

Review

# Family History Research and Distressing Emotions

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**Abstract:** Anecdotal evidence suggests that the popular pastime of exploring one's family history can unleash strong emotions, both positive and negative. The aim of this study was to chart the extent and nature of negative emotions among family historians, and profile those most vulnerable to distress. Data from an online survey of 775 adult Australian hobbyist family historians showed nearly two-thirds experienced strong distressing emotions such as anger, shock and sadness while researching their forebears. Triggers included discoveries which led to feelings of betrayal and distrust or posed moral dilemmas. Also distressing were findings about ancestors who behaved badly, were treated cruelly/unfairly, or who experienced tragedy. Family historians who reported strong negative emotions were more likely than those who did not to be younger, female, spend more time on their hobby, have half-siblings, driven by the motive for greater self-understanding, and score higher on the personality trait of openness to experience but lower on emotional stability. The study is important because it raises issues of (a) what support is available to family historians who find their discoveries strongly distressing and (b) whether purveyors of genealogical research products should provide more education and support to their clients.

**Keywords:** family history; genealogy and distress; negative emotions and genealogy

## 1. Introduction

As well as being enjoyable, the popular leisure pastime of family history research has the potential to confer therapeutic benefits on those who participate. For example, there is evidence that finding out more about the challenges, trials, and successes of one's ancestors can help develop and strengthen an individual's sense of identity, belonging, and resilience (e.g., [Bottero 2015](#); [Champagne 1990](#); [Hartowicz 2018](#); [Lima 2019](#); [Moore et al. 2021](#); [Robinson 2021](#)). Furthermore, exploring the lives of our ancestors can contribute to the understanding and healing of past trauma and assist in managing grief (e.g., [Bifulco 2021](#); [Darongkamas and Lorenc 2008](#); [Jarvis 2022](#); [Parker-Drabble 2022](#)). Family history research may also play a role in influencing one's personal life narrative and search for meaning (e.g., [Bhar 2014, 2017](#); [Duke et al. 2008](#); [Hedtke 2014](#); [Kellerman 2001](#)). These therapeutic aspects of genealogical research have the capacity to unleash powerful emotions as new insights emerge.

The emotions may not always be positive ones. For some individuals, discoveries made through genealogical research can cause distress and even pose challenges to mental health until they can be reframed into an adaptive personal narrative. By way of illustration, newspaper, magazine, and online articles abound with stories of individuals who discover they are 'not who they think they are', for example, later-life discoveries of people who did not realise they were adopted ([Clapton 2021](#); [Riley 2008, 2009, 2013](#)) or finding previously unknown close relatives whose existence raises questions about identity and parentage (e.g., [Darroch 2020](#); [Darroch and Smith 2021](#); [Mroz 2019](#); [Theunissen 2022](#)). These individuals may experience emotions such as anger, abandonment, confusion, guilt, sadness, or loss of trust. Relationships may be permanently damaged. Indeed, it seems that any genealogical findings that challenge family beliefs can be disturbing to some. Durie, in his role as a professional genealogist, discussed clients' reactions to information that disputed their



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assumptions and expectations about forebears. While many were able to integrate the new knowledge into their family story, some refused to accept documented evidence, some became aggressive, and at least one was distressed enough to seek counselling (Durie 2017, 2022). Over time, some of those upset by genealogical findings will develop ways to understand, forgive, and incorporate their discoveries into a new appreciation of who they are and where they came from, while others may harbour resentment and a sense of betrayal over a long period.

Clapton (2021), in his review of research on late-life discovery of being adopted, discusses such adoptees' feelings of shock and sense of betrayal, especially in situations where it appears that many others were already aware of the adoption. There is resentment at the uncovering of secrets and lies; personal and cultural identities are shaken and kinship ties confused. Nowadays, adoption practices are more open, with late-life discoveries less likely to occur. However, a new opportunity for identity-disrupting discoveries has emerged through the practice of treating infertility by facilitating conception via anonymous egg or sperm donation. Darroch (Darroch 2020; Darroch and Smith 2021) writes of the shock of finding that her biological father was a fertility doctor and that she has dozens, perhaps hundreds, of half-siblings. As a psychologist herself, Darroch has written about the psychological, ethical, and legal challenges associated with donor conception, stressing the need for mental health professionals to be aware of and trained in dealing with client trauma in cases of 'accidental' discovery.

Genealogical findings concerning ancestors who behaved badly or were themselves abused, mistreated, or victims of terrible circumstances are less well studied than the dramatic discoveries about parental identity, but they still have the potential to impact in emotionally distressing ways.

In the first instance, uncovering family stories and secrets about disreputable ancestors can lead to a sense of shame, loss of prestige, or identity challenges. Nash (2002), commenting on genealogical tourists tracing their Irish ancestry, found that for 'both individual and collective identities, genealogical projects can have unsettling results' (p. 27). Disquiet can occur through uncovering an ancestor's wrongdoing or perceived unworthiness, or through the realisation that ancestors held cultural values no longer considered appropriate. An example of this comes from Australian novelist Kate Grenville who researched her wealthy and respected forebear, an early 19th century British settler in the Hawkesbury River area of New South Wales, Australia. Her research led her to wonder how this ancestor had secured his land, and at what cost to the indigenous peoples. Grenville has reflected on how this shook her own sense of self in a way that was emotionally taxing, involving, 'a very confronting shift of identity' (Grenville 2006).

On the other hand, the discovery of ancestral lives of hardship, trauma, and tragedy is also distressing. Genealogical Facebook pages, talks at family history conferences, and personal interactions with fellow family historians leave no doubt about how affecting these findings can be. By way of anecdote, in a recent post on a family history Facebook page, one woman described how saddened and overwhelmed she felt about the many traumatic stories of suicide, early death, family desertion, and other unhappy events she had uncovered when researching ancestors. She asked if others had similar experiences and what strategies they used to cope. Dozens replied with tragic and traumatic stories, expressing their own emotions of sadness, anguish, and anger at injustices. Interestingly, some respondents raised the issue of how such unhappy discoveries, although initially upsetting, may eventually lead to positive outcomes. This is because, for some, these findings increased understanding of how intergenerational trauma could have influenced their parents' or grandparents' personalities, thus helping to explain behaviour that was once resented or misunderstood but can now be more readily forgiven.

To date, much of what has been written about the potential for negative emotions to accompany genealogical research is anecdotal. There is little research on the extent, nature, and possible triggers of distress among genealogical researchers. However, there is a growing academic literature on the related topic of intergenerational trauma. As with the

Facebook commenters mentioned above, this body of research often addresses the potential for therapeutic outcomes as genealogists process their emotional responses to distressing information.

The term ‘intergenerational trauma’ refers to the consequences of when the effects of traumatic experiences in one generation are passed down to subsequent generations, for example, through parenting practices or cultural mores. Some researchers have used their own family histories as data to discuss possible mechanisms that might exacerbate or mitigate the results of intergenerational trauma. For example, [Bifulco \(2021\)](#) described her Polish family’s history of suffering and loss during World War II, noting that the intergenerational impact of harrowing events may be lessened when survivors are able to openly discuss their trauma and have it socially acknowledged, not hidden or denied. Such acknowledgement opens up the opportunity for descendants to incorporate the trauma story into a family narrative that, while recognising loss, stresses resilience and ways of coping. [Hartowicz \(2018\)](#), in an interview study of six healing professionals ‘who had consciously addressed the wounding passed down to them from previous generations’ concluded that knowing and intentionally examining trauma from their familial pasts encouraged these participants to break away from negative patterns of behaviour or thought. For example, one man discovered that his father and paternal grandfather had both suicided in their 40s after suffering periods of depression. This knowledge inspired the man to seek professional help to manage his own depressive tendencies. [Krauskopf et al. \(2023\)](#) studied adult children of Holocaust survivors and noted their intense ambivalence toward uncovering details of their parents’ trauma. On the one hand, the knowledge was extremely distressing but, on the other hand, processing this trauma could have therapeutic outcomes such as engendering greater appreciation of parental resilience.

Studies of descendants of soldiers with PTSD, wartime refugees, Holocaust survivors, and those who experience extreme poverty have suggested various mechanisms for how trauma can be passed on generationally (e.g., [Costa et al. 2018](#); [Cramer 2019](#); [Erysiyan 2018](#); [Kellerman 2001](#); [Krauskopf et al. 2023](#)). Breaking maladaptive patterns of thought, mood, and behaviour in later generations is often discussed in terms of experiencing and processing the negative emotions associated with gaining knowledge of ancestral trauma. This might occur through sharing the knowledge with others including family members, fellow family historians, or counsellors and therapists. The therapeutic value of committing ancestral stories to written form has also received comment (e.g., [Evans and Lorrison 2023](#)).

On the basis of this limited literature, it would appear important for individuals to approach genealogical research with an awareness of its potential to arouse negative and difficult emotions. How likely are these emotions? What triggers them? Who is most at risk? Answering these questions is important because they open up discussion of what forms of support are (or should be) available to family historians who find their discoveries distressing and/or posing a mental health challenge.

The current study was designed to answer these questions through both descriptive and hypothesis testing methodologies. The exploratory, descriptive component of the research used both quantitative and qualitative data to chart the extent and nature of negative emotions experienced by a large group of hobbyist (non-professional) family historians as they researched their own ancestry. The hypothesis testing component compared, on a series of demographic and psychological variables, those who sometimes or often experienced negative emotions during the conduct of their genealogical research with those who never or rarely experienced such emotions.

The demographic variables chosen for the study were age and sex, plus several family variables including number of siblings, number of half-siblings, number of descendants (children plus grandchildren), and whether a participant had been adopted or donor conceived. Number of siblings and number of descendants were, like age and sex, exploratory variables about which no hypotheses were formed. However, it was predicted that having half-siblings and/or being adopted/donor conceived would increase the potential for family history discoveries to be unexpected and/or potentially distressing, thus leading to

a greater likelihood of negative emotions. Two other demographic variables—the amount of time spent on family history research and its relative importance in relation to other pastimes—were also postulated to be associated with a greater likelihood of distressing findings and therefore negative emotions. This was simply because the more one delves into the past, the greater the likelihood of making disturbing discoveries.

Several motivational and personality variables were hypothesised to relate to a higher potential for experiencing negative emotions among family historians. In a prior study (Moore and Rosenthal 2021), we isolated three key psychosocial motives for researching family history, these being the desire to enhance self-understanding (self-understanding motive), the desire to assist others and/or offer them something of value (altruism motive), and the desire to engage in cognitive challenges/problem solving (cognitive challenge motive). In the current study, it was predicted that those scoring higher on the self-understanding motive would be more likely than low scorers to experience negative emotions because these individuals have a greater personal stake in the outcome of their research and therefore a greater potential for disappointment and distress. High scoring on the other two motives may also be associated with greater propensity for negative emotions for similar reasons, although because the altruism and cognitive challenge motives are less personally oriented than self-understanding, relationships between these motives and negative emotions may be weaker.

In this study, personality was conceptualised using the Big Five Personality model. This model describes personality via five overarching variables—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness (Costa and McCrae 1992; see Measures section below). Lower levels of emotional stability were hypothesised to be related to a greater likelihood of experiencing negative emotions among family history researchers, given that those lower on emotional stability are generally characterised in terms of greater emotional lability and tendency toward anxiety, depression, and stress. Relationships between negative emotions and the other personality variables were deemed exploratory.

### *Analyses*

Descriptive analyses included quantitative measurement of the extent to which family historians experienced negative emotions plus a qualitative analysis of the type of negative emotions experienced and the events that stimulated them. Using analysis of variance, those who never or rarely experienced negative emotions while researching their family history were compared with those who sometimes or often experienced these emotions. The dependent variables in these analyses were the demographic and psychosocial variables described above. Finally, the relative strength of this set of demographic and psychosocial variables in predicting negative emotions was assessed through multiple regression analysis.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### *2.1. Participants*

Participants who fitted the selection criteria for this survey-based study were Australian citizens or residents, 18 years or over, who self-described as amateur (or hobbyist) family historians. Eligible surveys were completed by 775 adult Australian men and women 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 engaging in this pastime. All states of Australia were represented, with the majority from the most populous states, Victoria (35.5%) and NSW (30.1%).

About half of the sample lived with a partner only (51.5%), 18.0% lived alone and, reflecting the age distribution of the sample, only 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. Just over 80% had at least one child; 50.4% had at least one grandchild. Most (88.3%) had at least one sibling, 14.1% had one or more half-siblings, and 22 people (2.8%) self-identified as adopted or donor conceived.

The average amount of time participants spent per week on family history research varied widely from between 5 h or fewer (35.7%), through 6–10 h (27.5%), 11–20 h (19.8%), to 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 from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the author’s university. A detailed information statement was supplied to all participants prior to commencing an anonymous survey. Potentially identifying information (e.g., place of residence) was removed from any published quotes. The survey was advertised on several Facebook family history sites, through general emails/newsletters from local family history groups/genealogical societies, and through other relevant websites. Individuals could choose to ‘opt in’ or not. Permission was given for the survey to be conducted in Australia only, because other countries have different legislation, regulations, permissions, and customs associated with data collection online.

## 2.3. Recruitment

An online survey was set up using Qualtrics software. Major genealogical societies throughout Australia were contacted by an email that described the project and asked the administrators to share the survey link with their members. As well, a brief description of the project and the survey link were posted on several Facebook pages dedicated to family history and DNA research. The survey link was also shared online with students of 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.

## 2.4. Measures

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

## 2.5. 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, number of hours per week spent researching family history, and the perceived importance of their family history research in relation to other leisure activities.

## 2.6. Negative Emotions

Participants were asked, ‘How often has your family history research led to these outcomes (rarely or never; sometimes; often)?’ followed by a list of possible outcomes. The focus of the current study was on responses to having experienced the outcome ‘strong negative emotions like sorrow or anger’. Responses were coded 1 = rarely or never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often for the regression analyses. For the ANOVA analyses, those rarely or never experiencing these strong emotions were compared with those who experienced them sometimes or often. For comparison purposes, participants were also asked how often their family history research had led to ‘strong positive emotions like joy or pride’.

Responses to a non-directed open-ended question, ‘What have been the most surprising, difficult or unexpected outcomes of doing family history research?’ were analysed thematically to explore further the nature of negative emotions. Most of the 775 survey

respondents (88.8%,  $N = 688$ ) responded to this question. Some gave an example of each of 'surprising', 'difficult', and 'unexpected', others gave examples of only one or two of these options. Some gave more than one example of one or more of the options, for example, three difficulties might be mentioned. Since the focus of this analysis was on difficulties and emotional challenges, responses were read through and general themes denoting these issues were listed in draft form. As a further check, all responses were searched for keyword elements that could denote emotional difficulties and challenges (including diffic\*, challeng\*, upset\*, sad\*, disappoint\*, emot\*).

### 2.7. Psychosocial Motivations for Family History Research

The Psychosocial Motivations for Family History Research Scale (Moore and Rosenthal 2021) was used to measure key psychosocial motivations for engaging in genealogical research as a leisure pastime. This scale of 16 items assesses three motives—the desire to enhance self-understanding (self-understanding motive, 7 items), the desire to assist others and/or offer them something of value (altruism motive, 4 items), and the desire to engage in cognitive challenges/problem solving (cognitive challenge motive, 5 items). Participants are given the following instructions: "Below are some reasons that people participate in family history research. Please rate the importance of these reasons for you. The rating scale provided is 'very important' (scored 2), 'somewhat important' (scored 1), or 'not important' (scored 0). Example items include 'I participate in family history to find out more about who I am' (self-understanding), 'I participate in family history to make a contribution to future generations' (altruism), and 'I participate in family history because it keeps my mind active' (cognitive challenge). Ratings of items on each subscale of the measure are summed to produce three motivation scores. Reliability data shows Cronbach alphas at a level acceptable for research purposes (Taber 2018) of 0.74, 0.76, and 0.68 for the self-understanding, altruism, and cognitive challenge motives, respectively. Construct validity for the scale is provided by evidence that these motives demonstrate meaningful and differential relationships with age, gender, education, family structure, and personality (Moore and Rosenthal 2021).

### 2.8. Personality

The Big Five Personality Inventory Shortened Version (Rammstedt and John 2007), a 10 item version of the original Big Five Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa and McCrae 1992) was used to assess what have been conceptualised as the key underlying traits of personality. This scale assesses five factors: extraversion (sociable, outgoing, opposite to introversion), agreeableness (compliant, trusting, and warm), conscientiousness (organised, strong work ethic), neuroticism (anxious, opposite to emotional stability), and openness (enjoyment of new experiences, creative, nonjudgmental). 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. In the current study, the neuroticism scale scores were reversed so that this factor was scored for emotional stability.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Frequency and Type of Distress/Negative Emotions

When asked how often their family history research had led to strong negative emotions like sorrow or anger, 14.8% said 'often', 47.6% 'sometimes', and 37.5% 'rarely or never'.

In comparison, strong positive emotions such as joy or pride were often experienced by 59.7% of the sample, sometimes by 36.6%, and rarely or never by just 3.6%.

In response to the open-ended question about surprising, difficult, or unexpected outcomes of family history research, a large number of the difficulties mentioned concerned the practical challenges of genealogy as a leisure pursuit. Examples included encountering brick walls, costs associated with searching, not having enough time to pursue their hobby, and frustration that other family members were not interested. These were not considered as likely to lead to more than short-term frustration. However, about 10% of respondents described distressing emotions experienced as a result of their family history research. Examples of the different types of negative emotions described and the stimuli generating these emotions are shown below, classified under five broad categories or themes based on the emotional triggers.

- Distress about ancestors behaving badly

The most common cause for distress was discovery of ancestors who were believed to have behaved heinously, either because of their personal aggression or because they benefited from social circumstances that approved aggressive and inhumane treatment of others, for example, slave ownership or poor treatment of indigenous peoples by colonising populations. As shown in the quotes below, participants whose discoveries were of this nature experienced feelings that were ‘difficult to accept’, ‘confronting’, ‘shocking’, and generally ‘unpleasant’.

*Discovering a rapist in the extended family was very difficult to accept. (Woman over 50)*

*Finding the bigamist! He was horrific!! Very confronting thinking that I have some of his blood in my veins! (Woman aged 50 or younger)*

*It is always confronting when you are faced with documentary evidence stating that an ancestor did something in the past that although acceptable at the time is shocking today. That realisation that your privilege is built upon historical oppression of others. (Man aged 50 or younger)*

*Some finds can be unpleasant, such as an ancestor who had slaves in Jamaica . . . (Woman over 50)*

*Finding out one of my ancestors was involved in aboriginal massacres . . . (Woman aged 50 or younger)*

- Distress at unfair/cruel treatment of ancestors

A different kind of emotional distress accompanied findings that ancestors had been cruelly treated by other people. These discoveries elicited disturbing, even ‘heartbreaking’ feelings, and, at least implicitly, indignation at injustice.

*I always knew that a gr x2 uncle was hanged for his part in the XXX robbery, but reading the newspaper reports regarding his mother’s fight to save him from the gallows, a report of how he was waiting for his father and brother to attend the court and give evidence that could help his case—but they never turned up -and then the report of his bungled and horrific hanging, was heartbreaking . . . (Woman over 50)*

*Confirming that my great grandmothers second husband, her former brother in law, betrayed her trust and most likely abused one or more of her teenage daughters. (Woman over 50)*

*Finding a great great step grandmother who was committed to a mental institution in order that her husband’s children from his first marriage could inherit his wealth. (Woman over 50)*

*Holocaust memories very disturbing. (Man over 50)*

- Sadness at social conditions in the past and their effects on ancestors’ lives

The emotion of sadness was commonly expressed in relation to those ancestors who had suffered because of fate and social conditions.

*A few sad moments and tears especially relating to (deaths of) infants and children. (Woman over 50)*

*Discovering the tragedies encountered by my Irish ancestors who came to XXX and the struggles and heartbreaking stories of survival for the next 3 generations. (Woman over 50)*

*How sad you feel when you discover the death of a child 100 years ago or more. (Woman over 50)*

*It has been surprising to uncover particularly sad and desperate times in some ancestors' lives. For example, a destitute widow who admitted her child to an orphan asylum for three years, only to have her child die of typhoid fever within two weeks of returning home. (Woman over 50)*

- **Moral dilemmas**

Several respondents expressed feelings of doubt and confusion regarding dilemmas they faced on becoming privy to information that they feared would greatly distress other living relatives. Quotes from these respondents suggest that an emotional burden attaches to withholding this information, yet there is also guilt and fear about the potential outcomes of sharing findings.

*I have a dilemma. Should I tell mum or not? There might be closer DNA matches that show up in her DNA matches so that will be a surprise to her but I'm hoping she doesn't understand. I feel like I've done something wrong every day as it's because of my interest in family history that my parents did their DNA. My mum didn't suspect a thing. I feel bad all the time for her. (Woman aged 50 or younger)*

*When you find information that may be not what your parents have grown up being told, the decision as to just how much to tell them can be very difficult. (Woman over 50)*

*One awkward discovery regarding child born of incest, decided not to pass on information. (Woman over 50)*

*Another really distressing find was that my great aunt's husband had committed a terrible murder. I have not been able to speak about this with the descendants of the couple. (Woman over 50)*

- **Sense of betrayal**

The feeling of having been betrayed by other family members was mostly expressed by those who believed they had been lied to or that their lived experience had been ignored or denied. Three of the quotes below are from adoptees, and this is unsurprising given the literature suggesting that secretive adoption practices can lead to intense emotional reactions when adoptees discover more about their biological ancestry.

*Finding out how many lies have been handed down. (Adopted woman over 50)*

*Finding out that my Birth Mother did not want contact. (Adopted woman over 50)*

*How many (relatives) refuse to speak about my African American heritage. That is so disappointing. Generations back disowned them for not being white. (Woman aged 50 or younger)*

*I have been sad to think that my parents kept the information about my adoption secret. I realize that the law at the time—1940s—protected both adoptive and birth families from having any direct contact. So, my parents probably didn't see the need to bring the subject up. As far as they were concerned, they adopted me and I was theirs to keep. I didn't get the chance to tell them that I would always have loved them. I am thankful that they had passed away before I began my research. As I mentioned before, my cousins and aunts, uncles, grandparents all knew about my adoption. How they all kept that secret was a marvel to me! (Adopted woman over 50)*

### 3.2. Differences between Those Who Did and Did Not Experience Strong Emotions/Distress Accompanying Their Genealogical Research

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and *F* values associated with analyses of variance comparing those who have experienced strong distressing emotions as a result of their family history explorations and those who have never or rarely done so. The groups were compared on demographic and psychosocial variables. It can be seen from the table that those who experienced distress were significantly more likely to be younger, female, have half-siblings, spend more hours per week on family history research, and be more likely to rate their genealogical hobby as relatively more important than their other leisure pursuits. Forty-nine percent of males and 65% of females experienced negative emotions, while 76% of those with half-siblings reported negative emotions compared with 60% of those without half-siblings.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations (*SD*), and *F* values comparing family historians who did and did not experience distressing emotions while researching their family history.

	Rarely or Never Experienced Distress Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Sometimes or Often Experienced Distress Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
N	290	483		
Age	63.95 (10.95)	60.31 (10.83)	21.22	<0.001
Gender <sup>1</sup>	1.79 (0.41)	1.88 (0.33)	10.62	0.001
N sibs	1.21 (0.62)	1.26 (0.66)	0.89	NS <sup>4</sup>
Half-sibs? <sup>2</sup>	0.09 (0.29)	0.17 (0.38)	10.25	0.001
Adopted/donor conceived? <sup>2</sup>	0.02 (0.15)	0.03 (0.17)	0.32	NS
Hrs/wk spent on FH <sup>3</sup>	2.17 (1.51)	3.06 (1.01)	4.71	0.03
Rel. importance of FH <sup>3</sup>	1.76 (0.76)	1.88 (0.80)	4.85	0.028
N descendants	2.73 (1.64)	2.52 (1.70)	2.89	NS
Self-understanding motive	7.02 (3.00)	8.13 (3.00)	24.92	<0.001
Altruism motive	5.25 (1.94)	5.58 (1.89)	5.44	0.02
Cognitive challenge motive	6.17 (2.10)	6.42 (2.20)	2.34	NS
extraversion	3.06 (1.01)	2.85 (1.02)	7.42	0.007
agreeableness	3.68 (0.78)	3.60 (0.80)	2.20	NS
conscientiousness	3.85 (0.83)	3.83 (0.88)	0.05	NS
emotional stability	3.35 (0.97)	3.04 (0.98)	18.53	<0.001
openness	3.47 (0.90)	3.61 (0.89)	4.32	0.038

<sup>1</sup> 1 = male, 2 = female; <sup>2</sup> 0 = no; 1 = yes; <sup>3</sup> FH = family history; <sup>4</sup> = Not significant.

With respect to psychosocial variables, those experiencing distress were significantly more motivated by the desire to understand themselves (self-understanding motive) and to use their family history knowledge altruistically. They were lower on extraversion (more introverted), less emotionally stable, and more open to new experiences. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in experiencing negative emotions/distress between those who were adopted/donor conceived and those who were not; however, the small number of adoptees/donor conceived in the sample limits the confidence that can be placed in this finding.

Therefore, the hypotheses that experiencing distress during genealogical research would relate to more time spent on and relative importance of one's genealogy hobby, presence of half-siblings in the family, higher motivation toward self-understanding, and

lower emotional stability were supported, but the relationship between negative emotional experiences and adoption/donor conception was not supported.

### 3.3. Prediction of Distressing Emotions

A multiple regression was performed to predict the extent to which family historians experienced distressing emotions while researching their genealogy. Potential predictor variables were demographic variables (Model 1) and demographic plus psychosocial variables (Model 2).  $R^2$  values indicated that the demographic variables alone predicted a significant 7.7% of the variance in distress ( $F = 7.52, p < 0.001$ ), while in Model 2, with all variables included, the  $R^2$  value indicated that a significant 13.1% of the variance was predicted ( $F = 6.73, p < 0.001$ ).

This multivariate analysis demonstrates that certain variables that showed significant differences between the groups who did and did not experience emotional distress (Table 1) dropped out in importance when all variables were considered together as independent contributors to the variance of negative emotional experience. As shown in Table 2, sex and age remained independent predictors of distress, as did time spent on family history, and, as predicted, self-understanding motive and (lower) emotional stability. Openness remained an independent predictor but introversion dropped out as did the altruism motive and relative importance of family history as a leisure activity.

**Table 2.** Multiple regression to predict experience of distress from demographic and psychosocial variables among those researching their family history.

Model	Variable	Beta	t	p	
1	Age	−0.135	−3.26	<0.001	
	Gender <sup>1</sup>	0.113	3.03	0.003	
	N sibs	0.039	1.67	NS <sup>4</sup>	
	Half-sibs? <sup>2</sup>	0.127	3.34	<0.001	
	Adopted/donor conceived? <sup>2</sup>	0.011	0.29	NS	
	Hours/week spent on FH <sup>3</sup>	0.085	2.29	0.022	
	Relative importance of FH <sup>3</sup>	0.063	1.68	NS	
	N descendants	0.000	−0.01	NS	
	2	Age	−0.088	−2.10	0.036
		Gender <sup>1</sup>	0.087	2.37	0.018
N sibs		0.031	0.85	NS	
Half-sibs? <sup>2</sup>		0.106	2.82	0.005	
Adopted/donor conceived? <sup>2</sup>		−0.025	−0.67	NS	
Hours/week spent on FH <sup>3</sup>		0.096	2.63	0.009	
Relative importance of FH <sup>3</sup>		0.034	0.90	NS	
N descendants		−0.025	−0.61	NS	
Self-understanding motive		0.143	3.49	<0.001	
Altruism motive		0.068	1.71	NS	
Cognitive challenge motive	−0.048	−1.26	NS		
extraversion	−0.046	−1.25	NS		

Table 2. Cont.

Model	Variable	Beta	t	p
	agreeableness	−0.004	−0.12	NS
	conscientiousness	0.022	0.61	NS
	emotional stability	−0.103	−2.69	0.007
	openness	0.098	2.78	0.006

<sup>1</sup> 1 = male, 2 = female; <sup>2</sup> 0 = no; 1 = yes; <sup>3</sup> FH = family history; <sup>4</sup> = Not significant.

#### 4. Discussion

People participate in leisure activities mostly because they are pleasurable and create positive emotions. Nearly everyone in the current study had felt strong positive emotions such as joy or pride while researching their family history, the majority experiencing these emotions often. Even so, leisure pursuits can also engender negative emotions including frustration, sense of failure, and even fear (such as can occur during high-risk physical challenges). In this way, genealogy as a hobby pursuit is similar to other structured leisure activities, for example, exercise regimes, artistic pursuits, learning new skills, making things, or playing competitive games. A difference, however, is the extent to which researching one's family history is so highly focused on self, kin, personal narrative, and family narrative. This inward focus leads to questions that address the central core of our being—who we are, where we come from, and why we behave as we do. The depth of feeling engendered by this leisure pursuit is demonstrated by its potential to produce strong negative as well as positive emotions. Nearly two-thirds of this study's large sample of hobby genealogists had experienced distress as they researched their family history. In an open-ended and non-directed question, around ten per cent described these distressful outcomes as impacting on their sense of self, for example, by producing anger, shock, 'heartbreak', and feelings of injustice, betrayal, or moral confusion.

What triggers these strong negative emotions? Family historians who discover forebears behaving shamefully may report feeling shame themselves, or fear that some aspect of the ancestor's character might have been passed down to them. They may experience moral dilemmas about whether to tell others about their findings, and/or feel guilt and the desire to make some kind of reparation. The sins of the fathers become incorporated into the family narrative, or even affect one's own sense of worth. Author Kate Grenville (2006) in a speech to the Australian Psychoanalytic Society about her experiences researching her colonial settler ancestor, wrote that she became involved "*in a profound re-examination and re-experiencing of what it might mean to be an Australian, and what kinds of issues are raised by the idea of "belonging" here. On a personal level, it was an experience of the settler descendent being unsettled by what she found when she went looking for her history.*" The personal angst experienced by descendants of colonisers, slavers, criminals, and the like can become the collective guilt of nations, and indeed there is heated debate in colonised nations about how and even whether such reparations, apologies, and expressions of guilt should occur (e.g., Pettigrove 2003). One form of reparation available at an individual as well as group or national level is to tell ancestral stories that respectfully incorporate multiple viewpoints (e.g., Heath and Barnwell 2023).

Sadness and anger at the unjust or tragic fate of ancestors may have profound—but paradoxically positive—effects on one's sense of self. Genealogical discoveries may help some people overcome family-based trauma by enabling a deeper and more empathic understanding of the past. Placing an ancestor's maladaptive or distressing behaviours into historical and social context may lead to greater acceptance and forgiveness toward these behaviours, thus stimulating emotional healing and personal growth (Allen 2013; Moore et al. 2021).

Additionally, in some cases, initial feelings of distress may be overtaken by admiration for the strength and resilience of one's forebears, in turn influencing personal wellbeing and resilience in a positive way. In support of this, the studies of Duke, Fivush, and colleagues

(e.g., [Duke et al. 2003](#)) found that those ancestral stories that contributed most strongly to family pride and resilience were ones about forebears who experienced hardship and overcame it. [Fischer et al. \(2011\)](#) also argued that wellbeing is enhanced by ancestral stories that remind us that people can overcome difficulties and prevail.

Those who discover through genealogical research that their biological identity is not what they had been led to believe would seem to be most at risk of strong emotions. The participant sample in the current study included only a small number of adoptees, but even so, a few in this group expressed feelings of betrayal and sadness. Adoptees/donor conceived children who learn about their backgrounds from an early age are less vulnerable to unexpected genealogical findings than those who learn about them later in life, or 'accidentally'.

As mentioned previously, [Clapton's \(2021\)](#) review of studies of individuals who made later-life discoveries of their adoption often felt a sense of betrayal and anger at perceived lies and cover-ups. Interestingly, in the current study there were no significant differences between adopted and non-adopted (or donor conceived) people on the extent to which their genealogical discoveries led to negative emotions, nor did adoption/donor conception status predict negative emotions. This is not a particularly robust finding, given that the number of adoptees/donor conceived in the study was small and, even more tellingly, no distinction was made between individuals differing on how they were made aware of their birth origins. Further quantitative studies that specifically target the questions raised by this null finding are needed to develop more reliable conclusions regarding birth origin status and experience of negative emotions as an outcome of family history explorations.

Who were most affected by negative emotions? One aim of the current study was to form a picture of the type of family history researcher most likely to experience distress as they uncovered information about their predecessors. Results showed that women were more likely to experience distress than men, an unsurprising finding given the well-established relationship between gender and emotional expressiveness (e.g., [Wester et al. 2002](#)). Younger family historians were also more liable to become distressed while exploring their ancestry, possibly because sense of identity is less stable/more vulnerable at younger ages—although 'younger' in the context of this sample is still quite elderly. A study by [Haydon et al. \(2023\)](#) concluded that family history knowledge may influence components of identity development in adolescence; however, its role in influencing identity in middle and later years is as yet unknown.

Those who spent longer on their family history hobby and who perceived it as more important than other leisure pastimes were more likely to come across distressing findings, with time spent a significant independent predictor of negative emotions. Presumably, the deeper you dig, the more likely you are to find skeletons. Whether this might eventually lead some hobby genealogists to abandon their research is an open question.

A sizable number of study participants had half-siblings (14.1%  $N = 109$ ), and these participants were significantly more likely to experience distress than those who did not have (or were not aware of) half-siblings. Presence of half-siblings was also a significant independent predictor of distressing emotions. When half-siblings are discovered by chance (for example, through a DNA test), their presence signals the possibility of parental infidelities, non-marital births, previously unknown families, or other secrets. Meeting half-siblings for the first time in adulthood can be stressful and unsatisfying. Of course, being part of a family with half-siblings can also be joyful and rewarding, but their presence, perhaps especially if it comes as a surprise, does appear to be a risk factor for distress.

Those who were researching their genealogy to discover more about themselves and what shaped them were more strongly affected by negative emotions than those less motivated by identity concerns. This is a robust finding, with the self-understanding motive being the strongest independent predictor of negative emotions among study participants. Psychosocial identity comprises our self-descriptions, perceived roles, defining attitudes, major values, and cultural and personal identifications. While adolescence is thought to be a key stage in the development of identity, questioning, renegotiation, and changing of

identity occurs throughout the lifespan as our circumstances alter, for example, through career changes, parenting, and the ups and downs of relationships. Those seeking a richer or more certain sense of self through their genealogical explorations—that is, those with stronger self-understanding motives for their research—have embarked on a quest that is both personal and open to strong emotions, including distress and disappointment. For these individuals, their hobby is not just an intellectual exercise but an exercise in redefining the self. [Shaw \(2020\)](#), in her study of motivational drivers of family historians, described this process as ‘intrinsic, inward-looking, and personal’.

The findings with respect to personality were consistent with the idea that self-exploration is emotionally stressful (even although it may lead to positive outcomes in the long run). Those who were less emotionally stable—and therefore more vulnerable to anxiety and stress—were more negatively affected by their genealogical findings than those higher on emotional stability, as hypothesised. A further finding in relation to personality was that negative emotions were stronger/more common among those high on the trait of openness to experience. These were presumably the individuals more receptive to examining family myths, uncovering secrets, and looking at their ancestral families ‘warts and all’. Their openness to discovery also rendered them vulnerable to dealing with the nature of what was discovered.

In summary, the current study demonstrated that the pleasant and interesting hobby of exploring one’s own family history can also be distressing. Those more likely to experience negative emotions were younger, female, more engaged with their hobby (as indicated by time spent on it and its perceived relative importance), more likely to have half-siblings, more driven by the motive to understand themselves better, more open to experience, and less emotionally stable. All hypotheses were supported except for the predicted relationship between negative emotions associated with genealogical research and being adopted/donor conceived. This hypothesis would have been more adequately tested with a larger sample of this subgroup and a measure of how they were made aware of their birth origins.

As well as the above, further research might include follow-up studies of those distressed by genealogical findings in order to discover how they responded to the distress, for example, did they seek further education/information, or support from friends, family, or health professionals? It would also be interesting to know more about how hobbyist family historians coped with troublesome moral dilemmas such as whether to tell others about previously hidden family secrets, and how they handled feelings of ancestral guilt. What guided their ethical decision making? A related question is to what extent negative emotions lead to reactions such as denial, continuing distress, or adaptive reworking of personal and family narratives. In the case of the latter, what resources assisted in the adaptive response, for example, further education, social support, emotional management?

The implications of this study relate to both client support and consumer education about the huge industry that family history has become. While it is probably rare for emotional reactions to genealogical findings to be so distressing as to require therapeutic intervention (and such a need was not evident in this study’s data), there is no question that many hobbyist family historians are keen to find sensitive listeners to help them process their discoveries. Sharing with family members, friends, and other family historians can provide support in many if not most cases. For some though, it may be helpful to discuss these topics privately with a counsellor or therapist. Such discussions could assist clients to resolve longstanding family relationship issues that come to a head following unexpected genealogical discoveries. Examples include discovery that one’s birth origins were not as assumed, that there has been an unacknowledged history of mental illness or trauma in the family, or that an ancestor’s behaviour has left an unjust and distressing legacy. Intergenerational trauma also leaves its mark, illustrated dramatically in [Erysiyan’s \(2018\)](#) evocatively titled article, “Why the Armenian genocide lives in me”, not to mention studies of children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors (e.g., [Krauskopf et al. 2023](#); [Nir 2018](#)). Consequently, it would seem important for counsellors and psychologists to have plans

in place to support clients who are distressed by genealogical findings, and to develop techniques to encourage use of this new knowledge in adaptive ways that facilitate personal growth and greater understanding of family dynamics. Taking a psychodynamic viewpoint, Lenherr (2019) argues that therapists need to explore and understand their clients' ancestral family history "in order not to overlook the repercussions of the experience of the previous generations in the conscious and unconscious worldview of our patients" (p. 23).

The study findings also raise questions as to whether the purveyors of genealogical research products should provide more education about the potential for their products (especially DNA tests) to cause distress, a 'caveat emptor' if you will. Durie (2017) reminds us that genealogy cannot uncover any 'ultimate truth' about the lives of our long dead ancestors. The more we collect data and triangulate sources, the closer we may arrive at a picture approximating reality, but as Durie notes, it is a process of "diminishing deception" (p. 4), a sentiment shared by Meyer (2020). Both these writers point out how this process can lead to findings in sharp contrast with expectations and previously held family myths. Should DNA tests and companies selling genealogical information be more upfront in informing their clients that this is the case—that sometimes findings from their products will be unexpected and distressing? Is it desirable or feasible to preface access to genealogical information with an educative sentence or two about both the limitations and the power of this information? Should genealogical companies provide lists of support resources for those who are distressed or disoriented by their findings? Or are these 'trigger warnings' an unnecessary indulgence? It is something to think about and research further as more and more people gain access to more and more genealogical data that has the potential to challenge identity and uncover family secrets.

a = 1 (1)

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