History and Genealogy: A Study of the Relationship between Genealogical Research and Interest in History

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1. RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the importance of understanding user needs and interests for effective services, this study explored the relationship between family historians’ pursuit of genealogy and their interest in history more broadly. As family historians spend more time learning about their forbears, do they tend to also increasingly enjoy studying the world their ancestors inhabited?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

I used a survey of twenty-seven questions to collect data. Interest in history was measured by preferred genres of books and films, preferred school subjects, and museums or historic sites visited, as well as open-ended questions about interest in history as related to genealogy. The survey was administered online to a control population of master’s students from the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill, with 29 responses (15% response rate). The same survey was sent to the members of three genealogy societies: the Durham-Orange County Genealogical Society, the North Carolina Genealogical Society, and the Wake County Genealogical Society. The survey received 73 responses (5.8% response rate).

3. RESULTS

The data was analyzed in Qualtrics, comparing the results from each group. The answers to the open-ended questions were iteratively coded to identify common themes and patterns, beginning with open coding and followed by axial coding to identify broader, more general concepts. I also ran the results through free textual analysis software to identify the most commonly used words for each set of answers.

4. CONCLUSION

The survey results show a clear correlation between genealogical research and some indicators of interest in history, such as preferred book and film genres. These responses all reveal an affective and deeply personal need for connection, identity, story, and meaning, and reveal that such needs are met not only by researching genealogy but also by the connection to history that comes with it. A better understanding of genealogists’ interests, motivations, and needs and their relationship to history can help information professionals provide better services. The results of this research project contribute to the body of literature on genealogists and promote a better understanding of a significant segment of libraries’ and archives’ user populations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Patrick-Burns earned her Master of Science in Library Science with a concentration in Archives and Records Management from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2015, and her Master of Arts in Public History from North Carolina State University in 2014. She completed an internship in the University Archives at Duke University and a research internship for the Halifax County Convention and Visitors Bureau. Jamie has published an original research paper on the interpretation of the tobacco industry in Durham NC in the NC State Graduate Journal of History and has an article pending publication in Provenance, journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists. She has also collaborated on multiple exhibits. She received her BA in History and French from Wheaton College (IL).

This research paper was advised by Dr. Helen Tibbo, professor at the School of Information and Library Science at UNC—Chapel Hill.

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Reasons for enjoying genealogy among both groups included:

1. Learning about their family’s background
2. Desiring a personal connection with ancestors by knowing what life was like
3. Increased self-understanding by being a part of a broader historical narrative

Some concepts were mentioned only by the experienced genealogists:

1. The community that comes with pursuing genealogy
2. The joy of learning new things
3. Puzzle or problem solving

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