

SHOULDA COULDA WOULD: A LOOK AT ETHICS IN DNA TESTING

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EXPECTATIONS

Encountering unexpected outcomes is just part of life, I think most would agree. The longer you do genealogy, the more likely you are to encounter an unexpected connection in your research. Many argue that DNA testing has caused the exposure of these unexpected events to skyrocket, creating uncertainty for many in how to move forward with this new information.

One of the best things we can do before we test, or encourage others to test, is to fully understand that by spitting in that tube or scraping the inside of your cheek, you will get a list of people who are related to you. Some distantly, and some, not-so-distantly.

But once that information is seen, you can't unsee it. So we need to have at our disposal some tools that will help us to act ethically with the new information we have.

ETHICS

Unfortunately, morality isn't the universal standard that it once was. But I think most will agree that three basic moral principles would be honesty, respect, and kindness.

ethics

/ˈeTHiks/

noun

moral principles that govern
a person's behavior

honesty

respect

kindness

Before we get into maintaining those principles, let's talk for just a minute about how you might end up in this situation. While many people think that surprises only happen with adoptees or other misattributed parentage, that is not always the case. Some might find that an ancestor previously thought descendant from one brother, is actually a descendant of the other (or at least, that's what it looks like, based on the DNA connection to the second brother's wife).

DETERMINING RELATIONSHIPS

All this discovery likely all started with a DNA test. Over 7 million people have taken a DNA test and most of them received two kinds of information: a map of locations where their family was from thousands of years ago, and a list of their DNA cousins (at 23andMe, LivingDNA, and AncestryDNA, you can opt-out of the cousin-matching feature). Both might be useful in your family history, and both might bring unexpected results.

There are scores of people who report that the presence or absence of a particular ethnicity

was a surprise to them. In those cases though, many times the tests aren't sensitive enough to confidently rule in or out your membership in a certain community based on your DNA tests alone.

On that cousin list you see information that might help you figure out how you are related to another person. You have the name or username, the relationship ranges and techie DNA information, as well as a posted family tree (sometimes).



Username

(could provide clues as to surname)

Relationship Range/Amount of shared DNA

(use the table at the shared centimorgan project to more closely approximate your relationship)

While you may shy away from the cool science stuff, it is actually in the numbers that you will often find the most information. You can find the shared amount of DNA at each company on the main match page, except for AncestryDNA.

There you have to click on your match's name, then on the little "i" next to the confidence interval under their name. You then take that number into the table created by the Shared cM Project (a cM, or centimorgan, is just a unit of measure for DNA). The table is especially good at helping us identify half relationships. For example, if your match shares 450 cMs with you, the testing company will likely call them your 2nd cousin. But according to the table, the best fit for a match with 450 shared cMs is a first cousin once removed (1C1R) or a half first cousin (1/21C). While you likely know or could identify most of your 1C1R, as they are your cousins' kids, a half first cousin could be the child of one of your grandparents that maybe you didn't know about.

FOUR PLAYERS INVOLVED IN EVERY SITUATION

According to genetic genealogist Blaine Bettinger, there are four kinds of people involved when an unexpected relationship is discovered: The Keeper, The Discoverer, The Subject, and The Affected. Let's explore each of these categories, and how to practice the ethical principles of Honesty, Respect, and Kindness will help you make the most out of this situation.

HONESTY

Honesty is not the same as spilling the beans. In the case of genetic genealogy and relationships, honesty means being truthful in your interactions, but it does not mean that you are obligated to initiate those interactions, or tell your whole story at the first interaction. For example, if you are The Discoverer, the Honest thing to do might be to hold on to what you have learned until you can gather more information. The biggest place we see the need for honesty is in our interactions with our matches.

Let's take Shaun and William (all names in this syllabus and presentation have been changed) for example. Shaun is William's adult adopted son, and she is working to help him identify his biological family. Before DNA testing, William and Shaun had gone the traditional genealogy

route, seeking court records and conducting on the group research, which had resulted in some good information, but also some negative experiences. In William's correspondence with Shaun's match Autumn, he was upfront about Shaun's adoption, and said that they had "very little" information about his family tree. This was all true. Being truthful up front is very important first step toward creating a relationship, so it is up to you if you want to include the news of an adoption search on your initial email. However, William did not tell Autumn everything they knew, still holding back to protect his son from further negative experiences. And that is ok too.

It is especially important not to jump to conclusions and then correspond with your match. The human mind is very good at filling in empty places. It can be very tempting to see a genetic relationship, even a carefully calculated one, and then jump to conclusions about which ancestor you share with them. Then you may send off an email to a match declaring you know their uncle John is your shared ancestor, when that isn't the only explanation for the data. Remember, if you have a second cousin, that person can share a common ancestor with you in ANY of your four sets of great grandparents.

RESPECT

While it is easy to fall into the trap that everyone who has had a DNA test wants to know their relationship to every person on their match list, it just isn't true. In the case of unexpected relationships, we have to balance an individual's (The Subject's) right to know their parentage or heritage and The Keeper's right to remain anonymous. I worked with a client recently who handled the revelation about her own misattributed parentage with commendable integrity. While on the phone with me she decided that she would not approach her parents right away, but take some time to digest the information herself. Then perhaps plan a long weekend away with her mother, who she is very close to, and discuss it then.

KINDNESS

A big part of this whole process is truly recognizing that we all have secrets. We all have weaknesses. Therefore we need to treat each other with kindness.

One story of a Discoverer was a perfect reminder that the experiences we go through in life are meant to strengthen us and often times prepare us for what may be coming. When The Discoverer, Matt, approached his father and 4 aunts and uncles with the news that they had another half sibling, their mother's additional child, he received an unexpected response. His Aunt, the oldest child, who would have been three at the time of her mother's pregnancy, said

Shaun & William

The Keeper

Margaret

the person who creates/
keeps the secret

The Discoverer

Autumn

the person who uncovers
the secret

The Subject

Shaun

The person who is the
subject of the secret

The Affected

Other Family

the people affected by the
secret

that she knew about this additional sibling. In Matt's words:

“My grandma had told her first daughter, at least briefly, about the adoption. My aunt had gotten pregnant while at college, and came home to get advice from her parents on what to do. My grandma counseled her to keep the baby, because she had once had to give one up for adoption, and it was the hardest thing she'd ever done.”

In short, we have absolutely no idea what someone else is going through, or has gone through, and therefore everyone deserves our kindness and our patience. And perhaps, they will be there at just the right time to give us some much needed empathy and advice.

In whatever situation you may find yourself, remembering there are four main players in every drama, and countless others effected, and then practicing basic ethical principles of honesty, respect, and kindness, we might just be able to do our part to better connect families, both living and passed.