



## *An overview of the interplay between genealogy and academia*

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### **Summary**

Genealogy contributes rich micro-historical data, longitudinal family reconstructions, and insights into marginalized lives often absent from institutional archives, while academia provides genealogists with analytical tools, contextual theory, and ethical frameworks that deepen interpretation and strengthen research standards. The historical divide between ‘amateur/ hobby’ genealogy and academic scholarship can re-position genealogy as a legitimate method of knowledge production. As genealogy becomes more accessible through digital records and DNA testing, the risk of error and misinformation increases, highlighting the need for more rigorous, professional, and ethically grounded practices. In an era shaped by DNA testing, forensic genetic genealogy, public history, and renewed attention to slavery, adoption, and kinship structures, academic genealogy serves as a critical bridge between personal lineage research and institutional scholarship. Academic genealogy has thus emerged as an interdisciplinary field that bridges personal family history and scholarly research, reinforcing genealogy’s role as a credible form of knowledge production.

### **Genealogy is no longer “just a hobby” - it is:**

- a method of inquiry
- a source of data
- a site of ethical debate
- a contributor to academic knowledge production
- but a divide can be seen emerging between hobbyist and genealogy as a profession

### **Methodological rigor**

Genealogical research should include:

- conclusions which are defensible under academic standards, not just ‘plausible’
- transparent citation standards
- replicability of conclusions
- source criticism (evaluating reliability, bias, provenance)
- peer review or scholarly scrutiny

### **Being ‘a professional’ and ‘being professional’**

The relationship between being ‘in a profession’ and ‘being professional’ lies in the distinction between status and behaviour with the former referring to a role or position, involving payment, qualifications, or formal recognition within a field; whereas the latter relates to how people conduct their work, including accuracy, ethical practice, accountability, and respect for standards. A person can be in a profession without always acting professionally, while someone without formal status can demonstrate high professional standards. In genealogy, credibility can depend less on credentials and more on the quality, rigor, and ethics of the research undertaken.

### **The relationship between genealogy and academia is significant now because of:**

- statistical evidence emerging from DNA testing
- forensic genetic genealogy
- public history movements
- reckoning with slavery, colonialism, and adoption
- challenges to traditional archival authority
- greater understanding of context (legal, social, historical) when interpreting records

- distinguishing between evidence, assumption, and speculation
- respecting the privacy and experiences of living individuals

### What is academic genealogy research?

Academic genealogy research sits at the intersection of traditional family history and scholarly inquiry. Academic genealogy research is genealogical work conducted within an academic framework, or genealogical data used to produce scholarly knowledge rather than only personal family histories. It applies the methods, theories, and standards of academic research to genealogical questions, and in turn uses genealogical evidence to answer broader historical, social, scientific, and ethical questions. Genealogy and academia can inform and strengthen one another.

### Typical research questions

Traditional genealogy asks: *“Who were my ancestors?”*

Academic genealogy would ask:

- *how did kinship structures shape migration patterns?*
- *how did inheritance laws affect wealth accumulation?*
- *how did slavery, adoption, or conception outside of marriage alter family formation?*
- *how do DNA databases reshape concepts of identity and privacy?*

Individual families therefore become data points in larger historical or social analyses.

**Chart** showing where genealogists can contribute across disciplines

Discipline	Genealogist contribution	Example / application
<b>Sociology</b>	Analyse kinship structures, intergenerational mobility	Studying patterns of marriage, occupation, and social status across generations
<b>History</b>	Trace migration patterns, provide primary-source documentation	Reconstructing 19th-century immigrant communities using census and parish records
<b>Psychology / Behavioural Sciences</b>	Examine family influence on identity, mental health, and intergenerational trauma	Researching family patterns in resilience or behavioural traits
<b>Anthropology / Archaeology</b>	Reconstruct lineage and family structures from artifacts or DNA	Interpreting burial sites or artifacts to understand social organization
<b>Forensic Science / Criminal Justice</b>	Support investigations using genealogical research	Identifying unknown individuals via forensic genetic genealogy
<b>Legal Studies / Human Rights</b>	Establish lineage for inheritance, citizenship, or reparations	Supporting claims in restitution projects for displaced communities
<b>Social Work / Human Services</b>	Map family histories for client support and intergenerational understanding	Assisting adoption, foster care, or family reunification cases by reconstructing family networks
<b>Public Health / Epidemiology</b>	Map hereditary diseases and familial health patterns	Tracing genetic risk factors in population studies
<b>Lecturing / Higher Education</b>	Teach genealogical research methods and critical analysis	Leading workshops on archival research and ethical handling of family data
<b>Digital Humanities / Data Science</b>	Curate genealogical datasets and apply network analysis	Visualizing migration patterns using large-scale archival datasets
<b>Cultural Studies / Literature</b>	Trace historical and familial context of figures or movements	Linking oral histories to literary works or cultural narratives
<b>Education / Pedagogy</b>	Integrate genealogy into teaching frameworks	Designing courses that use family history research to teach critical thinking

## Genealogy contributes to academia

### 1. Microhistory and lived experience

Genealogy provides:

- names, relationships, timelines, places; individual-level data absent from official narratives

This allows scholars to:

- humanize large historical processes
- examine how laws or social norms affected real families
- challenge generalized historical assumptions

Example: Genealogical reconstructions of enslaved families reveal how slavery disrupted kinship in ways not captured by plantation records.

### 2. Data for longitudinal and population studies

Genealogical records enable:

- multi-generational studies across centuries
- analysis of social mobility, disease inheritance, and migration

In genetics, genealogy:

- anchors DNA data to documentary context
- prevents/ reduces misinterpretation of genetic relationships

### 3. Corrective histories

Genealogy often uncovers:

- marginalized individuals excluded from archives
- informal relationships (non-marital unions, fictive kin)
- women's identities hidden under patriarchal record-keeping

These findings help academia revise dominant historical narratives.

## Interdisciplinary orientation

Academic genealogy draws from and contributes to:

- **Anthropology:** kinship systems, lineage, descent patterns, clan structures, cultural definitions of family
- **History:** microhistory, social history, migration, slavery, industrialisation, everyday lived experience
- **Sociology:** family structures, class mobility, social stratification, marriage patterns, demographic change
- **Psychology:** identity formation, intergenerational trauma, memory, belonging, family narratives
- **Genetics:** population genetics, genetic inheritance, ethnicity estimates, forensic applications, DNA matching
- **Law:** inheritance, wills and probate, citizenship, adoption, family relationships, legitimacy status
- **Ethics** consent, privacy, surveillance, data ownership, historical injustice, representation, researcher responsibility

## What academia contributes to genealogy

### 1. Theory and context

Theories of kinship, power, race and colonialism give genealogical findings interpretive depth.

Academic frameworks help genealogists avoid:

- presentism
- anachronistic moral judgments
- overemphasis on biological descent

## 2. Standards of evidence

Academic training sharpens:

- source evaluation
- negative evidence analysis
- distinction between proof and speculation

This directly strengthens genealogical proof standards, especially in complex cases.

## 3. Ethical frameworks

Academia provides tools for addressing:

- DNA consent and privacy
- posthumous identification
- trauma-informed research practices
- power imbalances in whose histories get told

This is increasingly critical as genealogy intersects with forensic and commercial DNA databases.

### Where tensions exist

Despite potential synergy, tensions remain:

Genealogy	Academia
Values inclusivity	Values gatekeeping
Accepts probabilistic conclusions	Seeks theoretical framing
Often volunteer-driven	Institutionally credentialed
Focuses on families	Focuses on structures

Academic genealogy research works to bridge these divides, translating between experiential family knowledge and scholarly discourse.

### Practical and ethical dilemmas

The integration of genealogical research into academic scholarship offers new opportunities for knowledge production, but also raises practical and ethical dilemmas. As genealogy extends beyond personal family history into social history, population studies, forensic investigation, and genetic research, tensions emerge between evidentiary standards, interpretive frameworks, and ethical obligations. Genealogical practice emphasizes inclusivity, probabilistic reasoning, and lived experience, while academic disciplines prioritize theoretical abstraction, institutional authority, and formal gatekeeping, creating challenges in source evaluation, peer review, and the translation of family-based evidence into scholarly argument. Ethical dilemmas are particularly pronounced in the use of DNA and archival records. Issues of consent, privacy, and data ownership complicate research, especially when findings affect living individuals or reshape historical narratives. Studies of marginalized populations, including enslaved families, children whose parents were not married, adopted people, and communities under colonial or state surveillance require trauma-informed, person-centred approaches. The use of community-generated genealogical knowledge without reciprocal engagement further highlights power imbalances between scholars and non-academic researchers. Academic genealogy should be a collaborative and reflexive practice bridging personal history and scholarship.

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### Author of:

- *'Ethical Dilemmas in Genealogy'* 2019
- *'The Psychology of Searching'* 2020
- *'An Introduction to starting a family tree combined with DNA'* 2026

Available on Amazon in paperback and kindle

