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Family History and Genealogy: The Benefits for the Listener, the Storyteller and the Community

By Anna Lima, MA-SLP

Abstract

Thanks to the internet, discovering one's ancestry is just a few clicks away. Family histories and genealogies with intricate family trees filled with dates of birth, marriage dates, and death dates are meticulously documented for posterity. This process entails hours of research through census, immigration, baptism, and obituary records if you're able to access them. There's nothing greater for a genealogist to discover another generation of previously unknown ancestors and to tell the rest of your family. One would think that genealogy is a very new area of research since our ancestors obviously didn't bother to pass this information on to us, right? This article will show that genealogy is a practice as old as civilization but the recent social structures have changed the way family histories and genealogy is passed from one generation to the other. It will also demonstrate how knowledge of one's family history and genealogy plays a part in one's identity and connection with one's community

Key Words:

Genealogy, family history, family stories, Cape Verdean genealogy, The Creola Genealogist, Cape Verde DNA, Inc, identity, self perception, community, dementia, coherence and continuity, generativity, enrichment, human connection, immigration, connecting to our roots

A few years ago, I was asked by another Cape Verdean my name and who my family was. Without thinking twice I said I'm "Nanie de Ramizi de Rosinha de Nha Maria Rosinha de Cham de Souza, Brava." In that one sentence, I was able to give five generations of my family history including the place they came from. Those few words explained exactly who I was. It was the essence of my identity.¹

Although I was born in America, my identity was firmly established within my Cape Verdean culture and the four generations of extended family I lived with. I not only lived with my grandparents, I had the honor of knowing my great grandmother, Maria Coelho Rodrigues for the first 30 years of my life.

I was that persistent child that would grill my great grandmother about her childhood, her parents, grandparents and great grandparents. I wanted to know about where they were from, what they looked like and how they lived. I wanted to know my family history and not just my genealogy. I instinctively knew that by learning about who they were gave me a greater understanding of who I was.

My identity was shaped by this knowledge of my ancestors that has been passed down to me by my great grandmother and my family. Our culture and traditions, shaped by the ancestors, is the foundation of how we perceive the world, how we present ourselves to the world and how our ethics and morality are articulated.

I began my genealogical research in earnest after the death of my great grandmother in 2003.

*"I can still hear her voice though it's been 15 years since she took her last breath. Her words continue to guide me through my trials, her praises ring in my ears. Her gentle reminders of who I am and where I come from steady my foothold in this world. She was my compass, my foundation. My great-grandmother, Bibi, was the heart and soul of our family. She was Family Griot. As much as I miss her voice, her glare if you dared to do something she didn't approve of, the melodic humming as she held me in her arms to help me fall asleep, I realize that she is with me everyday of my life. Her song, her Griot Song, continues....."*²

¹The Creola Genealogist, (2015, May 18) *My Real Name Is...* (Blog post). Retrieved from <https://thecreolagenealogist.com/2015/05/18/my-real-name-is/>

²The Creola Genealogist, (2018, Sept. 6). *The Griot's Song* (Blog post). Retrieved from <https://thecreolagenealogist.com/2018/09/06/the-griots-song/>

There weren't as many resources available back then as there are today. I could only rely on the memory of family members to explore my family history. Once my great grandmother passed away I felt an urgency to remember everything she taught me. I was afraid I would forget. I had the opportunity to visit Cabo Verde for the first time in 2009. I will never forget the moment I first stepped on to the land of my ancestors. I felt I was home for the first time in my life. It is not an exaggeration to say that it was the first time that I felt that I belonged. I also realized that I had felt an intense Sodade for this place... A place that I had never been to before.

While in Cabo Verde, I was able to attain information and baptism records for my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and even great-grandparents. I belonged to this place, these people, this community. My connection and my pride to my family, culture and ancestry had never been as strong.

This was my reason for doing genealogy. Knowing where I came from and, more importantly, from whom I came from made me feel stronger. Understanding how my family lived gave me purpose to want to be a better version of myself. I wanted to honor them. I wanted other Cape Verdeans of the Diaspora to experience the same.

In the years since, I have published some of my research on my blog called *The Creola Genealogist* as well as a facebook page by the same name. By 2015, we had a small group of amateur Cape Verdean genealogists on facebook and so I created a private group called Cape Verde DNA, Inc which has grown to over 5,000 members all over the world. In August 2018, we held the first Cape Verdean Genealogy conference in Boston, Massachusetts.

But this question has always remained. Why is researching our family histories and genealogy important?

This is a question I have asked myself many times. What is the purpose of spending countless hours finding elusive ancestors in semi-legible records? Does it solve the drug problem plaguing our communities? Does it end hunger? Does it improve health statistics, increase literacy rates, end violence? Maybe.

To better answer this, a deeper look into what genealogy is, as well as, the history of genealogy needs to be explored.

What is Genealogy

The tradition of recording of lineages is as old as civilization, itself. Emperors and kings from ancient civilizations of Sumer (Mesopotamia) to medieval England have used genealogy to validate any claims to the throne. Some have used it to trace their ancestry to Greek, Roman and Egyptian gods just as Islamic rulers today trace their descent to the Prophet Mohammed. Genealogy was told and recorded through oral stories that were passed on from one generation to the next. This tradition can be found across continents and cultures from West African Griots, Japanese Kataribe, Celtic Shanachy and Germanic Scop. These specialized clans carried and preserved the memory of their leaders through not only the names of the ancestors but also with stories of their accomplishments. With the advent of writing systems, the lineages of rulers and leaders relied less on oral stories. As civilizations grew, genealogy became the primary tool for inheritance and land ownership of the nobility and as such, most people had no need to record their genealogies.³

Most people point to Alex Haley's *Roots* as the catalyst for today's rising popularity of genealogy. There is not only an interest in genealogy, which serves as a basic outline with facts such as date of birth, marriage and death dates, but family history that puts those facts into a narrative of self, culture and community.

The Listener, the Storyteller and the Community

Haddis describes specific benefits of family history and genealogy for the listener, the storyteller and the greater community.⁴

THE LISTENER

³Hadis, Martin (2002) *From Generation to Generation: Family stories, computers and genealogy* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts

⁴ ibid

For the listener, genealogy is the initial source of identity. The act of listening and learning from one's family history bestows the benefit of identity, guidance and enrichment upon the audience.⁵

Identity

Studies show that researching one's family history gives a better understanding of self which influences choices that are based on knowledge of their ancestors. This knowledge often leads to a greater desire to improve oneself. An increased sense of identity manifests in a greater sense of self confidence, increased self understanding, and greater resolve to improve personally.

In what has been dubbed "the Ancestor Effect", researchers describe improved test scores among students who were primed to think about their ancestors before answering test questions. Thinking about their ancestors, and therefor, their own identities in a positive way, affected each student's performance accordingly.⁶ While other studies have shown improved performance utilizing various aspects of identity besides ancestry, it is worth noting that exploring one family history can be a valuable tool that can be used in the classroom to help close achievement gaps.

Guidance

Genealogy can be said to provide a blueprint for life by illuminating the wisdom and folly of our ancestors. "Family stories that come down through the generations are often ones of overcoming obstacles, and of courage and survival, and those can be inspiring in our own lives".⁷ Even negative and disastrous stories can offer coping strategies which helps us to see more

⁵ ibid

⁶Fischer, Peter & Sauer, Anne & Vogrincic, Claudia & Weisweiler, Silke. (2011). The ancestor effect: Thinking about our genetic origin enhances intellectual performance. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 41. 11 - 16. 10.1002/ejsp.778.

⁷Rosenbluth, Vera. *Keeping Family Stories Alive*. Hartley & Marks, Pub. Point Roberts, Washington, 1997.

possibilities. Our family histories help us see possibilities, they give us we need to envision a future transformed.⁸ Family histories is a main building blocks in one's moral compass.

Enrichment

“A well-loved past enriches the world around us”⁹

Being able to link one's experiences to that of history gives greater understanding of the subject matter. Family histories can help put historical facts in an understandable context when it is related to the actual experiences of our ancestors.¹⁰

THE STORYTELLER

For the storyteller, family history and genealogy has the benefit of coherence, generativity and resulting human connections.¹¹

Coherence and continuity

Family history and genealogy enhances one's identity and therefore, perception of self by allowing one to connect their past with their present. There is therapeutic value to look back at life in order to come to terms with experiences and integrating various aspects of a lifetime. Genealogy can be used in counseling whereby a clinician can create a genome to look for traits, etc that follow an intergenerational framework .¹² Genealogy can be used as a counseling tool¹³.

⁸Haas-Dyson, Anne and Genishi, Celia. Introduction to *The Need for Story*. National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Illinois, 1994. P 243

⁹Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

¹⁰Ellis Jason B. and Bruckman, Amy. "Children and Elders sharing stories: Lessons from two on-line history projects". *Computer support for collaborative learning*, 1999.

¹¹Hadis, Martin (2002) *From Generation to Generation: Family stories, computers and genealogy* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts

¹²Duba, J. D., Graham, M. A., Britzman, M., & Minatrea, N. (2009). Introducing the "basic needs genogram" in reality therapy-based marriage and family counseling. *International of Journal of Reality Therapy*, 28(2), 15-19.

¹³Humes, C. W. (1994). Genealogy: A counseling tool. *The School Counselor*, 41(3), 296-299.

This can lead to “Looking back to childhood and young adulthood allows us to integrate those images of our former selves with who we are now.”¹⁴

Generativity

Psychologists refer to generativity as the healthy impulse to “foster, nurture, encourage and guide those that will succeed” as that “involves the creation or elaboration of a product of the self and the selfless and caring surrendering or handing down of this product to others.”¹⁵. This process encourages a sense of immortality, whether it is focused on one’s own descendants or allowed to encompass a family group, tribal collective or even a whole country or people.¹⁶

For the teller, family history and genealogy gives us hope that our stories, our product, will not only outlive us, but will continue to help and inspire generations to come.

Human Connections

“There is no doubt that reminiscing and telling personal stories has therapeutic value”.¹⁷ This is evident in my own practice as a Speech and Language Pathologist, where a majority of my patients are elders suffering from varying degrees of dementia. One of my goals is to maintain my patient’s current cognitive status and this most often entails keeping them “connected” with their families. I educate family members on strategies that aim to maintain a person functioning in their own environment for as long as they can.

Dementia is a hideous process that culminates in the slow unlearning of everything one has learned and experienced in their lifetime. It doesn’t only rob a person of their memories. Perhaps the most disturbing and scariest part for anyone diagnosed with dementia is

¹⁴Rosenbluth, Vera. *Keeping Family Stories Alive*. Hartley & Marks, Pub. Point Roberts, Washington, 1997. P 10

¹⁵McAdams, Dan P. Ruetzel, Karin and Foley, Jeanne. “Complexity and Generativity at Mid-Life: Relations Among Social Motives, Ego Development and Adults’ Plans for the Future”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 50, No. 4 (1986). Pages 800-807.

¹⁶Hadis, Martin (2002) *From Generation to Generation: Family stories, computers and genealogy* (Unpublished master’s thesis). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. P 18

¹⁷Rosenbluth, Vera. *Keeping Family Stories Alive*. Hartley & Marks, Pub. Point Roberts, Washington, 1997. P 10

the fear of “losing themselves”. The most heartbreaking point for family members is when their loved one ceases to be the person they have always known.

Strohminger and Nichols conducted a study in 2015, which surveyed 248 families and caretakers dementia patients.¹⁸ They found that family members noticed that a change in morals was more significant than memory loss, personality change, loss of intelligence, or inability to do daily tasks. Morals shape our lives and our conduct in various environments. One’s set of morals affects behavior and social decisions, and shared values are the basis for personal identity and the ability to belong to unique groups. The moral compass seemed to be the last piece of identity to disappear. When patients finally do lose their morality their families are no longer able to recognize them as the same person.¹⁹

When working with my patients and their families, I have found that working on family trees has shown positive outcomes in prolonging a patient’s “identity” and overall function by maintaining a connection with their family and external world. Giving someone with the dementia the opportunity to tell their “story” is a key in maintaining their sense of self and identity.

COMMUNITY

We all benefit from the sense of community and intimacy that is naturally fostered by a common past. There is often a divide between us and our ancestors consisting of time and familiarity. Learning about who our ancestors were can be an exercise in self-discovery with positive ramifications that can influence self-identity, confidence and outlook.

Human geographer, Catherine Nash, describes genealogy as “a practice through which ideas of personal, familial, collective, ethnic, and sometimes national senses of culture, location, and identity are shaped, imagined, articulated, and enacted. It is said that “the pursuit of family history fulfills a psychological need to the extent that it becomes a way of orientating the internal as well as the external worlds.”²⁰

¹⁸Strohminger, N., & Nichols, S. (2015). Neurodegeneration and Identity. *Psychological Science*. 26(9), pp. 1469-1479.

¹⁹Strohminger, N., & Nichols, S. (2015). Neurodegeneration and Identity. *Psychological Science*. 26(9), pp. 1469-1479.

²⁰Nash, Catherine, 'Genealogical Identities', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002), 27-52, p. 28.

John Triseliotis, who has studied fostered and adopted children, is convinced that “at least in Western Cultures, [people] have a deep emotional and social need and curiosity to know about their families of origin and ancestors.” He argues that narrative about the self contributes to a sense of continuity and uniqueness which is vital “to help us complete ourselves or complete the pattern of our lives” and is, therefore, a “necessary ingredient to the building of self and personality.”²¹

I believe our community can benefit by utilizing the skills, privileges, and resources available through family history and genealogy to ask questions about what specific experiences mean to us now and overtime²². Perhaps we can examine historical injustices within particular experiences and to disrupt these injustices by bringing to light the marginalized voices that are often silenced in the telling of stories.

CONNECTING TO OUR ROOTS

With the advent of ancestry.com and DNA testing, genealogy has become very popular all over the world. For most, a few simple clicks is all that is needed to trace one’s family back to Charlemagne. For those of us of the Cape Verdean diaspora, it’s not as easy. Whether first generation or fifth generation, we identify with our Cape Verdean identity but often lack the genealogical information that allow us to trace our ancestry past our most recent immigrant ancestor.

As previously stated, genealogy provides the facts while family history provides the narrative. For some of us, the narrative is lacking the facts to make a coherent story of who and what we are. Most of us can identify with growing up with someone who was identified as a cousin without ever knowing exactly how we are related. It can almost seem that our ancestors never had an interest in our genealogies and passing that information down. But this was not actually the case.

“Flattering though it would be to think otherwise, our recent interest in family history and genealogy is not because of a heightened perception of the past on our behalf, but in

²¹Triseliotis, John 'Identity and Genealogy', *The Scottish Genealogist* (1987), 272-76, p. 273.

²²Madison, D.S. (2005). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. P 263

the social changes that have brought about the disappearance of those institutions and structures that were in charge of continuity and the transmission of knowledge down through generations. Far from being the first to show an intense curiosity about our own pasts, we are among the first to suffer from its absence.”²³

Smith-Barusch and Steen ²⁴ described the family structure in preindustrial times to include often four generations of a family living within one household. Extended family members lived nearby and children were almost always ensured contact with family elders. Children would simply absorb information about their families and pass it on to their own children. Families often remained in the same regions and interacted with the same groups their ancestors did for generations before.

Industrialization brought about significant changes in the family household structure whereby only the nucleus or immediate family lived in the same house. With extended families scattered and dispersed, the many legacies that one generation passed to the next all but disappeared. ²⁵

Cape Verdeans have a long history of migration that has impacted our family and community structures and therefore passing on of family histories and genealogy. Our history of slavery has to also be taken into account where, due to its hideous nature, those of us who are descendants of enslaved Africans cannot connect to all our African family histories and genealogies.

In this light, it should not be surprising that we are now showing such a strong interest in connecting with our roots. Unlike that of our ancestors, our grasp of the past is as fragile as it is faint.²⁶

Why is family history and genealogy important when there are so many other problems in our community?

Knowing our family history and genealogy has the benefit

²³Hadis, Martin (2002) *From Generation to Generation: Family stories, computers and genealogy* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. P 23

²⁴Smith-Barusch, Amanda and Steen, Peter. "Keepers of community in a changing world". In *Generations: the journal of the Western Gerontological Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1996). P 86

²⁵Hadis, Martin (2002) *From Generation to Generation: Family stories, computers and genealogy* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. P 23

²⁶ ibid

of giving us a sense of continuity, identity, guidance and community. Where there is a breakdown in any of these, problems can and will arise.

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