

EVALUATING THE EDUCATIONAL IMPACT OF A FAMILY HISTORY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT. Articles have been written describing personal genealogy or family history projects, genograms, and family chronologies as exercises for teaching in a variety of disciplines including marriage and family studies. Little empirical data is available to support the claims of effectiveness. This article examines the empirical efficacy of personal family history projects as an instructional tool in marriage and family relations. A personal family history project is the major assignment in an introductory course in marriage and family studies at a medium-sized Southeast region university ($N=402$). The University's family history project is designed to help marriage and family students connect classroom concepts with their own family of origin experiences in an effort to help students to develop an appreciation of themselves within the contextual framework of their families and to relate the principles of family functioning to their own family experiences. Findings suggest that the family history project increases students' knowledge of their family histories as well as their research and critical thinking skills. Additional findings are discussed.

Many students enrolled in introductory classes in marriage and family relations have only a vague idea about how families function. Even though most intend to eventually have a family and want it to be successful, they rarely appreciate the impact that their families of origin will have. Few realize that, by understanding their family of origin, they can make better-reasoned decisions for their futures. Students are not even sure what questions they need to ask in order to understand their families better. The Family History Project is an attempt to bridge the gap between unknown background information about their individual families and the theoretical constructs articulated in class.

Articles have been written describing personal family history projects, genealogical projects, genogram projects, and family chronology projects as exercises for teaching in a variety of disciplines, from kindergarten (Heiss, 2003) through college (Gordon, 2001). Such projects

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have claimed to provide instructional strategies for teaching history (Carter, 1995; Heiss, 2003), improving writing skills (Mitchell, 1998), integrating history and writing (Carter, 1995) or facilitating cultural awareness (Melendez, 1999). In addition, personal family history projects are suggested to be a springboard to the students' understanding of their own roles within their communities (Koman, 2000), improving students' understandings of family dynamics (Bahr, 1990), facilitating undergraduate students' career decision making (Malott & Magnuson, 2004) and improving online research skills (Dyrli, 2000). In these papers, however, little empirical data are provided to support these assertions.

Family history projects have the advantage of integrating a popular widespread pastime in America. The popularity of tracing one's family history has increased to the point that approximately 60% of Americans reported an interest in researching their family history (Gallop-Goddman, 2000; Shulte, 2002). Often students have a relative, the family historian, who has done considerable work on their family's history and will share information with the student. Other students find that their relatives want a copy when the projects are completed. In fact, the first semester the lead author assigned this project, ten projects were submitted for early grading so that students could photocopy them and use them as gifts.

Differences in Genealogy, Personal Family History and History of Families

One must differentiate between the concepts of genealogy and family history. "Genealogy is the science of tracing ... [one's] ancestry" (Willard & Willard, 1997, p.5). The word "comes from two Greek words, one meaning 'race' or 'family' and the other 'theory' or 'science'" (Willard & Willard 1997, p.5). Genealogy is the platform on which a family history is constructed. It is the research into ancestors' pasts: the names, dates, places and life events occurred. It is essentially the "who," "what," "when," and "where" of the events in an ancestor's

life. It is organized with family group sheets and pedigree charts and should be meticulously documented by adequate evidence. According to Vandagriff (1993), “Maintaining records of sources is vital It is important to be able to identify the source of . . . [the] information” (p. 17) so that one may determine its accuracy. Genealogy is the gateway to any further work into a family’s past. Thus, genealogical research is the frame on which a family history is constructed.

A personal family history begins with genealogical research and pushes further into the family stories. It is the window through which the researcher can peer into the lives of ordinary people as they worked through their life challenges within the contexts of the larger world events (Mills, 2002). It allows the researcher to discover and to hypothesize about ancestors’ personalities, the causes of family decisions, and the relationships that existed among family members. In reconstructing the ancestors’ lives from birth to death, one begins to understand the effects that life cycle events, as well as the impacts of ethnicity, immigration, war and poverty, have on the family (Mills, 2002). The family history allows the researcher to hypothesize about the “why” of their family. For students in marriage and family studies, the “why” begins to make sense in the context of the theoretical foundations of family science.

Another distinction that needs to be made is the difference between the study of the history of the family and the concept of a personal family history. The academic field of family history examines the historical changes in the family in a collective sense. Such study includes the demographic analysis of the family structures and the sociological study of the family unit. It incorporates the “anthropological investigation into the differences and similarities in the family unit across cultures” (Null, 1985,. p.31). For students undertaking a family history project for the first time, it may be necessary to explain the differences between studying the collective history of families as opposed to the study of the history of a family or one individual. Throughout the

literature, personal family history projects are commonly referred to as family history projects. That will be true in this work as well.

What is a Family History Project?

A family history is a narrative describing the history of an individual's family. It is supported by a collection of family group sheets, pedigree charts, family documents, pictures and other related materials that provide evidence that the narrative has been researched and the information presented is correct. Personal family history and genealogy projects use commonly accepted methods of historical research for collecting and reporting facts about an individual family. The facts include, but are not limited to, family members' names; birth, death and marriage dates and locations; and medical information. Information about individuals' immigration and citizenship, military service, property ownership and probate records are also valuable in providing the researcher with the context in which the family lived and functioned. In addition, the researcher can enhance the genealogical narrative with family stories describing life cycle events, as well as family members' interactions with their communities and larger historical events.

The general pattern of researching one's past is similar to the Human Ecology Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) with the individual located in the center. One should begin with one's self (Vandagriff, 1993) and the information that is known. Home is the best place to start searching for missing information (Willard & Willard, 1997). This information is collected by interviewing family members and researching family personal records such as family bibles, personally maintained files of birth, death and marriage records, photo albums, letters and diaries or journals. For one studying women's history, their diaries give clues about their daily lives,

their chores, their friends and family members (Stewart, 2005). Sometimes, pictures of ancestors have valuable information written on the back.

Once the researcher has completed the initial search within his or her own family, the library with its collections of newspapers, local histories and governmental documents becomes the next step (Crandall, 1986). After completing this stage, the researcher should move into the area of existing governmental documents and records. Often the information provided by relatives and family records will guide one's search through governmental records by providing clues as to when life events occurred that would have generated a government record. For example, a notation in the family bible that a marriage occurred on a certain day would direct the researcher to look for the marriage license as documentation of the event. Associations and church records often contain information about the ancestor's past. The same wedding that was notated in the family bible may well be documented in the church records if the marriage was performed by a clergy member or occurred in the church. Newspapers often provide the details that help the researcher to incorporate the event into a family story. A journalist may have described the same wedding providing details such as occupation, future residence of the bride and groom, as well as information about their parents and other family members who might have been present. In addition, one may be able to locate their relatives on passenger lists for ships, which help to tell part of the family's migration story and provides clues to one's ethnic heritage (Colletta, 2002).

Clinical Importance and Application

Knowledge of one's family history can have medical and mental health care consequences. Physicians and other health care providers have increasingly recognized the utility of the three-generation pedigree in assessment of common disease and inherited genetic

abnormalities (Wattendorft & Hadley, 2005). Knowledge of one's family health history is so important that

The U.S. Surgeon General in cooperation with other agencies with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has launched a national public health campaign, called the U.S. Surgeon General's Family History Initiative, to encourage all American families to learn more about their family health history (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006, Family History Initiative Page, Introduction section, para 2).

Researchers who conducted the 2004 HealthStyles annual survey indicated that although, 96.3% of the respondents considered knowledge of family health history important, "only 29.8% reported actively collecting health information from their relatives to develop a family health history" (Yoon et al. 2004, p 2). Clinically, health care providers take medical family histories (Wattendorf & Hadley, 2005). This cannot be accomplished unless the patient knows their parents' and grandparents' genealogies and medical histories. In fact, in his study of the quality of medical family history interviews, Romitti (1997) found that mothers who participate in family genealogy practices were more likely to correctly identify relatives with birth defects than those who did not have a working knowledge of their genealogy.

Just as family genealogies and medical histories are important to physicians, the histories of family relationships also are important to mental health professionals. Genograms are a therapeutic tool commonly used by mental health providers to diagram the family's construction and denote relationships between members. Mental health workers cannot construct adequate or accurate genograms without basic genealogical information. "A genogram is a format for drawing a family tree that records information about family members and their relationships over at least three generations" (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985, p. 1). Genogram construction requires

that the reporter of the information know the same information that would be part of a family history project. The clinician collects facts about the family such as births, marriages, divorces, deaths, sibling positions, employment, and ethnic and religious backgrounds. If the family seems amenable, McGoldrick and Gerson (1985) suggested that “the clinician may start one or more family members on a project of historical researchFamily members are encouraged to seek more information by speaking to other relatives, consulting family bibles, or obtain medical or genealogical records” (p. 33).

Family History Projects in Undergraduate Classes

Although not foreign to undergraduate classes, family history and genealogy assignments have increased in use and popularity (Jeffery, 1974; Null, 1985). Family science students at Brigham Young University have been assigned genograms, the clinical version of a family history or genealogy projects, and family chronologies to help students clarify components of their family experiences and to personalize family concepts and principles (Bahr, 1990). Family history projects have been assigned in undergraduate sociology classes to explore cultural diversity and to link sociological concepts learned in class to actual data collected (Aminoff, 1995).

Undergraduate history classes across the United States use family history projects to meet a variety of objectives. These reasons include: 1) making the student care about the course content, 2) helping them grasp the concept that some knowledge of American history will help explain why the United States is in its present form (Culbert, 1973), and 3) making the course content relevant to contemporary students (Jeffrey, 1974). It can be used to teach a model of historical inquiry and demonstrate how research can be fun and exciting. Additionally, such projects can be tailored to the learning-to-write and writing-to-learn models, espoused by

Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs (Stephens, 1994). Family history projects also have been used in teacher education classes to teach prospective teachers skills in taking oral histories, integrating disciplines, conducting active learning projects and assisting students self-actualization work (Johnson, 1978). Indeed, some colleges have developed entire courses in genealogy and family history (Southwick & Kassebaum, 1984). At one university, the projects have contributed to genealogical archives. Completed family history projects at Louisiana State University have been stored as part of the Department of Archive and Manuscripts' Family History Collection (Culbert, 1973).

The Family History Project

In an introductory course in marriage and family, students learn about family functioning. These classes are typically approached from a family systems perspective and a family life cycle model. As most college students are in the launching phase of the family life cycle, few have undertaken the start of their own families. Many of the principles and challenges of family functioning are therefore abstract (e.g. marriage, parenting, middle-age, retirement and death). "A family's past and the relationship family members have to it prove important clues about family rules, expectations, and patterns of organization" (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985, p.34).

Learning objectives

The objective of family history project is designed to make those concepts more relevant by having students make connections between the abstract principles and the information supplied by their parents and grandparents' generations. It is a way to help students connect their developing personalities and sense of families with their beginnings in their families of origin. Indeed, Lambert (1996) found that younger respondents in his study were more likely to do genealogy as a way of exploring the roots of their identities.

The secondary objective of the family history project is to increase students' research and interviewing skills by collecting data from family members and using internet databases to search local, state or federal governmental documents and records. The researcher can find databases of state and federal records, chat rooms, query pages, the USGenweb project, and articles about how to conduct research on the web. Such records include births, deaths, and marriages, military service, land transactions, legal judgment, and immigration records. Researching one's family history is an excellent way of acquiring research skills (Dyrli, 2000).

Many of the databases that are online provide the researcher access to primary sources. Many have been digitized so that the researcher can view an actual copy of the original source record. By using these materials, students can discover information about their family history and draw their own conclusions (Lake, 2001).

Advancing the development of critical thinking skills is an underlying objective for many college classes. Critical thinking skills are encouraged by the need to reconcile the perceived or reported differences in genealogical facts. Information in governmental records sometimes varies. For example, the birth date on a federal census record may be different from the date on the birth certificate. Conflicting facts collected from a variety of sources about the same events, which often happens in family history research, pushes the student to use critical thinking skills to resolve the conflicts. Bits and pieces of information from varying sources must be synthesized to create the whole picture of who, where and how the ancestors lived. The sources, or evidence, must be evaluated for its accuracy.

Issues and Difficulties

Students are sometimes perplexed when one relative's account of an event differs from another's or the evidence of the event details (Stephens, 1994). Often the researcher finds

conflicting evidence that must be reconciled according to the source credibility. The reality is that plainly stated facts are more the exception than the rule (Mills, 1999). Although most parents and relatives are pleased to be asked about their family history, “some have been indifferent and a few downright hostile” (Jeffrey, 1974, p. 369). Opposition is often related to family secrets and may require discretion, tact, and some detective work to succeed (Vandagriff, 1993). Some students will hit brick walls that are insurmountable in the short few months of a semester long class. Even with the availability of internet databases, students who live a great distance from relatives may find collecting information impossible. It is therefore advisable for the instructor to have an alternative assignment. These assignments can include a community history (Stephenson, 1994) or a family culture, ethnicity and heritage paper, both of which can be drawn from objective resources rather than being family dependent.

Lastly, some students who are adopted or who come from divorced homes report knowing little to nothing about their biological family history. Therefore, they opt to conduct a study about their adoptive family or about a step-parent’s family genealogy. The downside for these students is not having access to their own biological data. However, there are still much to gain by understanding the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual histories of those who are not blood related but who have helped shape their lives.

Advantages

One of the advantages of the family history project is that it appeals to students of all of abilities (Culbert, 1973); most do well if they put effort into the project. Even those who do not have the ability to trace a lineage back for multiple generations, or who have experienced emotional cut-offs with family members, can do a credible job by interpreting what their lack of knowledge regarding their ancestry means to them. Another advantage is that the student is

generally proud of the final product and intends to keep it. Lastly, for some students the project opens up understanding about current family dynamics. It can also lift the emotional embargo on certain relationships and reunite family members who have decided to “lay down the swords” of generations past.

The Family History Project Assignment

The family history project is assigned at the beginning of the semester. Students are encouraged to begin immediately as the project is designed to last for the entire length of the course. Students are given sample pedigree charts, family group sheets, a list of selected web sites, a list of interview questions and an outline of the resulting paper. In order to safeguard the photos, memorabilia, and documents that students use to illustrate their final project, they are requested to turn in only scanned copies or photocopies. The project must fit in a three-ring binder. The completed project is turned in at the end of the semester for a grade.

Grading criteria is based upon completeness and quality of work. No student is penalized for information that he or she could not find due to inaccessible records or uncooperative relatives. Students often present well-reasoned papers that discuss the void or absence of historical information. Students are encouraged to use web-based resources, library collections and to interview relatives. Students are not required to spend large sums of money to purchase certified copies of vital records. Instructors are aware many students are the first in their family to try to document their family history.

The format for the project used in this study was originally designed by the lead author and has been used by a number of instructors at the same institution. It is similar to family history projects in use in other classroom settings. To date there has been no evaluation of its effectiveness as an instructional tool outside of self-reports. The time invested by both faculty

and students in this project is considerable. Students have 10-12 weeks to prepare them and faculty invest two weeks in grading them. The evaluation of the efficacy of the family history project would provide instructors with information regarding whether the project is accomplishing its goals or whether modifications need to be made.

Method

Participants included students enrolled in an introductory marriage and family course at a medium sized Southeast region university. Students were asked to prepare a history of their family as a major project for the class. The investigator, together with two faculty members who have also used the project in their sections of the course, developed the five-page survey instrument. A complete copy of the instrument is available by contacting the lead author. It was based upon learning objectives for the project and class, as well as desired skill acquisition. A pilot study ($N=109$) was done to test the instrument. Modifications were made to improve the instrument.

Students were assessed in a pretest-posttest format. The instrument was designed to capture students' attitudes about researching their families of origin and any genealogical knowledge gained prior to, and subsequent to, undertaking the project.

Need and Impact

Because approximately 300-450 students at this university are enrolled in introductory marriage and family courses each semester, it is important to assess the efficacy of the Family History Project. Anecdotal information has shown that students both enjoy the Family History Project and view it as beneficial. There was little support, however, that indicated that the project accomplished the learning objectives. While this research is applicable to college level courses in marriage and family relations, the impact of this research and its findings extends outside the

boundaries of the university. The project offers an opportunity to support both elementary and secondary teachers who assign similar projects.

Methodology

The primary purpose of the research was to investigate the usefulness of a family history project as an instructional tool in introductory classes in marriage and family relations. The study employed a pretest-posttest design that was approved by the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board, UMCIRB #:04-349. Researchers administered the pretest to students at the beginning of each semester, about the same time as the family history projects were assigned and discussed. Students worked on the projects, as previously described, throughout the semester. The posttest was administered after the projects had been submitted for grading but before students had received their grades.

Surveys from students who completed both the pretest and the posttest were matched and analyzed using SPSS, 13.0 Edition. Pre and posttest comparisons were made by paired t-tests, with a level of significance set at $p < 0.05$. Data are reported as mean \pm standard error of the mean.

Results

Usable responses were obtained from 402 students. Almost all of the students (93.5%) were of traditional college age, with female students (89.2%) outnumbering male (10.8%). Most (95.4%) were single; 3.6% were married; and four students (1.0%) were divorced. The racial/ethnic background of the 402 students was as follows: 72.4% were White; 20.9% African American; 6.7% Asian, Hispanic; Native American or multiracial. Only a small percentage of the students (12.7%) were majors in the Department of Child Development and Family Relations.

After completing the course, students showed a significant increase in their perceived knowledge of family history ($p < .001$). Students were asked, “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being ‘know everything,’ how much do you know about your family’s history?” In the initial questionnaire, students reported their perceived knowledge of family history as $5.22 \pm .08$ on the 10 point scale. Upon completion of the course, this value improved to $6.59 \pm .08$.

Survey responses confirmed an increased student awareness of family history. For example, in response to the question, “What was the highest level of education that any of your grandparents achieved in school?” pretest data showed that 29.6% of students did not know of their grandparents’ educational levels: this figure declined to 14.9% on the posttest. Similarly, with regard to the question “Did your maternal grandparents (you mother’s parents) approve of your parents’ marriage?” 16.8% of students on the pretest did not know if maternal grandparents approved of their parents marriage. This number dropped to 6.2% on the posttest. With regard to “What is your perception of why your great-grandparents married?”, students could choose four responses: “economic security,” “love and companionship,” “don’t know,” or “haven’t thought about it but I am curious.” All but 12 of 71 students apparently satisfied their curiosity about why great grandparents married as the percentage reporting that they “haven’t thought about it, but I am curious” declined from 17.1% to only 2.9% from pretest to posttest (see Table 1).

Students’ opportunities to practice their research skills also increased during the semester. Students had four options in response to the question “How many people have you interviewed in the last year?” Their responses included “none,” “1-5,” “5-10,” and “Too many to count.” The number of students reporting that they had not interviewed anyone during the previous year decreased from 61.3% at the beginning of the semester to 12.5% by the end of the semester. Students were questioned about Internet usage during the previous 12 months. Internet usage

increased from a pretest usage rate of 54.1% to 81.8% by the end of the semester. Responses to the question, “In the past 12 months, how often have you used library resources to conduct research,” indicated less than half of the students were using the library for research.

Interestingly, there was little change in library usage with almost half the students reporting that they had not used the library for research in both the pretest (46.6%) and posttest (43.0%).

Despite the fact that 67.3% of the students indicated they anticipated using a computer program to manage the data collection at the beginning of the project, only 40.4% actually reported that they did so (see Table 2). At the beginning of the project half of the students (51.0%) reported that they intended to continue researching their families’ histories. After completing the project, more students (57.3%) were planning to continue the research.

Discussion

The vast majority of students enrolled in the marriage and family course were White and female. Most were not child development and family relations majors. As most students are not majoring in child development and family relations, the relevancy of a family history project must be established. Research skills gained as a result of researching one’s family history are transferable to other professions and fields of study. History students will be able to use the same online tools and procedures to do general historical research on any family (Dyrli, 2000). Those students preparing for careers as attorneys or paralegals will use these same skills to determine heirship in estate matters. Students in the medical, allied health care and mental health professions will learn to collect the same information from their patients to record medical family histories and genograms. Those who intend to be biographers must use genealogical skills to research the life and ancestry about whom they are writing. Fiction writers can use the

research skills to facilitate character development (Holyer, 2000). Journalism students will note that genealogical material is often used in stories about people.

Students who participated in the Family History Project perceived themselves as more knowledgeable about their families at the end of the course than at the beginning. One student commented: "I have gained tons of knowledge of my family. I did not know that my grandparents had so many siblings. I also heard a lot of stories about people in my family. I feel that I know much more information." Another stated, "I now know where some of my rare medical conditions come from." In addition, a third found "a lot of info that I didn't know and I have gained insight on how my relatives grew up and what kind of medical problems I might face." For an African American student it "was interesting to find out that the majority of them [her ancestors] weren't slaves...It was also great to find out they all owned land much of which is still in the family."

Interestingly, this study shows a shift in the student usage of research tools and resources. Student Internet usage increased from the beginning of the semester to the end. With the proliferation of excellent web based genealogic resources, the Internet is often the most efficient method of searching for documents. For some the Internet is much more accessible than the library. Almost half of the students reported that they had not used a library to conduct historical research. It may be that the ease and utility of the Internet has made the actual library a resource of last resort used only when information can not be found on the Web.

Although students did not take the time to visit the library, many did visit their relatives when searching for information. The frequency of personal interviews also increased as students took the time to interview their relatives and preserve their historical legacies. Concerning the interview process once student commented, "I got to really know and understand relatives that

I'd never thought I would sit and talk to. It sort of was like a door opener for us to communicate.”

Although 67.3% anticipated managing their research data with a computer program, only 40.4% actually did. The 26.9% drop in interest in using a computer program to manage the data may be a result of not wanting to spend the money to purchase software, being afraid of virus issues and not downloading the free software versions from the Internet. The reason may have been that students simply perceived the amount of information that they were accumulating as being manageable without software designed to manage genealogical information.

Conclusion

The family history project appears to be beneficial to students. Not only can it assist them in their personal journey but in their professional one as well. The skills gained through this project may be beneficial when asked by employers to write reports, research historical data, or locate pioneers in their fields. The family history project also appears to highlight familial patterns such as medical, psychological, social, spiritual, and occupational ones, just to name a few. Understanding the origins of family patterns may help students to alter the course of patterns to come. Lastly, in discussions about things such as the family life cycles and family systems theory, students may not see the material from the textbook as noteworthy enough to commit to long-term memory. However, when asked to apply it to something they value or relate to, the material in the text suddenly becomes a tool for life.

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Table 1

Percentages of Student Awareness of Family History

	Pretest	Posttest
Did not know of their grandparents' educational level	29.6%	14.9%
Did not know whether maternal grandparents approved of parents' marriage	16.8%	6.2%
Haven't thought about why grandparents chose to marry	17.1%	2.9%

Table 2

Percentages of Family History Research Skills

	Pretest	Posttest
Students who had not interview anyone in the previous year	61.3%	12.5%
Internet usage for research	54.1%	81.8%
Library usage	46.6%	43.0%
Anticipated vs. actual use of a computer program to manage data collection	67.3%	40.4%
Intend to continue researching family history	51.0%	57.3%