

## Article

# ‘Trying to Live Without History Would Be Like Suffering from Amnesia or Dementia, It Would Be Very Unhealthy’: What Is ‘History’ to Family Historians?

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a large-scale survey ( $N = 1406$ ) in Australia examining what ‘history’ means to practising family historians. Using the Typology of Historical Consciousness as a second-level analytical framework, the study identifies and categorises the diverse ways in which family historians conceptualise and define the discipline. Findings reveal that the majority of respondents articulate a traditional historical consciousness (50.5%), characterised by identity-seeking, generational connection, and a conception of history as inherited continuity. A substantial proportion (27.3%) demonstrate genetic historical consciousness, framing history as a dynamic developmental process linking past, present, and future. Exemplary and critical historical consciousness each account for approximately eleven percent of responses, indicating that lesson-extraction from the past and epistemological scepticism toward inherited historical narratives are minority, though analytically significant, orientations within this population. The study contributes empirical data to ongoing international conversations around the definitions, meanings, and purposes of history, and has implications for how academic historians and heritage institutions engage with the large and historically active community of non-professional historians.

**Keywords:** family historians; family history research; typology of historical consciousness; historical consciousness

## 1. Introduction

Family historians are large consumers and producers of historical knowledge and occupy a liminal space in the historiographic landscape. Through the micro-lens of the familial, their histories often repackage and reinvigorate broader historical narratives while simultaneously illuminating the role of the individual within ‘grand’ historical events. Rapid technological advancements and the increasing democratisation of historical records has seen the history discipline mutate into a kaleidoscope of historical genres, with the multi-billion-dollar family history industry being one of the most popular, and accessible, in the world (De Groot 2009; Barnwell 2019). This mutation is reflective of the current historical climate where there is “a global wave of intellectual exploration into fields that are historical in their very nature: the building of personal and collective memory; social, cultural and political use and functioning of narrating the past; and the psychological structures of remembering, repressing and recalling” (Rüsen 2005, p. vii).

Once the exclusive domain of the academic historian, family historians are disrupting the perceived custodianship of the past by constructing and publishing their research



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findings across multiple media platforms. As prolific users of history, many family historians have shown they can employ historical research methodologies with acuity and skill (Shaw 2021). Paradoxically, research has shown they often learn the disciplinary nuances of the historian on the fringes of formal institutions of learning, either through a process of trial and error and/or collaboration with other family historians (Kramer 2011; Darby and Clough 2013; De Groot 2009; Shaw 2021). Such contradiction has previously created tensions between academic and family historians, yet these tensions appear to have largely softened into a synergetic relationship that sees some academic historians collaborating with family historians in the (re)production of local, social, public and other histories (T. Evans 2022; Shaw 2021). In the broader historical space, family historians are often consultants for television programs such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (De Groot 2009; Shaw 2021) where their expertise is used to reveal the familial narrative of the celebrity avatar, and many actively contribute to local and family history societies, community heritage groups, archives, museums, and other history-making sites of historical culture.

Notably, the disciplinary mechanics of family history research are entangled with broader notions of affect and identity and, when combined, serve to orient the individual in time (Kramer 2011; Shaw 2021). It has been widely acknowledged that engaging with historical activities aids in the development of an ‘historical consciousness’, which has gained traction as an area of scholarly investigation for at least the last four decades. Despite this, competing definitions and meanings remain (Clark and Peck 2019), with its slipperiness attributed to being “grounded in various philosophical, anthropological, historiographic and educational disciplines with different normative (political or didactic) agendas” (Grever and Adriaansen 2019, p. 815). One widely accepted definition is that by engaging with the past, we are provided with an understanding of the present, which then guides us on how to act in the future (Rüsen 2005).

For the family historian, however, this past–present–future continuum is amplified by the deeply personal connection to the people and places of the past. Unlike some academic historians who may conduct and report on their research through a particular philosophical or methodological lens, this is largely absent from family history research. However, this is not to be taken as a criticism: family historians forge emotional connections with their ancestors which often serve as a catalyst for broadening their research directions to include place and space, as a means of understanding the context of their ancestor’s temporal experiences (Shaw 2020). It is through these endeavours that many can explain complex historical issues, for example, migratory patterns or social stratification, which is indicative of sophisticated contextual notions of historical production.

That millions of family historians are engaging with and (re)producing the past leads to an obvious question:

*What does history mean to family historians?*

This paper reports on the findings of an Australian study into how family historians think historically. Using a survey methodology, this research explores what the notion of ‘history’ means to Australian family historians, which are then categorised using Rüsen’s (1996, 2012) ‘Typology of Historical Consciousness’. This work contributes to ongoing international conversations around the definitions, meanings and purposes of history.

### *The Nebulous Nature of the Meaning of ‘History’*

The meaning and purposes of history are complex and contested and remain open to ongoing international scholarly debate. What can be agreed, however, is ‘history’, as a discipline, should not simply be regarded as ‘the past’ or ‘everything that has happened’. Historical events, people, and places are understood through different perspectives and experiences which change over time, and through the application of different method-

ological and/or theoretical lenses. As Lee (2004a) explains, ‘the past’ in history is not determined, and “cannot play any direct methodological role, although it remains a central regulatory idea” (p. 134). Rather, transforming ‘the past’ into ‘history’ is a highly selective and cognitive process, and draws on exclusive and specific concepts that are different from other disciplines, which must be considered if one is to ‘think historically’. For Rüsen (2012), “the past itself is not yet history; it becomes history by the activity of the human mind. It receives its qualification as history by its representation in the form of narratives” (p. 47), and as Lee (2004a) points out, “there is not one true story about the past, but a multiplicity of complementary, competing or clashing stories” (p. 129).

The classification of ‘history’ is blurred between professional historians and others, including family historians, actively engaging with the past (De Groot 2009). While Marwick (1995) argued that “History is... the human past as it is known by the work of historians” (p. 12, emphasis in original), adding that it “is about finding things out, and solving problems, rather than spinning narratives or telling stories” (p. 12), this view is antithetical to the current historiographic climate. In the three decades that have followed, the domain of the professional historian has mutated into multiple historical genres and blurs how we come to know history. In this context, history has moved beyond the pages of textbooks, to be found within the domains of family stories, media and spatial representations, and public history in all its forms and genres.

The classification of ‘historian’, too, has been broadened beyond the Academy. Rosenstone (2006) admits that whilst disparities exist within varying interactions with the past, filmmakers, for example, “can be and already are historians” (p. 8). Jenkins (1991) argues a historian uses “generic skills to investigate a set of problems that they themselves deem important” (p. 1), and as R. J. Evans (2002) explains, the work of historians must “be read with this in mind” (p. 15). Lee (2004a) claims that historians bring their own particular views and assumptions to their transformations of ‘the past’ into ‘history’, especially considering “none of the ways in which we have to go about (re)constructing history involves direct access to the past” (p. 134). Histories, argues Robert Parkes (2011) are understood as historical products themselves, to some degree ‘prejudiced’ or conditioned by the period in which they were written, and constituted within the ‘horizon’ or limits of the cultural paradigms of the authors. (p. 5).

Clearly, understanding the ‘cultural paradigms’ and historiographic intentions of the historian must be considered when reading or interpreting their historical narratives. Clark (2011; cited in Gosselin 2012) claims that good historians are historiographers in that they “endeavour to consider their motivations and biases and to understand those of previous historians” (p. 30). This becomes more complex for the family historian, especially considering that most are self-taught and are often fueled by a personal and affective connection to the people and places of their investigations. It is useful, therefore, to align reports of what history means to them against an established and credible framework for exploring historical consciousness. The purpose of this is to develop foundational understandings of how some family historians define history which augments existing discourses of historiographic conceptualisations.

Rüsen’s (1996, 2012) ‘Typology of Historical Consciousness’ provides a nuanced understanding of how people approach and interpret history, and the diverse ways in which people relate to the past. Each of the four ‘types’ of historical consciousness has its own values, assumptions and biases which influence how historical people and events are understood in the present. This assists in highlighting the different approaches to history and contributes to a knowledge of how the narratives of the past are constructed and can be used as a heuristic to understand the discipline of history itself (Seixas 2004). By emphasising the role of context, interpretation, and perspective in understanding history,

the ‘types’ of historical consciousness underscore the discipline as dynamic, complex, and contested. Yet as Lee (2004b) points out “we are not being offered a ladder-like progression in which we move from one stage to the next” (p. 5) with each stage of the typology building upon the former. Rather, the types of historical consciousness may “co-exist in any particular encounter with the past” (Lee 2004b, p. 5).

The four ‘types’ of historical consciousness are: *traditional* historical consciousness; *exemplary* historical consciousness; *critical* historical consciousness; and *genetic* historical consciousness. Rüsen (2012) explains that it is the principle of ‘tradition’ to which all other modes of making sense of the past are grounded and it “presents temporal changes in the human world such that the world’s order is maintained despite all its changes” (p. 45). The principles of traditional historical consciousness, Rüsen (2012) argues, remain the most popular and the most frequently used, and are responsible for providing a “cultural orientation for practical human life using certain reference to the past” (p. 46), and further insists that, from an ontological perspective, tradition is “the starting point for every development of historical consciousness” (p. 50). *Exemplary* historical consciousness emphasises “a sameness beyond change” (Rüsen 2012, p. 53). Historical events are understood as specific examples which “document general rules of human conduct” (Rüsen 2012, p. 53). In other words, events in the past can be used to provide general rules that can be applied to similar cases in the present. *Critical* historical consciousness “emphasizes distance and negation” (Rüsen 2012, p. 54) and offers the opportunity to explore contextual counter-narratives and a critique of values. On a personal level, critical historical thinking “clears a path towards constituting identity” (Rüsen 2004, p. 75) by allowing us to step outside roles which may be predetermined to redefine ourselves by defining “what we do not want to be” (Rüsen 2004, p. 75). *Genetic* historical consciousness emphasises change as the source of meaning as it “conceptualizes identity by individualization and generates meaning by temporalization of human forms of life” (Rüsen 2012, p. 53). Different perspectives are encouraged and accepted because they are, at their core, temporally historicised. That is, it is understood that perspectives change over time according to external influences and context.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research was developed using a survey methodology. Often cited as the most popular method for collecting data for evaluation in qualitative research, surveys require individuals to answer specific questions about their behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, emotions or practices (Ballou 2008; Mrug 2010; Creswell 2012; Creswell and Creswell 2022). In total, 1406 individuals completed the survey which collected demographic data, information about research practices, and attitudinal information about conceptions of historical understandings. It is the question “*What does history mean to you?*” which forms the focus of this paper.

The survey instrument (see Supplementary Materials) was comprised of 31 items and aimed to collect demographic data (age, gender, occupation, level of education), information about their research practices, the ways they had engaged with history as an academic subject, any other interest in history beyond their familial research, the types of information sought in their research, and how their research was disseminated (if at all). Collectively, these types of questions spanned how the respondents thought about history, how it was defined, and how it was consumed, produced, and shared.

The sample population of this study was purposive, in that only practising family historians were invited to participate. This inclusion criteria were explicitly outlined in the Participant Information Statement, and on the first page of the online survey. Respondents were recruited via social media through four Facebook groups, and through invitations

sent to 280 family and local history societies Australia-wide to be distributed among their members. It is worth noting that these family and local history societies were not exclusively Anglo-Celtic. Invitations were sent to all societies listed and included family and local societies representing many different ethnic groups in Australia, such as the Greek, Italian, Chinese communities, for example. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, it was not possible to see which societies individuals might have belonged to, or how many individuals from each society completed the survey.

Demographic data collected revealed that women represented 76% of the sample and men 24%; most respondents (72%) identified as being of Anglo-Celtic ethnic or cultural background; respondents were highly educated, with 75% completing study of various forms post-secondary school. Of this highly educated group, 47% of those surveyed had studied at university, and more than half of these (27%) had studied at the postgraduate level. Ages of respondents ranged from 16 to 91, with an average age of 54 years.

Data was coded in two iterations. Firstly, the data were read to establish codes which were then tabulated with the name of the code, a description, an example, and the number of times the code appeared in the data. First-level coding resulted in 34 codes (see Supplementary Materials). Second-level coding organised the identified codes and aligned them to Rüsen's (1996, 2004, 2012) 'Typology of Historical Consciousness' to untangle the different types of historical thinking present in the data. This second-level recoding was undertaken systematically, with each code evaluated against the defining features of each typological level, and carefully adjudicated where borderline cases arose most notably in the codes 'Temporal continuum' ( $n = 83$ ) and 'Narratives' ( $n = 83$ ), which were assigned to genetic consciousness on the basis of their processual framing, though it is acknowledged that reclassifying portions of these codes would adjust the proportional distribution accordingly. The two combined iterations of data analysis revealed what history means to some of Australia's family historians.

The survey data, as expected, was diverse. Respondents' ideas of history ranged from the prosaic and superficial ("History is the past" r#738), to the deeply personal ("It's the history of my family" r#84), to the conceptually rich, as exemplified by respondent 402 who wrote that

The study of history is a crucial vehicle for understanding, for knowledge. Clearly, historical narratives can never eradicate the subjectivity of their authors, but they remain more open, accessible, questionable and revisable than other forms of scholarship. My own training was dominated by logico-deductive processes, complemented by dysfunctional or narrow empirical techniques. I eventually jettisoned my formal academic training and became a self-taught historical researcher and historian.

In total, 34 codes were identified in the first-level coding of the data. The 34 original codes were then aligned to the different 'types' of historical consciousness identified by Rüsen and are presented in Table 1 below.

As Table 1 indicates, just over half of survey respondents' notions of what 'history' meant to them could be identified as a 'traditional' historical consciousness (50.5%), comprising thirteen original codes. Notably, however, the second-largest grouping, at 27.3% of all coded responses, was 'genetic' historical consciousness. This finding warrants careful discussion given the theoretical expectation that genetic and critical consciousness represent more developmentally advanced orientations not typically associated with lay historical engagement. Exemplary and critical historical consciousness each accounted for approximately eleven percent of the data.

**Table 1.** Codes Aligned to Rüsen's (1996, 2004, 2012) Typology of Historical Consciousness ( $n = 1406$ ).

| Type of Historical Consciousness | Codes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <i>n</i> | %     |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Traditional                      | 'The past' ( $n = 220$ ); Family as history ( $n = 141$ ); Ordinary people ( $n = 55$ ); Personal origins ( $n = 55$ ); Who we are/cultural background ( $n = 45$ ); Love it ( $n = 38$ ); Important & interesting ( $n = 36$ ); Connections & belonging ( $n = 36$ ); Facts ( $n = 27$ ); The truth ( $n = 21$ ); Learning about the past ( $n = 17$ ); Hate history ( $n = 10$ ); Remembrance ( $n = 9$ ) | 710      | 50.5% |
| Critical                         | Self/identity ( $n = 60$ ); Finding & recording information ( $n = 31$ ); Interpretation & perspective ( $n = 22$ ); Boring to interesting ( $n = 21$ ); Multifaceted ( $n = 18$ ); Distortion ( $n = 3$ )                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 155      | 11.0% |
| Exemplary                        | Lessons ( $n = 60$ ); Understanding people of the past ( $n = 55$ ); GH in context of family ( $n = 32$ ); Answers ( $n = 7$ ); Repetition ( $n = 3$ )                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 157      | 11.2% |
| Genetic                          | Foundation of present & social development ( $n = 101$ ); Temporal continuum ( $n = 83$ ); Narratives ( $n = 83$ ); Contextualised people & events ( $n = 33$ ); Knowledge ( $n = 31$ ); More than dates & events ( $n = 21$ ); Time travel ( $n = 13$ ); Change & continuity ( $n = 10$ ); Chronology ( $n = 4$ ); Empathy ( $n = 3$ ); Cause & effect ( $n = 2$ )                                         | 384      | 27.3% |

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1. Traditional Historical Consciousness

Traditional historical consciousness is the most pervasive type in this dataset, appearing across thirteen first-level codes, the three largest of which were 'The past' ( $n = 220$ ), 'Family as history' ( $n = 141$ ), and 'Ordinary people' ( $n = 55$ ). This distribution is unsurprising given the motivational profile of family history researchers, for whom the primary impetus is typically identity-seeking and generational connection. When asked to provide a definition of what history meant to them, the largest group of respondents did so in ways that treated the past as an unchangeable guide, reinforcing identity through continuity and memory without requiring critical examination.

Often, a populist view of history was provided, with many defining it as merely 'the past'. This prosaic conception is problematic according to the scholarly literature, as the transformation of 'the past' into 'history' is a highly selective and cognitive process (see in particular Lee 2004b; Rüsen 1996, 2012), one in which many scholars argue resolutely demarcates 'the past' from 'history'. Other respondents wrote of history being a collection of 'facts' and that history itself was the process of finding and recording accurate information, as respondent 614 argued:

History means I can establish the FACTS<sup>1</sup> from reliable, usually primary, sources. This distinguishes it from "speculation" "family story", "legend" "myth". There is a glorious moment in this process when "family story" is actually verified by primary records and becomes history. I'm a historian when I can reach that outcome.

Whilst this is not incorrect, it is a limited definition of history. History, that is, the transformation of 'the past' utilising the cognitive processes of the human mind, undoubtedly begins this transformative process with the gathering of 'facts' and other historical information, which aligns strongly to first-order historical conceptual understandings of the history discipline; one in which this and many other studies have shown family historians to be competent. However, as argued (see in particular Lee 1983, 2004b; Lévesque 2008), such first-order historical concepts require the addition of second-order historical conceptual understanding to be able to think historically and understand the discipline of history in its entirety.

The classic formulation of traditional consciousness as identity stabilised through inherited norms was apparent across numerous responses. Respondent 1396 framed family history as “a road map of where we came from, and why, and when, and in what circumstances, and where they settled, and their hardships, trials and tribulations”, adding that it “provides me with a sense of generational connection and an explanation of how our personalities and character are formed over time”. The past here is non-negotiable in its authority; it does not require critique, only tracing. Similarly, respondent 1194 described history as “belonging, heritage and connection to country and family”, emphasising “not forgetting where you come from” which is a classically traditional formulation in which the past is a stable, shared inheritance that anchors present identity. Respondent 195 distilled this to its most concise expression: “Part of our make-up. It makes us what we are. ‘Where do you come from’ is pretty apt”. This positions the past as determinative and authoritative, requiring no interpretation or critique, simply acceptance.

Other respondents defining history foundationally spoke of history being ‘the truth’ of the past, as evidenced by respondent 1110 who wrote that “History is full of excitement and the reality of what happened in the past”. This emphasises a lack of metahistorical understanding. Claiming that documented ‘history’ is the truth of past events allows no scope for the critical analysis of perspective, interpretation, or contextualisation. Hermeneutically speaking, this mode of thought aligns to a conservative (or traditional) hermeneutic approach to documents (Gallagher 1992) which appears antithetical to the current post-modern landscape of historical inquiry. According to postmodern scholar Robert Parkes (2011), one can never know the ‘truth’ of any one particular historical document. Even the author of the document in question is changed upon interaction with the text, known as a fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1992), and therefore can never again approach the document identically, thus rendering the ‘truth’ of the document null and void.

A large sub-group within the traditional category were those whose responses were labelled as ‘Personalisation of history’ due to the respondents’ focus on themselves and their family as a means of defining what history meant to them. For respondent 578, history is

NOT what I was taught at high school. . . ‘facts’ on British Empire. I failed, couldn’t be bothered. What it does mean is an exploration of lives of people through the generations, and how the ‘big’ things, e.g., Plague, Great Fire of London, Land enclosures, Highland Clearances, Industrial Revolution caused poverty and crime, chronic illnesses, etc. affected my ancestors, and hence led to emigration. If history had been all about me when I was at school, I would have embraced it.

This sentiment was echoed by respondent 513 who claimed that “when I was at school, I detested history as a school subject. Through family history research I have become interested in events in the wider world that would have influenced the lives of my ancestors”. A number of respondents defined history through the lens of ordinary people, speaking of “the common people and their contribution to society. Not wars etc.” (r#200), and told of history being more than dates and events, as respondent 14 explained: “history is now much more than dates to me. . . it is about the experiences that people lived through and their struggles and successes”. Notably, while this latter formulation carries a developmental quality, it is the phrase ‘now much more’ which signals a reflective shift while the primary orientation remains traditional in its emphasis on lived heritage and familial identification rather than on process or change.

### 3.2. Critical Historical Consciousness

Critical historical consciousness, while present in a minority of responses (11.0%,  $n = 155$ ), was notable for its intensity when it did appear. It clustered around codes that ex-

plicitly addressed the epistemology of historical knowledge: ‘Interpretation & perspective’ ( $n = 22$ ), ‘Distortion’ ( $n = 3$ ), and ‘Multifaceted’ ( $n = 18$ ). Critical consciousness manifested most clearly in respondents who challenged or deconstructed inherited traditions, used the past critically to enable emancipation, or constructed an explicitly counter-narrative relationship to institutionalised history.

The concept of interpretation was represented by respondent 1032, who argued that history is “the study and interpretation of the past. We can only do that with those parts of the past for which there are some form of records still extant. For most of ‘history’ we will never know what happened, we only perceive—and vaguely at that most of the time—what the results were”. The scare quotes around ‘history’ itself signal a critical awareness that what is transmitted as history is a partial, mediated, with incomplete construction. The epistemological humility here (‘we only perceive, vaguely’) challenges the authority of inherited historical narratives, positioning the knower as inherently limited and the record as inherently suspect. Respondent 1162 similarly offered: “A RECORD OF PAST EVENTS ALBEIT WITH THE BIAS OF HINDSIGHT AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL PREJUDICES” [emphasis in original quotation] as an explicit acknowledgement of bias and culturally laden production that refuses to accept inherited historical accounts at face value.

A particularly notable feature of critical consciousness in this dataset is its embodied and autobiographical character: respondents do not merely theorise critique, they narrate a personal rupture with an earlier, uncritical relationship to history. Respondent 402’s ‘jettisoning’ of formal academic training (cited above) is the clearest example, but respondent 578’s categorical rejection of school history (“NOT what I was taught at high school”) similarly represents an emancipatory break with an officially transmitted, institutional version of the past in favour of a counter-narrative centred on marginalised and structural experience. The critical respondents are typically those with more research experience, and several have consciously emancipated themselves from institutionally transmitted historical narratives in favour of more contextually sensitive and perspectival understandings.

Respondent 23 displayed critical consciousness at a methodological level, deliberately refusing the language of truth and fact: “I would love to use terms like ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ but they are highly misleading when it comes to history”. The deliberate scare-quoting of these terms represents a critical epistemological stance: the respondent deconstructs the transparency of historical knowledge and insists on cultural contextualisation, refusing to grant any historical account unmediated authority. Others were deeply critical of established historical discourse; respondent 599 wrote that historical knowledge meant “being able to cut through the lies and propaganda that is propagated in the media and, unfortunately, by current politically motivated historians”, deploying historical knowledge as a counter-hegemonic resource for resisting the distortions of authoritative sources, including the media and professional historians alike. Respondent 531 captured the layered, constructed nature of historical knowledge from a family history perspective: “since doing this sort of research I see history as a narrative that has many layers to it and finding out about ancestors brings to life aspects of the stories that make up historical ‘fact’”.

### 3.3. Exemplary Historical Consciousness

Exemplary consciousness was the third most prominent typological grouping (11.2%,  $n = 157$ ), concentrated primarily in codes relating to ‘Lessons’ ( $n = 60$ ), ‘Understanding people of the past’ ( $n = 55$ ), and ‘GH in context of family’ ( $n = 32$ ). A well-represented group of respondents believed that history was primarily a pedagogic tool, existing to educate those in the present or the future. To these respondents, history was a lesson to be learned or a warning to be heeded: “If we don’t learn from the past then we are doomed to repeat it” (r#1009). This Santayana-derived formulation was among the most

frequently encountered phrasings in the dataset, appearing across multiple respondents in varied forms. Importantly, many respondents who exhibit exemplary consciousness treat historical lessons as self-evident rather than derived: they do not specify what the lessons are, only affirm that they exist. This suggests a relatively unreflective deployment of the exemplary frame, operating more as a culturally scripted articulation of history's value than as an established moral epistemology.

The desire to identify commonalities with past people was another marker of exemplary consciousness. Respondent 844 wrote that "I think the past is very important and interesting. I can see if I have anything in common with people of the past", thus illuminating a cross-temporal pattern-matching orientation in which history is a repository of universal human constants that transcend historical context. Respondent 936 articulated the twin goals of the exemplary orientation directly: "It is so important that we read and research so that we can find answers to questions that we may have, also to help us not make the same mistakes". The phrase 'the same mistakes' implies that mistakes are recurrent and pattern-like, which is precisely the universal quality that exemplary consciousness attributes to historical events.

Some respondents in this group argued that history is the foundation of the present, responsible for our shared cultural and social norms and values, as exemplified by respondent 94 who wrote that "History is the foundation of us. It is the basis of today. History is where we have come from, and where we are going". Others wrote of history as a means of contextualisation through the examination of historical themes, for example migratory push/pull factors ("understanding history is understanding why my ancestors came to Australia. What the conditions were like in Germany, and why they moved" r#12). These explanations of history are not incorrect; yet the idea of learning from the past can be perceived as a function of history as opposed to a definition, and most respondents in this group made no attempt to critically analyse the narratives they referenced.

### 3.4. Genetic Historical Consciousness

The second-largest typological grouping, and analytically the most striking finding of this study, was genetic historical consciousness, accounting for 27.3% ( $n = 384$ ) of all coded responses. This finding is theoretically significant. Genetic consciousness is, in Rüsen's (1996, 2012) framework, the most developmentally sophisticated orientation: it emphasises change as the source of meaning, understands the present as the outcome of an intelligible historical trajectory, and frames identity not as inherited but as constituted through an ongoing developmental process. That over a quarter of respondents in a self-selected lay population demonstrated this orientation merits careful interpretation.

Codes corresponding to genetic consciousness included 'Foundation of the present & social development' ( $n = 101$ ), 'Temporal continuum' ( $n = 83$ ), 'Narratives' ( $n = 83$ ), 'Contextualised people & events' ( $n = 33$ ), and 'Change & continuity' ( $n = 10$ ). A methodological note is warranted here: several of these codes sit at typological boundaries. Many respondents who articulate a past–present–future temporal arc do so in the service of lesson-extraction (exemplary) rather than developmental understanding (genetic), and the 'Narratives' code encompasses responses whose processual orientation was not always unambiguous. Reclassifying even a portion of these borderline cases would reduce the genetic share and close the gap between types. This interpretive uncertainty is acknowledged and flagged as a limitation of the second-level coding.

The most clearly genetic responses were distinguished by their explicit attention to process, interaction, and recursive change which are features absent from traditional and exemplary responses. Respondent 1211, whose words serve as this paper's epigraph, articulated the constitutive dimension of historical consciousness most vividly:

What a complicated question! History is both the stories we put together to try and understand where we have come from; it is also part of the continuum of past–present–future within which we live and provides meaning to our lives. I imagine that trying to live without history would be like suffering amnesia or dementia, it would be very unhealthy.

The concept of the ‘continuum of past–present–future’ as constitutive of human meaning-making is the core formulation of genetic historical consciousness. The amnesia/dementia metaphor further articulates the idea that historical consciousness is not merely informational but ontologically necessary, and that identity and meaning are constituted by developmental temporal positioning.

Respondent 1028 offered the most theoretically sophisticated genetic response in the dataset, explicitly modelling history as a recursive, dynamic system:

History to me is an inclusive term covering people and the historical, political, economic contexts in which the people function, over time. History to me covers the interaction between people and their contexts over time. . .the changes in people and also in their social contexts. . .the choices people make which in turn change the context for following generations, and so on. An interaction of people by context by choice by time.

The phrase ‘and so on’ signals an understanding of history as an open-ended developmental process. The recognition that individual choices alter conditions for subsequent generations embeds personal agency within a developmental temporal logic, a sophisticated genetic formulation rarely present in lay historical consciousness research. Respondent 867 similarly framed history as “a dialogue between the past and the present” in which “social, political and economic context as well as the basic family narrative” combine to produce depth of historical understanding.

Respondent 527 distilled the genetic orientation concisely: “History is continuing change. I try to understand how these people lived back then, the hardship and how society is forever evolving”. The phrases ‘continuing change’ and ‘forever evolving’ are precise genetic formulations: history is not a static body of content but an ongoing developmental process. Many respondents claimed to be more interested in history as a result of contextualising their ancestors in their time period, as typified by respondent 103 who wrote that “history means a lot more to me now that I have traced relatives through historical events”, a statement that reflects the respondent’s own developmental engagement with the past, indicated a self-reflexive growth that mirrors the genetic type’s core structure. For others, there was no demarcation between history and family history as genres, as respondent 1396 writes: “I am not so much interested in ‘history’ . . .this is a particular focus on family history for me and this history provides me with a sense of generational connection and an explanation of how our personalities and character are formed over time”.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine what ‘history’ means to Australian family historians, deploying Rüsen’s (1996, 2012) Typology of Historical Consciousness as an analytical framework to categorise the diverse definitions offered by 1406 survey respondents. The findings reveal a complex and nuanced picture that resists any simple characterisation of family historians as historical naïfs operating at the margins of disciplinary consciousness.

The dominance of traditional historical consciousness (50.5%) was anticipated, given the motivational profile of family history researchers, for whom the primary impetus is typically identity-seeking and generational connection. The past, for this majority, functions as a stabilising authority that answers the question ‘who am I?’ without necessarily requiring

critical examination. Many respondents defined history in terms of their own families and ancestors, emphasising connections and belonging, personal origins, and the inheritance of cultural identity. For these respondents, the boundaries between ‘history’ and ‘family history’ were often non-existent: they viewed the two as one and the same. This lack of differentiation is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it may highlight a disinterest in history as a broader discipline and indicates that only the familial is historically consequential for these respondents. Indeed, many respondents were explicit in expressing their former dislike of history proper and told of a paradigmatic shift which occurred after their families could be located within historical events, as typified by respondent 703 who wrote that “Once I wasn’t interested, however, now history almost consumes me”. Secondly, and more productively, the blurring of these lines may signify that there is no demarcation that can meaningfully be drawn between ‘history’ and ‘family history’. Rather, they might be viewed as kaleidoscopic as opposed to being categorised as separate entities, which is itself an insight into the democratisation of historical practice in the contemporary moment (see in particular, [Shaw 2021](#)).

The most theoretically significant finding, however, is the substantial proportion of respondents demonstrating genetic historical consciousness (27.3%). That over a quarter of a lay research population framed history as a dynamic developmental process, understanding the present as the product of an evolving historical trajectory, attending to the interaction of people and contexts across time, and situating the self within a past–present–future continuum, suggests that sustained engagement with genealogical evidence produces a strong capacity for developmental historical reasoning. Many respondents spoke explicitly of context and of the ability to place themselves and their ancestors in time and space; for them, history was not simply a record of what happened but an interpretive apparatus for understanding how and why the present came to be as it is. This temporal self-location, and the sense of being positioned within an ongoing historical arc, is precisely the orientation that genetic historical consciousness describes ([Rüsen 2012](#)). It is also, notably, the orientation that connects family history most productively to the broader historical discipline, insofar as it requires engagement with change, continuity, causation, and context. It is important to note, however, that the 27.3% genetic figure may be inflated by borderline codes, and further investigation with more tightly defined coding criteria would be valuable in confirming this finding.

The near-symmetry of exemplary (11.2%) and critical (11.0%) historical consciousness is analytically interesting. Both types represent minority orientations requiring a degree of reflective distance from the past that the majority of respondents did not exhibit. Exemplary historical consciousness, concentrated in lesson-extraction formulations of the ‘doomed to repeat it’ variety, was culturally prevalent but unreflective, as respondents affirmed that history holds lessons without specifying what they are or examining how they are derived. Critical historical consciousness, while less numerically abundant, was characterised by greater epistemic depth: those respondents who demonstrated it narrated not merely an intellectual position but a personal rupture with an earlier, uncritical engagement with the past. The critical respondents are typically those with more education or research experience, and several had consciously emancipated themselves from institutionally transmitted historical narratives in favour of more contextually sensitive and perspectival understandings.

A further finding that emerged from the data was that a large number of respondents defined history using a micro-historical lens, focusing on the lives of ordinary people rather than historical elites. Micro-history, or ‘history from below’, is defined as the democratisation of historical interest “to include groups other than the historical elites” ([Wilson 2005](#), p. 85). [Ginzburg \(1993\)](#), whilst describing his own micro-historical work,

explained that micro-history was usually the product of serendipitous research, a definition which aligns to the work of many practising family historians as they gather together various fragmentary documents to construct their familial histories. This emphasis on the personalisation of the past, in which history becomes meaningful when an ancestor can be contextually located within it, reverberated through much of the data across multiple typological levels. However, there is a caveat: this micro-historical methodology has been argued to be more controversial than other historical lenses, particularly for its failure to view an historical event in relation to its whole (Wilson 2005), and its popularity among respondents here does not necessarily signal that family historians are reading individual lives within fully contextualised macro-historical frameworks.

The overall pattern aligns broadly with Rüsen's (1996, 2004) own developmental theory, in which traditional and exemplary types represent the default orientation of everyday historical consciousness, while critical and genetic types require explicit cultivation through reflective practice, education, or epistemic disruption. For researchers in history education and public history, this distribution suggests that the family history research context, despite its experiential depth and the emotional investment respondents bring to it, does not automatically generate the epistemological rupture associated with critical consciousness or, indeed, the reflexively developmental orientation of genetic consciousness in all practitioners. Yet the sizeable genetic cohort demonstrates that some family historians do develop sophisticated developmental understandings of the past through their research, even in the absence of formal historical training. This supports existing arguments that the binary between 'professional' and 'amateur' history is less stable than it might appear (T. Evans 2022; Shaw 2021), and suggests that targeted pedagogical intervention may be productive in scaffolding movement from traditional and exemplary orientations toward more critically and developmentally sophisticated engagements with the past.

For intergenerational family connection, these findings suggest that family history research functions as an active mechanism of transmission rather than passive nostalgia, with respondents' traditional and genetic orientations pointing to two distinct ways this transmission occurs: as inherited, stable identity for the majority, and as a developmental sense-making process for a substantial minority. For the relationship between professional and non-professional historians, the data suggest the boundary is better understood as a spectrum of disciplinary engagement than a fixed division, with implications for how academic historians, archives, and heritage institutions might design collaborative or educative initiatives that meet family historians where their historical consciousness already sits, rather than assuming a uniform deficit in historical thinking. Looking ahead, as record digitisation continues to lower the practical barriers to family history research and as Australia's demographic composition diversifies beyond the largely Anglo-Celtic cohort surveyed here, the forms of historical consciousness identified in this study may themselves shift, underscoring the need for continued research into how memory-making within Australian families evolves alongside the tools and communities that sustain it.

This research contributes empirical data to ongoing international conversations around the definitions, meanings, and purposes of history. It demonstrates that historical research is a multifaceted endeavour undertaken by a diverse group of people with varying motivations and levels of engagement with historiographical concepts. It also demonstrates that family historians, while often learning the disciplinary nuances of their craft outside formal institutions, are nonetheless engaging with history in ways that are, at least in part, genuinely nuanced. Understanding how this community conceptualises history enriches our grasp of the broader historical landscape and further strengthens possibilities for collaboration between academic and non-professional historians in the ongoing (re)production of the past.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/genealogy10030086/s1>. Table S1. Coded responses to the question ‘what does history mean to you?’.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Capitalisation is reproduced verbatim from the respondent’s original written answers and reflects the respondent’s own emphasis, not editorial styling.

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