A Suggested Taxonomy of Genealogy as a Multidisciplinary Academic Research Field

Arnon Herskovitz

Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract

Genealogy has been practiced by people all over the world for many years, and in recent years, its leveraging to the academic level has been suggested. Mostly, discussions about the academization of genealogy were focused on teaching in the field, rather than on promoting it as a legitimate research field. This article suggests taxonomy for genealogy as an academic multidisciplinary research field. The taxonomy consists of six components: people, families, communities, representations, data, and bird's-eye view. This taxonomy demonstrates how genealogy is related to many other existing disciplines, highlights its unique points of view, and hence, promotes it as a separate field of study. The discussion goes further and recommends a way of actually building this new academic community in a bottom-up fashion, gathering currently affiliated scholars from other disciplines who will together work for constructing the new field.

Keywords

genealogy, taxonomy, academic discipline

Introduction

Genealogy has been in the minds of people for many generations, dating back hundreds and thousands of years, when it played a major role in the formation of many cultures. Detailed and rich genealogies are documented in numerous canonical texts, like the Holy Bible, the New Testament, Hesiod’s Theogony (which describes the genealogies of the ancient Greek gods), or Sima Qian’s Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian, in which the author describes the genealogies of the emperors and kings of China). Genealogy as a field of practitioners (genealogists) has been growing tremendously over the last few decades.

In the late 1970s, it was Alex Haley’s bestseller Roots (1976) that inspired many African-Americans to trace their own family history back to their ancestors’ country of origin, and
encouraged many Americans to investigate their own lineages. A survey published in 1995 suggests that more than 40% of adult Americans were at least “somewhat interested in genealogy” (Fulkerson, 1995). Five years later, this number had grown to 60% (Gallop-Goodman, 2000), and after another five years, 73% of Americans were interested in discovering their family history (MyFamily.com, 2005). Countries from which people emigrated have attracted genealogists and descendants of those emigrants, as in the case of Ireland (Nash, 2002). Along with the growth of the Internet and its adoption by millions around the world, genealogy has experienced a boost in interest over the last couple of decades due to increased access to remarkable amounts of data and resources, and new opportunities for connectedness between genealogists (Veale, 2009). This growth also led to the production of a number of TV genealogy shows – the most prominent example being the BBC production, Who do You think You are? (2004), and its numerous spin-offs, which were very popular and led to even more interest in the field of genealogy.

Being a self-taught practice, associated with only a few self-accredited organizations in the field, genealogy is not yet in the spotlight of the academic arena. However, in recent years, there has been an ever growing interest in studying the various aspects of genealogy using the tools of academic research, whether it be immigrant registration under History (Alroey, 2011); the study of visualization of family trees, through the lens of Computer Science (e.g., Bezerianos, Dragicevic, Fekete, Bae, & Watson, 2010; Kim, Card, & Heer, 2010; Tuttle, Nonato, & Silva, 2010); or the implications of genealogy on tourism, in light of Management studies (e.g., McCain & Ray, 2003). Until now, only the “other” disciplines discussed such topics, mainly because genealogy in itself has not yet developed into an academic field of study. This article presents Genealogy as a multidisciplinary academic research field and suggests a taxonomy for this domain.

Re-defining Genealogy as a Multidisciplinary Academic Research Field

At its most basic, the term “genealogy” traditionally refers to both the “history of the descent of families” and “the pedigree of a particular family or person” (Findlater, 1882, p. 200). This definition (which can be found in updated dictionaries as well) still holds the building stones of most of the studies carried out by amateur and professional genealogists today—namely, persons, families, and pedigrees—however, today’s genealogy is de-facto much broader than that. First, the term “family” in today’s modern societies is very different from how it was understood a hundred years ago or so. Second, “pedigree” is only one of the basic entities studied by genealogists today (others include, for example, ancestral lines, or complex network-like family relationships). Third, today many genealogical studies focus on migratory patterns or the history of communities, rather than on individuals or families. More important, this definition is not sufficient for understanding what genealogy as an academic research field involves.

Dozens of studies discuss the question of various fields being academic disciplines, but only few include suggested measures for this examination. One list of conditions for a field of study to be considered a discipline has been constructed by the American Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). Minton (1983) quotes this list when assessing whether Statistics is indeed an academic discipline. Another list is found in Krishnan (2009), while discussing what are academic disciplines. Merging these two lists, a framework is set for assessing whether genealogy
is an academic discipline. According to this merged list, academic disciplines should have the following: particular objects of research; unique research methods; a significant market demand; professionals working essentially in the field; specific terminologies or technical language; a theory, concepts, and a body of literature; professional journals regularly publishing new advances in the subject; and institutional manifestations. A detailed account of these components for genealogy is given in Hershkovitz (2011); in short, Hershkovitz suggests that genealogy has the potential to become an academic discipline, as it has a huge market demand, professionals working in the field, many journal articles that appear regularly in various venues, special jargon, specific objects of research, and some unique methodologies. However, genealogy still lacks a comprehensive and organized body of knowledge as well as an institutional manifestation; and it seems the former is a pre-requisite to the latter.

However, academic genealogy is not merely an independent discipline, but rather a research field that juxtaposes many disciplines, like history, geography, literature, computer science, information science, linguistics, etc. Hence, it is a true multidisciplinary field (Klein, 1991; Miller, 1982). Therefore, we hereby suggest a systematic way of organizing the field of academic genealogy, treating it as a truly multidisciplinary domain. The main purpose of this taxonomy is to highlight the multifaceted research directions of genealogy; previously, genealogy was mentioned as part of the Humanities (Lamdan, 2011), the Exact Sciences (Wagner & Klauzińska, 2006), and the Social Sciences (Jones, 2007) as well as being related to no fewer than 45 research disciplines (Jones, 2007). Although most of the building blocks of the following taxonomy are indeed an integral part of well-established academic disciplines (e.g., History, Anthropology, Sociology, Computer Science, Biology, and many more), each of them has a unique point of view when discussed under the umbrella-topic of genealogy. All together, they synergistically create a new integrative field of research.

The Taxonomy

The suggested taxonomy for multidisciplinary academic studies of genealogy is built of six components. Each of the first five components is a research unit. These units – namely, people, families, communities, representations, and data – refer to the core building blocks of traditional genealogy studies; while presenting them, we demonstrate how academic research in the field of genealogy is related to in-practice genealogy, but enriching it with new points of view to benefit the field. The sixth component, bird’s-eye view, suggests an extension of genealogy beyond the traditional scope of its daily practice, hence, highlighting the potential contribution of such research to the field, academically. All together, the taxonomy suggests reciprocal relationships between the practiced field and its academic level.

People

People are the basic entities behind any genealogical research in practice, as it is the chronology of individuals that motivates any historical inquiry. Any genealogical account is comprised of individuals and is based on a collection of facts, documents, and various materials about them. People within any genealogical study have descriptors of different types, like names, dates, places, occupations, or relationship to others. Their historical narrative might is partly
objective (e.g., the parts that rely on vital records) and partly subjective (e.g., the parts that rely on testimonials), and is usually based upon diverse evidence. However, the study of an individual is almost never the sole purpose of genealogical research, but rather it is about the simple or complex relationships of others to that individual.

Families

By definition, genealogy discusses people in the context of familial relationships, as such, families are a crucial research component in this field. Within genealogy, one almost never researches historical narratives of individuals without considering the families to which they belonged. That said, the term “family” is much less narrow in genealogy than it is in its usual social contexts. An exact definition of the term "family" is something to debate on, hence, we will use it here by the very intuitive and simple meaning of "a group of people who are related to each other" (Family, 2012). This definition might well apply to families from the 16th century, as well as new families from the 21st century, or it might also fit other structures of families that families often research, such as groups of individuals who all were descendants of the same person or from the same couple.

Genealogies of families bring together information on individuals across different times and locations, and yet all of these people are connected through an often illusive idea of “family.” Lists of descendants are present from as early as biblical times, often with the common ancestor being of importance historically, culturally, or religiously. For example, the book of descendants of Thomas Olcott (died 1645, aged about 45 years old), one of the first settlers of Hartford, Connecticut, appeared in 1845, holding more than 700 descendants, not counting their spouses; more than 7 generations (Goodwin, 1845). Another example is the book The Unbroken Chain, which traces more than 25,000 descendants of the very famous Jewish Rabbi, Meir Katzenelnbogen (1482-1564/5), more than 16 generations and across numerous countries (Rosenstein, 1990). The Ancestry of Abraham Lincoln (Lea & Hutchinson, 1909) demonstrates a different form of a genealogical narrative of “family”; this publication examines the ancestral families of the 16th President of the United States (1809-1865), including many sub-branches of these ancestral families; these sub-branches are all connected to Abraham Lincoln, but not necessarily to each other. There are more generalized interpretations of the term “family,” like the “Royal Family,” which brings together many sub-branches of different families to unite them in various ways to form royal lineages (e.g., Weir, 2009).

But a “family” is not merely a set of individuals. On one hand, it is an entity that has taken a fundamental role in the formation of societies; on the other hand, cultural and political norms heavily affected communities all along the history. As such, the study of families in the context of genealogy might deepen our understanding of daily life traditions as well as external factors affecting these customs. For example, in his work for exploring the formation of the English middle class in the 17th-18th centuries, Earle (1989) discusses three main topics: economy and society, business life, and family and social life. In the last one, Earle examines topics like marriage customs, household structure, and even diet and dress. Another example is Anderson’s (1971) study of 19th century Lancashire’s family structure. In such studies, genealogical sources are a necessity; for example, vital records that supply the researcher with the means of calculating demographic statistics. However, upon completion, such extractions also are helpful for future
genealogical constructions, as they may suggest paths for in-practice research. For example, knowing the average age at marriage of women and men for finding relevant records, and understanding customs related to appearance might help in extracting information from photos. Of course, there are big differences between families from different locations and times, as this entity is constantly changing (e.g., Popenoe, 1988), and these differences often relate to another essential genealogical entity—community.

Communities

In 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies published his inaugural work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (society and community), in which he sketched the main differences between communities and societies. By doing that, the concept of community refers to much more solid a construct than just a sub-group of a society, or a set of individuals sharing local resources. A community a la Tönnies (1887) is a grouping based on feelings of togetherness and on mutual links; the goal of the community is to maintain these feelings and links, and the community members are the means for this goal. This definition helps understand that communities are components that are as important to genealogy as families, as one affects the other. For example, studying other families from the same community to which a given family belonged might enrich our knowledge about that family. On the other hand, telling the story of a certain family within a community might shed light on the community as a whole. The characteristics of a particular community—which might be small (e.g., a Jewish community of a little “Shtetl” in 19th-century Eastern Europe) or huge (e.g., African Americans)—usually determine the genealogical resources relevant for the research of all of the families and individuals. Therefore, it is no wonder that many genealogy organizations have emerged based on communal belonging. One example would be Italian genealogy groups, which focus on the study of descendants of current and historical “Italy” wherever they are. Another example would be Jewish genealogical societies, which focus on researching any individuals, families, or communities of Jewish descent.

Through sociological lenses, communities might have “memory,” more precisely collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950), that is, the shared information individuals within a given group share. Individuals within a group can create (or re-create), sustain, transform, and pass-on their collective memory. A range of disciplines, including psychology, historical geography, linguistics, and communication studies can study topics related to collective memory (cf., Middleton & Edwards, 1990). This collective memory relates strongly to genealogy, not only as it might enrich knowledge on communities to which one’s relatives belonged (with, e.g., folklore stories, traditions, and recipes) but also as it might promote community-related “pure” genealogical research. An example of the latter is the study of how the collective memory of the Holocaust plays an important role in “second generation” Jewish Holocaust survivors’ decision to trace their roots (Stein, 2009). In other cases, genealogy is a tool for preserving or modifying the collective memory of a given group (Anderson, 1971; Ciubrinskas, 2009b).

But even when narrowing down to the more practical definition of community as a group of people living in a given geographically-limited area, communities are of interest to genealogy from at least two important points of view: resources and migration. Resources may largely vary not only between different countries but also between different locations in the same country, often at the community level. A fire in a town’s archive might destroy all of this town’s historical
documents, but might do no harm to the neighboring town. A particular small community might
decide to keep lists of household members as a local initiative. Such examples are, of course,
countless. This is why compilations of inventories at the community-level are of huge importance
to genealogists (e.g., Eichholz, 2004). Merging resources at the community level might help in
enriching other resources for the same community: Wagener (2008) demonstrated how
tombstones from an old Jewish cemetery in Eastern Europe – traditionally holding only little
information about the deceased or having missing information due to poor conditions – are fully
identified using other resources for that community, such as vital records, burial records,
necrology lists from memory books, and business directories. Another example from a different
domain demonstrates the usefulness of resources at the community level: A study of genealogical
resources for the Old Order Amish community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, spanning over 160
years, revealed interesting relationships between parity and life span (McArdle et al., 2006).

Migration patterns of communities are also of great importance for practical genealogy
research, as understanding such patterns might provide hints for research directions when tracing
“lost” family branches. Examples are numerous, so we will mention only two: Most of the Urfalim
– Jews originally from Urfa, Turkey – had left Urfa in 1896 and settled in Ottoman Syria, and
later in Jerusalem and Tiberias, Israel; Lithuanians immigrated to the USA as early as in the pre-
Civil War days, settling in Texas (Čiubrinskas, 2009a). More high-level patterns of immigration
and of community belonging arise from genetic studies, suggesting linkages between groups of
people over a span of thousands of years; using such techniques, scholars gather new knowledge
about different ethnic groups, like the Jewish population (e.g., Hammer et al., 2000; Ostrer,
2001), or the Indian caste populations (e.g., Bamshad et al., 2001; Kivisild et al., 2003). Overall,
genetic studies open new horizons for genealogy practitioners, both at the individual and
community level (cf., Johnston & Thomas, 2003; King & Jobling, 2009; Shriver & Kittles, 2004).

The “community” entity is related to available resources and migratory patterns as well as
to name(s), history, demographic statistics, local culture, and other characteristics that make it a
unique building block of genealogy.

Representations

The skeleton behind many genealogy studies is the family tree, which connects
individuals to all kinds of family structures. Often, family trees connect families from the same
community together, hence allowing the examination of inter-community relationships.
Although immediately associated with a graphical representation, the family tree is not
necessarily a visual representation of the relationship within a certain population, but rather the
set of all such existing relationships (e.g., many genealogists will talk about their “family tree,”
without referring to a specific visual representation of it). Hereby, we will refer to these two
meanings interchangeably. In the same manner, the “family” in the family tree might be a
generalization of the term “family” (see Families). Practically, there are a few common graphical
forms for presenting data from a family tree; each refers to a different part of the actual family
database: (a) Descendant tree, which includes all of the descendants (usually with their spouses)
of an individual or a couple; (b) Ancestor tree, which includes all of the ancestors of an
individual; (c) Hourglass tree, combining both descendant- and ancestor tree for an individual or
a couple; (d) All-in-one tree, which represents the whole set of individuals relating to a particular individual. The presentation of all of these is or is not limited by number of generations.

However, graphical objects are not the only means for representing portions of the family tree. Reports are also popular for that purpose; besides a descendant report or ancestor report, which have obvious corresponding graphical representations, there are also other types, e.g., family group sheets (holding information about a single family, i.e., parents and their children), timelines (presenting chronologically-ordered events for an individual or a sub-set of the family tree), relationship reports (detailing the exact relationship between two individuals), and narrative reports (offering as much information as possible about individuals). We group all of these representations of a family tree, or subsets of it, under the “representation” umbrella as well as other potential ways of representing bits and pieces of the information one gathers during a genealogy research (for example, maps which represent genealogy data).

Representations might play a crucial role in one’s genealogical research, as using them is a common method for one to communicate and reflect upon research with oneself or with others. As such, representations should be easy to handle and might also offer some insights to the researcher. Family trees, for example, most commonly share two-dimensional hierarchical structures; however, in recent years, some studies suggested other methods, either keeping the concepts of the traditional tree-like diagrams (Tuttle, Nonato, & Silva, 2010; Wesson, Plessis, & Oosthuizen, 2004), or changing them considerably to highlight timelines (Honey, 2001; Kim, Card, & Heer, 2010) or relationships between individuals and families (Bezerianos, Dragicevic, Fekete, Bae, & Watson, 2010). It is computer scientists who usually study problems regarding genealogical data visualization as such problems relate to other problems in data bases and data structure.

Besides their visualization, family trees are an important research unit. One of the best examples of this is the fact that analysis of a repository of family trees might result in finding matches between trees (that is, people, or sub-branches, that appear in multiple trees). Similarly, analysis of a repository of family trees and a repository of historical records might result in matches between individuals in both repositories. The largest commercial genealogy Websites, such as Ancestry.com, Geni.com, and MyHeritage.com already implement algorithms for automatically finding such matching. More than that, similar techniques might be of help for humanitarian organizations for locating “lost” people (cf., Rojas, 2011). Such technologies often use not only pure genealogical data about individuals or families but also descriptive data from the tree structure. Furthermore, merging trees, upon finding a match, is a process that usually involves changing sub-structures of the tree and not just modifying individuals’ data. Therefore, in the heart of merging trees lies the tree itself, hence it is a feasible research unit.

Another research topic with regard to representations of the family tree—mainly in the form of reports—is numbering systems for genealogy. There are various numbering systems, a few of which are the “gold standards” of the field of practice (Curran, Crane, & Wray, 1999). The two most common methods for numbering descendant reports are the Register System and the National Genealogical Society (NGS) Quarterly System. In 1870, the New England Historic Genealogical Society developed the Register system, which uses both Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4) and Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv), and follows these rules: The main individual (the one the descendants of whom are reported) takes the number 1; each person’s children take Roman numerals in the order of birth (if known), starting from i; “children” who later appear in the
report as married or having descendants take additional numbers in Arabic numerals (continuing from 2 upwards across the report), which serve as pointers to their entry; the report details the descendants by generations. In 1912, the National Geographic Society (NGS) published the Quarterly system, which differs from the Register System in that each individual takes a number, regardless of whether the line of that individual is continuing; individuals who do have a separate entry later in the report are further indicated by a plus sign (+) in front of their number. In both systems, spouses do not get numbers, as only direct descendants do. Other numbering systems for descendant reports might implicitly mention the full lineage of an individual (e.g., Henry or d'Aboville systems). Ancestor reports have, of course, other numbering systems, the most common is Ahnentafel, according to which the main person takes the number 1, and then each person’s father takes the double of the person’s number, and each person’s mother takes the double of the person’s number plus one. Recently, McDonald (2011) developed a new ancestral numbering system, named the Ancestral Lines Pairing System, which suggests a clever embedding of other pieces of information, including component lines, generations, and collateral families, in the identifying numbers.

As family trees have much to do with the mathematical notion of graphs, it is possible to research the former using algorithms and techniques from the field of Graph Theory, usually under either Mathematics or Computer Science (Lewis, 1992; Rapp & Jones, 2012). However, important to recall, a family tree is not necessarily a “tree” as appears in Graph Theory because of possible inter-family marriages.

Data

What differentiates genealogy from other disciplines is the types of data genealogists and family historians use for establishing genealogical facts or hypotheses, and, moreover, the extremely wide range of potential data they use. These include historical records, old and new fiction and non-fiction books, photos, online databases, artifacts, ephemera, personal communications, and much more. Any piece of information about individuals, families, communities, and such must have originated from some piece of evidence and, frequently, from more than one source.

The life cycle for using a source of information in genealogical research usually includes the following high-level stages: locating, evaluating, and citing.

Locating. This is the process of finding the needed source to answer a specific research question. Detailing this process in a more fine-tuned level might demonstrate its complexity. First, the researcher might ask herself or himself a question like: “Where can I find the exact birth date of my maternal grandmother?” Then, the researcher should gather all the relevant information she or he has for answering that question. For example, based on existing documents, the grandmother was born in Galati, Romania, probably between 1890-1915, immigrated as a single to the US, was married and naturalized in Hartford, Connecticut, and died in New York, New York. After analyzing the existing information, the research can then try to locate the birth date by looking for the grandmother’s birth certificate, naturalization records, passport, death certificate, gravestone, etc.; searching relevant online databases (e.g., family trees uploaded by other researchers that might have information about that grandmother); interviewing the grandmother’s family members, or friends, or both; or in any other way. This
stage ends when the researcher feels that she or he has gathered enough information for answering the research question.

Evaluating. After collecting the data, the researcher should evaluate it. The evaluation is three-fold, as the researcher is given a source that provides information from which she or he can derive the evidence they need to answer the research question. For each of these components, different methods of evaluation might be required. For example, the source may be original or a derivation, the information might be primary or secondary, and the evidence might be either direct or indirect (Mills, 1999).

Citing. After coming to a conclusion, the researcher should explicitly state what they have learned from the evaluation process and properly cite the source(s) for that conclusion. Of course, there is more than one way of citing sources in genealogy (Croom, 2009; Lackey, 1986; Mills, 2009), and one should choose the proper method to use, based on personal preferences or on requirements made by the venue in which the work is to be published.

Sources and resources – the providers of genealogical data – might be the focus of many studies with regards to the above three stages in the life cycle. Traditionally, many studies have focused on the very existence or usefulness of a given resource for genealogical research; however, in a broader sense, other aspects are also crucial with regards to genealogical data. For example, a method for adding bidirectional links between evidence and conclusions was suggested to improve the way sources are being used and re-used (Wilson, 2002). Another example is SmartMatch and Record Matching, technologies developed and being offered by MyHeritage.com; the former intelligently finds similarities between users’ family trees (i.e., locates matching sub-branches), and the latter automatically finds matches of one’s family tree profiles in a large set of historical records. The automatization of the first stage of using sources basically redefines that very stage, making the role of the user in locating data more passive and letting data be “pushed” to the genealogist. Scientific explorations might set boundaries to the potential usefulness of such technology in enriching one’s family tree (e.g., Rojas, 2011). Metadata can enrich online genealogical data, which in turn will affect all stages of using online genealogical resources (Taylor, 2012), although previous research has demonstrated that even without metadata, locating and separation of genealogical records is possible using ontology-based extraction and vector space modeling (Walker & Embley, 2004).

Taking a different angle, the study of genealogical data may improve data quality. For example, Stroweis (2011) demonstrates a methodology for detecting and correcting family names in repositories of genealogical records using Soundex and phonetic name-coding to overcome errors (either in the source or during its digitization). In another case, Wagner (2008) has shown how one resource (tombstone records) can be enriched by merging it with another resource (e.g., metrical data, burial records, and business directories). Similarly, Agarwala et al. (1999; 2001) have demonstrated how merging two resources – two large genealogy books documenting North American Anabaptist communities – might reveal parent-child relationships that do not exist in either of the books and dramatically increase information about inbreeding. Tulinius (2011) shows how the construction of a complete database of Icelanders (born after 1854) has dramatically promoted many genetic studies.

Connecting data, and more generally, accessing data, is also closely related to the way data is represented, stored, and shared digitally. GEDCOM (GEnaological Data COMmunication) has become the standard for exchanging genealogical data (GEDCOM X is a
newer version of that protocol, see http://www.gedcomx.org); stepping into the promising world of the semantic Web, historical and genealogical schemas are suggested as new standards to markup such data (cf., http://historical-data.org).

Bird’s-eye View

Practicing genealogy involves part or all of the aforementioned research units; however, there are other issues involved in the very practicing of genealogy which should be considered an integral part of genealogy as an academic research field. That is, issues like ethical dilemmas and legal concerns while practicing genealogy (e.g., Human Genetic Commission, 2000; Kallmann; Tutton, 2004; Wilkinson, 2010); methods for teaching or learning about genealogy practices (e.g., Sheppard, 1977; Veale, 2006); or handling the genealogy research (e.g., Duff & Johnson, 2003; Lucas, 2009; Yakel, 2004) are all feasible research topics for a scholar studying the field of genealogy. Of course, such issues might also be relevant to other disciplines (for the examples given above: Law, Education, and Information Science, respectively); however, genealogy sure has some unique points of view that make these topics, as well as potentially many others, an integral part of the current suggested taxonomy. In practice, a research group about “Genealogy Education,” for example, might work under the (yet imaginary) Department of Genealogy or under the Faculty of Education (or both). Although not well-defined, we might say that any research question that refers to genealogy as a whole might be categorized under this section of the taxonomy (e.g., Greenberg, 1982; McCain & Ray, 2003; Tyler, 2008). Sure enough, it is not possible to list all the domains to which genealogy is related. However, as the claimant should get some satisfaction, we will shortly present a central building block of potential bird’s-eye view types of research on genealogy, namely, the genealogist.

As genealogy has been an active field for hundreds of years, and as it has developed dramatically over the last few decades, mainly in response to technological advancements, it is of interest to many people. They are the ones who, often on a daily basis, deal with people, families, communities, representation, and data. They are the ones who ponder on their family history, or who help others learn more about their ancestors. They are the ones who hit brick-walls; the ones who are often engaged in life-long learning in this field. Hence, genealogists might be studied from a wide range of angles. First and foremost, the question arises: why are people interested in their family history? This is a fundamental research question the (alleged) answers to which might help scholars to better understand the inner-structure of the genealogy community, and may lead to help more people research their own genealogy in a way suitable for them. In recent years, studies of this question have surfaced with regards to issues related to oneself, families, cultural groups and societies, and even to human nature (Basu, 2004; Bishop, 2005; Erben, 1991; Hackstaff, 2010; Kramer, 2011; Nash, 2005), hence its importance on many different levels and from many points of view. Another fascinating question, initiated by the fact that many genealogists are involved in meetings or discussions, be it formally or informally, face-to-face or virtual, is: What is the role of the community in genealogy research? This question also has many implications, and might enhance collaboration to ease one’s own efforts, as well as promote collaborative genealogy research (that is already being performed by many communities world-wide). Some studies already took this direction, highlighting patterns of sharing, asking, and helping that help to establish the role of a community of genealogists.
Still, there is much to explore on genealogists, as well as on many other bird’s-eye view topics related to genealogy.

Conclusions and Discussion

Since the beginning of the 21st century, millions of people around the globe have practiced genealogy, either as a hobby, a serious leisure activity, or a vocation. Technological development and the relative ease of access to historical records on the Internet enabled this emergence of genealogy, and TV shows and magazines tail-winded it. Therefore, more people continue to join the circle of genealogists. Along with the major popularity of genealogy among laymen, many academic studies that relate to genealogy conducted in recent years; however, these are scattered across many disciplines. This article suggests ways to leverage genealogy as a multidisciplinary academic research field, and specifically presents a taxonomy for this new field. This taxonomy demonstrates the relationships between genealogy and other fields on one hand, but describes its uniqueness on the other hand. The taxonomy is built upon the very structure of the genealogy research and defines six main topics for research. There are, of course, rich webs of relationships between these components; however, they serve, as we demonstrated in this article, as independent building blocks. The six elements are people, families, communities, representations, data, and bird’s-eye view.

As science and scientific research progress, new multidisciplinary research fields continue to appear, such as Urban Morphology (Moudon, 1997), the Philosophy of Chemistry (Scerri, 2000), Network Science (Fang et al., 2007), and many more. These integrative research fields highlight the reciprocal relationships between existing fields and a new domain. Our taxonomy demonstrates that genealogy, as an academic research field, presents a similar structure. For example, researching how certain communities pass down family customs from generation to generation may assist both genealogists (e.g., by developing a method of making connections between individuals and families using knowledge about customs) and sociologists; studying visual representations of complex family trees might assist both genealogists and computer-scientists (e.g., by reflecting on other similarly-structured databases); exploring statistics about professions based on census data might assist genealogists (e.g., in understanding the place their own ancestors took within the community) and historians. Clearly, examples are numerous (also see Brown, 2008).

Academic institutes do not yet manifest genealogy as a research field per se. Although almost any academic institution’s library has a dedicated genealogy division, only a few have genealogy as one of their academic branches. While looking for US academic programs that focus on genealogy, we were barely able to find a handful; however, the main focus of these centers and programs involves educational or practical applications, and they are not actively involved in academic research in genealogy. As the nature of the suggested academic genealogy is multidisciplinary, it is only natural that the best practice of building this field is using a bottom-up method, that is, starting by facilitating communication between current faculty members who are interested in bringing genealogy to the fore of their research interests (whether they are currently actively involved with a genealogy research or not) from her or his own perspective. This way, a new academic community will have a non-null starting point; the community members,
motivated by their common interest, will initiate discussions about the new field’s requirements, such as definitions, core knowledge, standards, and major research questions. While doing this, they will also have to discuss some community-related issues, like structural organization, means of communication, etc. Eventually, when the community evolves, teaching in the field might be possible, based on the knowledge gathered by its members; and eventually – when the infrastructure is ready – recognition by academic institutions is more plausible. This proposed process takes an opposite direction than a few scholars suggested before, that is, to start with university-level for-credit courses (Jones, 2007; Mills, 2003).

References


**About the Author**

Arnon Hershkovitz, Ph.D. (arnon.hershkovitz@gmail.com), is a Post-doctoral Research Associate in Teachers College, Columbia University (New York, N.Y.), focusing his research on Educational Data Mining (EDM). He holds a Ph.D. in Science Education (Tel Aviv University), an M.A. in Applied Mathematics, and a B.A. in Mathematics and Computer Science (both from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology). For more than 13 years, he has been involved in genealogy research and in the genealogy community world-wide.
Discussion Questions

1. Are you convinced genealogy is indeed multidisciplinary so it cannot reside under one current discipline? Why or why not?

2. Can you think of innovative genealogy-related studies that might take place under “unusual” disciplines like Literature, Economics, Arts, Physics, Political Science, etc.? Where would these be located in the suggested taxonomy?

3. Can you think of an academic genealogy research that will promote your own family history research? Where it would be located in the suggested taxonomy?

4. What other multidisciplinary domains might be academically leveraged? Base your answer on the list of conditions an academic discipline should follow (under “Re-defining Genealogy as a Multidisciplinary Academic Research Field”): market demand, professionals working in the field, journal articles published, special jargon, specific objects of research, unique methodologies, comprehensive and organized body of knowledge, or institutional manifestation.

To Cite this Article
