI-R Professional Manual*. Odessa: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Darby, Paul, and Paul Clough. 2013. Investigating the information-seeking behaviour of genealogists and family historians. *Journal of Information Science* 39: 73–84. [CrossRef]
- Darongkamas, Jurai, and Louise Lorenc. 2008. Going back to our roots. *Psychologist* 21: 1022–25.
- Duke, Marshall, Robyn Fivush, Amber Lazarus, and Jennifer Bohanek. 2003. *Of Ketchup and Kin: Dinnertime Conversations as a Major Source of Family Knowledge, Family Adjustment, and Family Resilience (Working Paper 027–03)*. Atlanta: Center for the Study of Myth and Ritual in American Life, Emory University.
- Duke, Marshall, Amber Lazarus, and Robyn Fivush. 2008. Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy* 45: 268–72. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Erikson, Erik. 1980. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Green, Anna. 2013. Intergenerational family stories: Private, parochial, pathological? *Journal of Family History* 38: 387–402. [CrossRef]

- Hadis, Martin. 2002. From Generation to Generation: Family Stories, Computers and Genealogy. Master thesis, Media Arts and Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA. Available online: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.475.5115&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (accessed on 1 June 2021).
- HersHKovitz, Arnon, and Sharon Hardof-Jaffe. 2017. Genealogy as a lifelong learning endeavor. *Leisure/Loisir* 41: 535–60. [CrossRef]
- Hertz, Joan E. 1998. In pursuit of authenticity: An adoptee's quest. *Modern Psychoanalysis* 23: 103–12.
- Koenig Kellas, Jody. 2007. Family ties: Communicating identity through jointly told family stories. *Communication Monographs* 72: 365–89.
- Kramer, Anne-Maree. 2011a. Mediatizing memory: History, affect and identity in Who Do You Think You Are? *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14: 428–45. [CrossRef]
- Kramer, Anne-Maree. 2011b. Kinship, affinity and connectedness: Exploring the role of genealogy in personal lives. *Sociology* 45: 379–95. [CrossRef]
- Lambert, Ronald D. 1996. The family historian and temporal orientations towards the ancestral past. *Time & Society* 5: 115–43.
- McAdams, Dan. 2001. The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology* 5: 100–22. [CrossRef]
- Merrill, Natalie, and Robyn Fivush. 2016. Intergenerational narratives and identity across development. *Developmental Review* 40: 72–92. [CrossRef]
- Moore, Susan, and Doreen Rosenthal. 2014. Personal growth, grandmother engagement and satisfaction among non-custodial grandmothers. *Ageing and Mental Health* 9: 136–43. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Moore, Susan, Doreen Rosenthal, and Rebecca Robinson. 2021. *The Psychology of Family History: Exploring Our Genealogy*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.
- Müller, Ulrich, and Barbara Perry. 2001. Adopted persons' search for and contact with their birth parents I: Who searches and why? *Adoption Quarterly* 4: 5–37. [CrossRef]
- Parham, Angel Adams. 2008. Race, memory and family history. *Social Identities* 14: 13–32. [CrossRef]
- Rammstedt, Beatrice. 2007. The 10-Item Big Five Inventory: Norm values and investigation of sociodemographic effects based on a German population representative sample. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment* 23: 193–201. [CrossRef]
- Rammstedt, Beatrice, and Oliver P. John. 2007. Measuring personality in one minute or less A 10-item short version of the Big Five Inventory in English and German. *Journal of Research in Personality* 41: 203–12. [CrossRef]
- Rammstedt, Beatrice, Daniel Danner, Christopher J. Soto, and Oliver P. John. 2020. Validation of the short and extra-short forms of the Big Five Inventory-2 and their German adaptations. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment* 36: 149–61. [CrossRef]
- Shaw, Emma. 2020. "Who we are, and why we do it": A demographic overview and the cited motivations of Australia's family historians. *Journal of Family History* 45: 109–24. [CrossRef]
- Sobol, Michael P., and Jeanette Cardiff. 1983. A sociopsychological investigation of adult adoptees' search for birth parents. *Family Relations* 32: 477–83. [CrossRef]
- Spector, Tim. 2013. How your grandparents' life could have changed your genes. *The Conversation*. Available online: <https://theconversation.com/how-your-grandparents-life-could-have-changed-your-genes-19136> (accessed on 1 June 2021).
- Taber, Keith S. 2018. The use of Cronbach's Alpha when developing and reporting research instruments in Science Education. *Research in Science Education* 48: 1273–96. [CrossRef]
- Walters, Penny. 2020. *The Psychology of Searching*. London: Author.