Genealogy, Archives and Uses of the Past

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Genealogy can be described as a way of linking the past to the present using genealogical and historical records to establish a lineage that connects present people with those who came before them. It's a way of linking oneself and one's family to history through archives and ancestry. In that way, genealogy can create a unique, personalized experience of historicity and a sense of historical identity. What is characteristic of genealogy is thus the use of history to create meaning in the present.

Genealogy is a cultural practice that both uses and produces cultural heritage, i.e. historical knowledge inherited from past generations, which is maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. This definition places the phenomenon of genealogical research in the humanities, making it a legitimate object of study for scholars based in history and heritage studies, among other fields. According to public historian Jerome de Groot, genealogy as a form of historical knowledge is largely untheorized (de Groot 2015). This article is an attempt to draw attention to some of the many ways genealogy can be understood and discussed.

In the first part of the article, I examine the contemporary phenomenon of genealogy. Why has genealogy boomed in recent years? What does genealogy mean to those researching their family history? What might be some issues surrounding genealogical research? In the second part, I discuss in more detail how genealogists use and produce history, and what I mean by the term 'use' in this sense, drawing on a few historiographical methods that elaborate on different approaches to history. I will also raise some questions concerning what implications the surge of genealogy may have for archives and archive practices, which will be discussed in the third part of the article, where I also suggest a way forward for professionals interested in developing new approaches and methods.

My argument is based on, in addition to relevant academic literature, my own studies of web content from archives and genealogy companies and organisations, as well as on interviews with archivists. However, many insights discussed in this paper derive from a limited empirical study. This article is primarily intended to raise questions and initiate a discussion on genealogy as an object of study for scholars working in historical disciplines, and for archivists and archive educators. In the future, I will undertake a more systematic empirical study, followed by an in depth analysis of the individual and organizational impacts of genealogy. Nevertheless, I hope that my present discussion will attract wider interest and inspire further exploration.

A new way of approaching the past

For centuries, genealogy was a model for historical investigation associated with antiquarianism and dynastic models. It is a practice long associated with heraldry, dynasty, marriage negotiation, pedigree, and the organization of family. However, in the past two or three decades, genealogy has become one of the most popular hobbies in our time and a global phenomenon.

It is a contemporary popular movement with a massive amateur audience producing large volumes of family history. In fact, today, amateur historians produce more history than professional historians.

In Sweden, for example, the family history societies list thousands of members and organize numerous meetings and workshops, publish magazines and books, send out leaflets and newsletters, provide discussion forums on the Internet, and share tips and advice on how to conduct genealogical research. Furthermore, most public archives, as well as several libraries, universities and adult educational associations, offer courses on genealogy and family history. Genealogy is also a common feature of history teaching in primary and secondary school, encouraging children to learn about the past through their own family histories.

Genealogy is being both produced and consumed—through digital and physical archives, software programs, online websites (such as Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, MyHeritage and Findmypast),[1] social media, popular culture, etc. Internationally syndicated television programs such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *The Genealogy Roadshow* demonstrate the thriving popularity of the phenomenon. In these programs, the viewers get to follow someone who goes on a journey to trace parts of his or her family tree. The quest for roots is framed as the search of one's history, and therefore, in a sense, a search for oneself. Information about your background is supposed to explain who you are today. Elsewhere (Jonsson Malm 2015) I have discussed why this kind of biological essentialism is problematic.

Michael S. Sweeney uses the phrase 'the genealogical assumption' in his thesis on how the American genealogy discourse has changed over time (Sweeney 2010). The genealogical assumption is the belief that who you are is tied to who your ancestors were. By exploring this assumption, Sweeney demonstrates how ideas of kinship and family relations are intertwined with those of gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, origin and geographical belonging. This suggests that genealogy is not just an innocent and innocuous act, but also reinforces normative discourses and structures in society.

People have, of course, long been interested in their family histories. The difference now is that it is far much easier to trace the generations backwards through time. In our age, mainly thanks to the development of new technologies and the improved accessibility of public records, genealogical research has been transformed profoundly. Online and digital technology has made the creation of family trees and genealogies a lot easier than it was before. All one has to do today to create a family tree is log into special databases that contain names and details of families. After this data has been obtained, additional historical sources can be used to work on the family saga, which could be life stories of the people in the family tree or information on a particular family estate.

In his article, "On Genealogy", de Groot argues that genealogy in many ways can be described as "a democratization of access to the past" (de Groot 2015). Anyone with time and inclination can search for their ancestors in databases and online. But de Groot also makes the point that genealogy is shaped by patriarchal models, institutions of the state and the bureaucratic nation. The success of the genealogical research is dependent on the existence of textual traces and

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[1] http://www.ancestry.com; http://www.familysearch.org; http://www.myheritage.com; http://www.findmypast.co.uk/ (all websites were accessed on May 17, 2016).

archival data, and some groups are significantly underrepresented because of gender, ethnicity and social class.

The democratization of knowledge and technology is what enabled genealogy to become a mass phenomenon, but is not the only explanation to why this activity is so popular. The growing interest in local and social history among professional historians and the general public is also an important factor. Local history studies the history of a geographically local context, often concentrating on the social and cultural life of the local community (Beckett 2007). Social history studies the experiences of ordinary people in the past and their relationships and daily activities (Johnson 2011). The interest of local and social history has been growing since the 1960s and 1970s, which coincides and interfaces with the growing interest of genealogy and family history. Genealogy, thus, can be seen as part of a larger trend in historical production and consumption.

The Swedish ethnologist Lennart Börnfors identifies the interest in history and historical research as a common motivation for engaging in genealogy (Börnfors 2001). The curiosity of the past, the archival treasure hunt, the joy of discovery, the satisfying feeling of problem solving, and the desire to preserve and pass on memories of previous lives. He also discusses the existential aspects of genealogy, the same that underlies television programs such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* mentioned earlier, and how genealogy can be understood as a search for identity and belonging. Karla B. Hackstaff argues, in a similar way to Börnfors, that genealogy is "an expression of longing for connections in family lives and for a place in social history across the generations" (Hackstaff 2009a). The need to connect to history and to a wider community may very well be a symptom of the individualized and fragmented society that sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman talk about when explaining today's societal changes (Bauman 2001a; 2001b). This possibility warrants further discussion in the future.

Another issue that also require further discussion is the relationship between genealogy and today's preoccupation with genes and genetics. Rapid advances in genetic research since the 1980s have revolutionized our knowledge of the role of inheritance in health and disease, but have also opened the door to recreational genomics and genetic ancestry testing. Genetic ancestry testing, or genetic genealogy, is a way for people interested in family history to go beyond what they can learn from historical records or from relatives, and use DNA to create family trees. Genetic ancestry testing is offered by several profit making companies and organizations throughout the world (such as 23andMe, AncestryDNA and Gene by Gene).[2] The tests measure the users' genealogical proximity to distant relatives—sometimes stretching thousands of years back in time and across multiple continents—and provide a seemingly precise percentage breakdown by ethnicity and region, allowing the users to claim or reject their 'African-ness', 'European-ness', 'Asian-ness'', and so forth. American sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel asks if new revelations about our ancestors' identity change the way we see ourselves and others, and what implications this may have on individual and collective perceptions of self-identification and otherness (Zerubavel 2012, also see Hackstaff 2009b for a similar discussion). These are just some of the issues that could be further explored.

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[2] https://www.23andme.com/; http://www.dna.ancestry.com/; http://www.genebygene.com/ (all websites were accessed on May 17, 2016).

Genealogy and the uses of history

How do genealogists use and produce history? What do genealogists do when they are using the past for their research? To understand this, I must start with asking the question: What does it mean to use the past? Uses of history is prevalent everywhere in our society, ranging from the building of monuments to the making of historical movies and the using of nostalgic cues in advertising and product design. Professional historians use history in their daily work, as well as history teachers, museum curators, archivists, public historians, etc. History is used in the most diverse ways, of different people and for different purposes. What they have in common is the attempt to evoke the past—a real or an imagined one—in order to achieve something in the present. Historian Peter Aronsson defines the uses of history as "the processes where parts of the history are activated to form specific meaning-making and action-oriented wholes" (Aronsson, 2002). This does not necessarily mean that uses of history always are conscious processes, but it does indicate a form of historical consciousness, which organizes and influences the perceptions of the past.

In the case of genealogy, this process consists of finding useful historical data to create a cohesive genealogy. But genealogists do not just reproduce their findings. They also interpret and value the information based on their notions of, for instance, family, relatedness and kinship, and exclude what they consider not important. An example of this way of reviewing and revising history is when genealogists deal with the status of adopted children. I recently visited *Anbytarforum*, which is the online forum of the Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies, where members can discuss topics related to genealogical research and share their experiences.[3] There were quite a few discussions on adopted children, for the most part methodological discussions on how to find them (if they had been given away) or their biological parents (if they had been brought in), but also discussions on whether or not to include these children in the family tree at all. Some of the members argued that the child should be considered part of the family, others did not believe so. For some biology seemed to take precedence over social ties, for others the way people actually lived their lives mattered the most.[4] This is what is meant by using parts of history, as Aronsson stresses in the above quotation, the deliberate act of choosing who should be included in one's family, and thus what elements of the past should be included in one's family history.

So, what the genealogists do is that they use parts of history to create a new whole, a reconstruction of the past, a historical narrative of the family's background. What is produced is both physical and psychological, tangible and intangible. Tangible objects might be charts, timelines, books, journals, photo albums, scrapbooks, and illustrations, or digital materials such as databases, websites, blogs, and podcasts. But more interesting are the intangible meanings and experiences attached to these objects. Why are they created? For what purpose? How will they be used? How could they be *abused*?

To answer these questions, we must turn to historiographical methods that allow us to analyse purpose and intention from different perspectives. Friedrich Nietzsche was a pioneer in the field, in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (2008) he discusses individual and societal needs and uses of history, and develops a framework for distinguishing between different approaches to the past, which can be understood as a typology of concurrent or competing visions

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[3] http://aforum.genealogi.se/discus/ (accessed on May 17, 2016).
[4] http://forum.genealogi.se/index.php?topic=131391.0 (accessed on May 17, 2016).

of the purpose and value of history. Nietzsche asserts that history can play three positive roles, which he calls 'monumental', 'antiquarian' and 'critical'. Monumental history uses the great men and deeds of the past to inspire and improve the future; antiquarian history admires and absorbs the past and wants to preserve it for the future; and critical history is questioning and re-examining the past in order to learn from history when shaping the future. All three approaches are equally essential, according to Nietzsche, as long as they are not pursued in excess.

Due to the increased interest in critical studies of history and the uses of history, Nietzsche's typology has resurfaced in recent times, but has also been reworked and reimagined by his postmodern successors. Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson has contributed with a typology that can be a useful tool when understanding how history is used to serve different needs and interests (Karlsson 1999). Karlsson distinguishes between scientific, ideological, moral, political, pedagogical, commercial, and existential uses of history. He also talks about a sort of non-use of history, when history is not used as a relevant or legitimate point of reference, even if it could be. Neither Karlsson's nor Nietzsche's typologies consist of mutually exclusive categories of uses, but rather combinable and partially overlapping variations of uses. All of them will not be present in a randomly selected use, but at least some of them will—a pedagogical use can be highly driven by moral considerations, or by ideological ones, and so on.

The difference between the typologies of Nietzsche and Karlsson is not just the number of possible uses and their definitions, but also the mindset behind them. Nietzsche's interests lie in the activity of valuing and he is trying to direct society towards the proper uses of history. In Nietzsche's typology, all three types of uses are essentially positive. Karlsson, on the other hand, also recognizes that there are different types of uses, but doesn't assign them a value. It is not *if* history is used, but *how* it is used that determines whether it is good or bad, and therefore there always need to be a contextualization. The way Karlsson see it, the abuse of history is when the usage violates human rights or in other ways have a negative impact on society or the individual (Körber 2011).

So what kind of uses of history are genealogists practicing when scouting through the archives and creating their family histories? Here further research is needed, but I will allow myself to make a few assumptions. Firstly, in dialogue with Nietzsche's typology, I want to place genealogy mainly in the two first categories. Genealogy is rarely about uncovering a dark and shameful past, but quite the opposite, to celebrate one's family's struggles and successes, which is the role of monumental history. Genealogy is also about inserting oneself into the past, honouring past lives, and preserving the knowledge of the past for future generations, which is the role of antiquarian history. Monumental and antiquarian approaches to history are thus easy to relate to genealogy, but what about the third perspective, the critical standpoint? My argument is that genealogy is not a particular critical use of history. That, however, does not mean that genealogists can't be critical of the past, and people, actions, and events in the past, but being critical about the past is not, in my view, the same thing as being critical of the uses of the past. Being critical of the uses of the past requires a level of self-awareness and an awareness of the constructive nature of history. That would mean questioning and defying the practices of genealogy and family history while performing them, which is seldom a dimension of conventional genealogical research.

Secondly, drawing on the typology suggested by Karlsson, I argue that genealogy is above all an existential use of history. Genealogy is a personal experience that creates meaning in the

present and opens a window to the past. Engaging with genealogy means engaging with questions related to time, place, family, belonging and human relations, which all are, in a sense, existential concepts. However, labelling genealogy as merely an existential activity is not enough, genealogy can be used for many other purposes, and as I mentioned earlier, most uses of history combine a variety of underlying motivations. For instance, genealogy could be used for scientific reasons, especially in medicine, but also in the humanities and social sciences, if the conducted research requires the establishment of family relationships. It could also be used for ideological, moral or political reasons, to claim an individual or collective identity, the belonging to an ethnical or religious group, or the right to a specific territory, but also to exclude and expel others. It could be used for pedagogical reasons, to teach about history, the art of archival research, and the value of family and belonging, or to deepen the historical consciousness. Finally, genealogy could be used for commercial reasons, in the way the many companies and organisations I refer to in this article trade with genealogical information and tools.

As we can see, Karlsson's typology allows for many different interpretations, and there are probably even more possibilities. There are without question many ways of using history when it comes to genealogical research, but there can probably never be a *non-use* of history, since history is the very foundation of genealogy. In contrast, it is not hard to imagine the *abuse* of history, and the implications thereof—for example by establishing false or dissonant narratives, fuelling unethical historical practices, or reinforcing harmful social norms and thereby producing grounds of discrimination and exclusion. In the last part of this article, I will return to the question of how to avoid the risk of abusing history when doing genealogical research.

How genealogy changes the archives and archival practices

The increasing interest in genealogy has, naturally, affected the archives and how they organize their work, since they are managing many of the historic resources genealogists rely on. Traditionally, archives have served as institutions for preservation of historical records, containing information and knowledge of the past. The archives were primarily in the service of the government, the authorities, or the organizations that generated the collections. (Hereinafter, when discussing the archives, I mainly refer to public historical archives, and not private archives managed by companies and organisations.) Due to the surge of genealogy and the increasing number of people visiting the archives for genealogical purposes, the archives have in many cases been forced to make their services more accessible.

A case in point is the Malmö City Archives, located in Malmö in the south of Sweden.[5] Malmö City Archives are governed by the Department of Culture of Malmö City, and thus count as a public body. The archives contain approximately 15,000 linear meters of national, municipal, and private archival documents from the 14th century until today. Beside text documents, there are also considerable collections of photographs, films, drawings, maps, posters, flags, and other artefacts. The City Archives are responsible for preserving these items and making them accessible to the general public. In 2014, the archives moved from the previous location in the upscale neighbourhood in Malmö's harbour to Möllevången, a more economically disadvantaged and diverse neighbourhood. The main reason for the move was, according to the head of the Department of Culture, to reach more people: "Locating the City Archives in Möllevången

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[5] http://malmo.se/stadsarkivet (accessed on May 20, 2016).

will provide great opportunities for our city. The archives will be able to disseminate the history of Malmö to new audiences, and reach those who aren't already visiting the archives. This relocation will hopefully attract more people to the archives. By creating this public space, the archives will become more visible and open."[6] As a result of this, the building that houses the archives has been designed as a space that encourages creativity, learning, interaction and social encounters.

The shift towards a more public-oriented approach is also visible in the archives' activities. One of the archives' mission is to "offer research services and educational activities and also present exhibitions on various themes." [7] This spring, these activities range from public lectures and guided tours to book clubs and a fashion photo exhibition—and, of course, a considerable amount of activities aimed at genealogists and family historians. Actually, the archivists work more with public programs and customer service than with the collections. This would probably not have been feasible, and maybe not even conceivable, only a few decades ago.[8]

A lot of this has to do with the changing role of the archives—they have, in a very short span of time, transformed from monolithic administrative agencies to cultural heritage organisations—which in turn depends on the enormous presence of genealogists in historical archives (at the Malmö City Archives, about 80 percent of the visitors are there to conduct some kind of genealogical research). They paved the way and insisted on accessibility, openness, guidance, and acknowledgement. Moreover, they also pushed forward the development of the digital and information tools used in the archives, which has further increased the reach and accessibility of archival records. It is quite obvious that there has been a paradigm shift in the way archives are perceived and how they perceive themselves.

The idea of preservation has for long been the basic paradigm of all heritage management (Lowenthal 1996), including archival heritage management. In the last decades, however, there has been a strong emphasis on the use of cultural heritage as a positive resource for the sustainable development of society. A case in point is the public approach advocated by the Swedish National Archives, which have developed a strategic work plan that outlines how to improve inclusion and accessibility.[9] The Swedish National Archives are a government agency within the Ministry of Culture, and being subordinated to the Ministry of Culture and the Minister of Culture and Democracy means meeting the overall objectives of the national cultural policy.[10] The objectives of the national cultural policy in Sweden emphasize above all inclusion, participation, and diversity. Furthermore, the objectives promote the preservation, use and development of cultural heritage.[11] Hence public archives in Sweden are an integral part of the cultural landscape, and are expected to contribute to the development of a sustainable and democratic society. So, how can archivists and archive educators work towards these objectives, considering that genealogy and genealogical research nowadays actually form the basis of their practices?

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[6] http://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/malmo/pressreleases/malmoe-stadsarkiv-flyttar-till-moellevaangen-727177 (accessed on May 20, 2016).
[7] http://malmo.se/stadsarkivet (accessed on May 20, 2016).
[8] Interview with Fredrik Egefur, archivist at Malmö City Archives, 2016-05-19.
[9] Interview with Eva Tegnhed, the Regional State Archive in Östersund, 2014-03-26. (The Regional State Archive in Östersund is a part of the Swedish National Archives.)
[10] https://riksarkivet.se/om-oss (accessed on May 20, 2016).
[11] http://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/kultur/mal-for-kultur/ (accessed on May 20, 2016).

How can they ensure that the archives and the archival records are used in a way that promote these objectives, and not in a way that is fallacious, unethical or harmful?

Now I will return to the question I asked earlier concerning how to avoid the risk of abusing history when doing genealogical research. First of all, in accordance with Nietzsche's typology, we need to introduce a critical perspective in genealogical research. A critical perspective that could help us, on the one hand, analyse issues surrounding genealogy from a critical theory point of view, and on the other hand, develop a critical approach to genealogical practices. I have already raised some of the issues here that I believe will need to be addressed in depth in the future. One had to do with the normative ideas of family and belonging embedded in the very act of linking people together based on perceived family ties, and the negative impact this might have on family relations and social cohesion. Another had to do with the massive amount of local and social history produced by amateur historians, and how that might impact on the public's perception of how history is produced and how to understand the historical past. Yet another had to do with what happens when personal historical data gets commodified and becomes an object for trade by large multinational corporations. Seeing that all of these issues are different from each other, they need to be analysed separately, presumably from a variety of critical theories and methods.

The next step is to develop a critical approach to genealogical practices based on the critical analysis carried out in the first step. This would be a useful tool for archivists and archive educators when supporting visitors who wish to conduct genealogical research, drawing up strategies for future preservation practices, designing activities aimed at genealogists, and managing resources and digital services. By operating from a critical perspective, archivists and archive educators can get a better understanding of how history might be abused, and find ways to prevent this by asking critical questions and offer insights that problematize the genealogical practices. That could steer the existential, using the terminology of Karlsson's typology, and often self-involved use of history towards a more reflective and critical approach. It may also prevent the essentialist and biologically-based ideological, moral or political use of history that genealogy could give rise to. Perhaps it could also prevent a dubious commercial use of historical data by for-profit companies and organisations through education and awareness-raising of their users. Instead, a critical approach could facilitate a more scientific and pedagogical use of history, that could foster critical historical thinking skills and deepen the historical consciousness. By doing that, we can hopefully minimize the risk of false or dissonant narratives, unethical historical practices, the reinforcement of harmful social norms, etc. What I suggest then, is the development of a critical-pedagogical approach to genealogy and family history, and that critical theory researchers, archivists and archive educators work together in developing and implementing such an approach. Combining a critical approach and practical knowledge is, in my view, crucial to address the many issues surrounding genealogy.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed genealogy as a cultural practice that links people to the past to create meaning in the present. Genealogy has become a contemporary mass phenomenon that urgently requires further study from scholars working in historical disciplines interested in the changing uses of the past, as well as for archivists and archive educators managing the resources that genealogists use. I addressed some of the issues and implications related to the surge of

genealogy and family history in different sectors of society, such as family history societies, education, media, popular culture, the commercial market, and—in more detail—the public historical archives. These issues and implications include a possible changing significance of history and a changing approach to how history is used, produced and consumed, for different purposes. I suggested that genealogy is mainly an un-critical, personal and existential use of history that easily could be manipulated and exploited in a way that could be fallacious, unethical, or even harmful. Finally, I discussed what a critical-pedagogical perspective on genealogy and family history might provide, and stressed the importance of scholars and practitioners working together to develop and implement such an approach in the design of new genealogical practices.

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