

# It's in the Genes

September 25, 2019

I was in elementary school in the 1980s when I first asked my parents where they came from; when I was told their states of birth (Pennsylvania and Iowa), I asked: “But where before that?” I then learned that I have English and Irish heritage on my father’s side, and that Mom was “full German.” I didn’t think much more about my heritage until I entered college in 1995; the movie *Braveheart* was released that year, and it depicted England as the evil oppressor of Scotland, their northern neighbor. The movie increased my interest in my English heritage, so I entered the world of family history and genealogy to explore my identity — and I have enjoyed investigating my heritage ever since.

Now, as a psychology professor, I see clearly the intra- and interpersonal effects of family history research (FHR) and encourage its use in psychology courses as a teaching technique to increase students’ awareness and critical understanding of psychological concepts. FHR may be integrated into different types of psychology courses, but it may be especially well-suited to introductory courses, which are in need of more teaching techniques that enhance learning (Gurung & Hackathorn, 2018) because of the diversity of topics the courses cover. Because family history is about the self and one’s family’s collective story across “space and time,” it’s the height of personal relevance and therefore provides a context in which principles of psychology can be better understood. Also, at the core of FHR is active learning, which is believed to promote higher levels of thinking about psychological principles (Richmond & Hagan, 2011). FHR also represents an opportunity for interdisciplinary exploration when the student discovers the stories of his or her ancestors in the broader historical, cultural, and sociopolitical context of their time (Ritchey & Bott, 2010). In this article, I share my perspective on how FHR can benefit students of psychology.

For FHR to have the most benefit, it should go beyond an establishment of lineage and manifest instead as a critical look at one’s family history, including an active exploration of sociopolitical and cultural influences on one’s ancestors. This approach, termed *critical family history* (Lee, Kumashiro, & Sleeter, 2015; Sleeter, 2008), offers promise both in helping students understand psychological concepts via exploring the experiences and decisions of people at different points in history and in helping them see how life today features the same triumphs and hardships as in past generations. And the best part of this exploration is that the student possesses the same DNA as the subjects of their research.

There are myriad psychological concepts that could be better understood by engaging in FHR; below I offer a few that may serve as good starting points along with pedagogical suggestions.

## **Identity Formation: Ethnicity and Social Standing**

### **Ethnicity**

The literature on identity, ethnicity, race, and genealogy is vast (e.g., Scodari, 2016; Tutton, 2004) and largely beyond the scope of the present article; however, Americans — especially those of African

(Rotimi, 2003) and European (Sleeter, 2008) descent — largely lose a sense of ethnic identity related to ancestral origins across generations. FHR would be an excellent context for discovering, exploring, and attempting to understand ethnicity and one’s own ethnic background in particular. To achieve this, students may be asked to write a one-page reflection on their specific ancestral origins after having gathered information from parents and grandparents, thinking about what it means to be not simply “White,” for example, but specifically of German or Irish heritage.

## **Social Standing**

Social standing can vary considerably both within an individual’s lifetime and within a family from one generation to another. Students can increase awareness of how it can change over the course of one’s lifetime by conducting a brief review (1 or 2 pages) of or presentation (5 or 10 minutes) on an ancestor’s life and how it helps them understand their own life path (and anticipated future). As part of this effort, the student would provide evidence of both personal (e.g., skill/ability/education level, health, age) and social (e.g., family dynamics, job availability, education access) factors pertaining to his or her ancestor.

## **Belongingness**

Families continue, and you are the present “link in the chain.” I represent a link in my family’s genealogical chain, and my children will likely lengthen the chain with children of their own. Since I am an FHR buff, I already share family stories with my kids — and they often want to learn even more. Beyond entertainment, though, sharing stories about previous generations of the family and being conscientious of how present attitudes, behaviors, and styles of social interactions affect the family is important because these aspects of a family environment tend to be passed down through generations: Children often internalize them and create a similar environment for their own children via a phenomenon termed *transgenerational family memory* (Ferring, 2017). Thus, the way I interact with my sons is likely to continue to affect them throughout their entire lives — as a psychological scientist, I recognize this is consistent with the behaviorist emphasis on the power of the environment in shaping behavior and consolidating preferences and habits. For students to better understand principles of conditioning, they could be given a “Shaping the Family — From One Generation to Another” assignment (a paper or brief presentation) in which they identify family-created environmental conditions that explain mannerisms, attitudes, or preferences of their own.

## **Personal Wellness**

Some traits and characteristics people may want to uncover about ancestors relate to temperament (e.g., a sweet great-grandmother), styles of communication (e.g., the talkative grandfather), and behavioral tendencies (e.g., alcoholism, gambling, church-going) because these things “run in the family.” Gathering information pertaining to recent ancestors could provide useful context for understanding one’s present experiences (e.g., “I take after my grandfather because I’m quiet like he was”). In addition, FHR can shed light on physical characteristics (e.g., eye color, stature) and health (e.g., diabetes, heart disease) and, in the latter case, may produce very important information regarding both present health conditions and elevated risk for, or increased susceptibility to, illness and disease (Lord, 2018). This information may then motivate regular health check-ups and preventative screenings (Harmon et al., 2005).

## Critical Thinking

In my own FHR, I've come across curiosity-invoking facts that were either unexpected or represented a way to understand changes in sociocultural dynamics over the years. To illustrate this, I offer an example from my family tree. A maternal great-great uncle of mine suffered from epileptic seizures and died at the age of 33. I heard a story via relatives that his father (my great-great grandfather), annoyed with plaster falling from the ceiling when his son was seizing on the floor upstairs, installed tin sheeting on the ceiling to prevent further plaster loss. When I first heard this I felt it was an insensitive move on my great-great grandfather's part, and I wonder how his son felt — was he embarrassed or ashamed of his condition and the “inconvenience” this caused the household, or did he shrug off his father's reaction? I don't know. But his story reminds me to have sensitivity to others: I may know about some people's struggles because their source is readily observable (e.g., a physical or intellectual disability); however, I also realize that I don't fully know what experiences people have had and, sometimes, are currently experiencing that are bringing them hardship. This encourages me to take a genuine interest in others, and, in the spirit of proceeding with the “unconditional positive regard” championed by Carl Rogers, to make honest and sincere attempts to understand people from their point of view. Accordingly, assigning students to search for an ancestor with an unusual life circumstance could provide students an opportunity to build a sense of compassion for and acceptance of others who are different from them.

## Conclusion

FHR is a rewarding pursuit that offers psychology instructors a potential teaching technique. Because numerous psychological concepts are inherent within FHR, instructors are encouraged to integrate FHR assignments into their courses with the goal of increasing knowledge of those concepts. In addition to the suggestions I've provided here, other concepts that could be considered include personality, stereotyping, prejudice, motivation, stress, conformity, and attraction. Whatever the psychological topic of interest, it's important to proceed knowing that every ancestor in the family tree has a unique psychological story to tell — enjoy your time as you discover and reflect upon them. ☺

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