

Genetic testing and family tree research are revealing painful family secrets, research says

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Genealogical research and genetic testing are revealing skeletons in family closets and causing rifts among members, a new study shows.

Family members have discovered they are unrelated or have relatives from an unexpected ethnic group, the research says.

Katy Barbier-Greenland and Associate Professor Deborah Dempsey of Swinburne University, Australia, studied families which have been thrown into confusion by the revelation of a long-kept secret.

"All families have secrets, and it's almost inevitable that when we undertake genealogical research, they can emerge—this can often be confusing, distressing or upsetting," Ms Barbier-Greenland told the European Sociological Association conference in Manchester, UK, today [Thursday, 22 August 2019].

"More of us are discovering [family](#) secrets, and more people getting involved in genealogy by the day. There are so many types of family secrets to discover, and secrets about conception and birth are those with the greatest consequence on people's lives."

The researchers drew on 23 case studies of families in the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands for their work. In many family tree research or DNA testing had revealed secrets that cause conflict in families.

Among those featured include one British man in his 60s who found out through DNA testing that his father was not his biological parent, said Ms Barbier-Greenland, who is based in the Netherlands.

"He grew up with two loving parents—neither he nor his sister ever expected anything so this was a complete surprise to them. He experienced significant distress and a deep sense of loss of identity."

The man told the researchers: "My sister and I are not who we thought we were—this was a secret held tightly for so many years."

He said he felt "so betrayed by the secret, not knowing the truth. I would have wanted to know my real grandparents and my actual father as my father. I would've wanted to know from the very beginning, as a child.

"I personally think that people need to understand at least a little about DNA before they are told. If they are not accepting of the science, then I would say it's not a good idea to tell them."

In one case a British woman, "Isabella," discovered through family tree research that a man she thought was her uncle, who she hardly knew, was in fact her half-brother.

Her grandmother had pressured her mother into giving up the child, and brought him up as her own, not allowing anyone in the family to reveal the secret.

"The grandmother wouldn't let her tell anyone that the child wasn't hers, not even Isabella, who didn't discover until she was in her '20s that she had a secret half-brother, when starting to explore her family tree," said Ms Barbier-Greenland.

"We can see here the power of silences, omissions, and how family members can oppress each other, changing and altering records and the family lore in order to serve their own aims.

"After Isabella discovered she had a half-brother, her career path changed completely and she commenced training to become a genealogist, wanting to help others discover and understand their own family histories."

In another case a 60-year-old Australian man was surprised to find that his grandmother was Aboriginal.

"In the Australian context there was systemic, intense racism towards Aboriginal people, – whilst many view their Aboriginal heritage as a source of pride, for some past generations in particular, it was a source of shame," said Ms Barbier-Greenland.

"His family tried their very best to disguise the fact that his grandmother was Aboriginal, denying it and hiding it and creating a series of lies around it in a deliberate way. This family secret was kept brilliantly—his family members were keeping their mouths shut.

"He was determined to acknowledge, recognize and celebrate his grandmother, to give her respect for who she was and his frustration with his [family members](#) is really understandable."

Ms Barbier-Greenland said she had found other cases of people who had found out [family secrets](#) through DNA testing in her research.

Her website, with advice on dealing with issues brought up by family research, is <http://www.familysecretsresearch.com>.

Provided by European Sociological Association

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