Leveraging Genealogy as an Academic Discipline
By Arnon Hershkovitz

Genealogy as an academic discipline has been much discussed in recent years especially by Neville Landan, Daniel Wagner and Tom Jones, all of whom have considered the topic in detail. Landan is director of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and Paul Jacoby Center (IIJG) one of whose goals is “developing Jewish genealogy into a recognized field of academic investigation within the realm of Jewish Studies and in association with a broad range of other sciences on an inter-disciplinary ba-

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In accordance with this goal, IIJG has developed a proposed syllabus for teaching Jewish genealogy at the university level. Landan, who holds a Doctorate in History, places Jewish genealogy under Jewish Studies, i.e., in the Humanities. On the other hand, Wagner, a Professor of Material Science, suggests that genealogy is closely related to the Exact Sciences, and Professor of Education Jones places genealogy under the Social Sciences while indicating that it is related to no fewer than 45 research fields, among which are Animal Husbandry, Cartography, Herbology, Numismatics, and Women’s Studies.

The question of whether genealogy is (or is not) an academic discipline, however, has not yet been discussed under a comprehensive framework of “what is an academic discipline?” In this article, we present such a framework and examine the disciplinarity of genealogy within it. We suggest that although genealogy meets most of the prerequisites to become an academic discipline, it fails to meet two crucial ones: a comprehensive and organized body of knowledge and institutional manifestation. Following that, we suggest a bottom-up process of leveraging genealogy to a fully recognized academic discipline, a process that will be initiated by forming an international community of scholars in any discipline who already are affiliated with academic institutions, who are willing to bring genealogy to the front of their research interests, and who will continue to construct the needed body of knowledge for genealogy.

What Is an Academic Discipline?

While considering whether or not Women’s Studies is an academic discipline, Sandra Coyner addresses what an academic discipline is not. According to Coyner, a discipline is not equal to a subject; that is, it is not just the summation of things people want to (or should) know about a certain topic. Related to this is the fact that some topics are treated by more than one discipline. For example, questions about migration patterns might be examined by historians, economists, geographers and/or statisticians. A discipline is not defined by the use of specific research methodologies; interviews, tests, case studies, archival research and other research methodologies are shared by many disciplines. Disciplines are not single, unified structures with regard to the knowledge underlying the subject matter. Different trends within a discipline (e.g., micro-history and macro-history) do not complete each other, but rather compete by suggesting different explanations for the same phenomena. Sometimes dissimilarities in a discipline are at least as great as those between disciplines, and it might be thought that often the grouping of several topics into a discipline is random. Coyner maintains that disciplines are not objective or apolitical, and that all research—starting from its initial questions and ending with its interpretation—rests on values or is narrowed by selective perceptions.

Applying Coyner’s views of what disciplines are not, we may begin to understand what they are. Disciplines are systems that deal with certain bodies of knowledge but also with their construction, concepts, representation, teaching, inquiry, judgment, values, ethics, and much more. Disciplines are not only about knowledge, but also about the people who form this knowledge, use it and discuss it. Those scholars have the sense of belonging, through which they form their identity, and share kudos. Like other professional fields, disciplines use their own forms of organization to link together specialists scattered among institutions, and they also provide culture to the scholars. All in all, disciplines are neither solely about subjects nor are they

about people or institutions, as "nothing is more certain in the lives of the disciplines, whatever the field, whatever the institutional setting, than that they are forever changing." Moreover, academic disciplines are about the organization of learning and the systematic production of new knowledge through research.

Dozens of studies discuss the question of whether or not various fields are academic disciplines but only few include a suggested measure for this examination. One list of conditions that must be met in order for a field of study to be considered a discipline has been constructed by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). This list is quoted in an article trying to assess whether statistics is an academic discipline. Another general list is found in a working paper discussing academic disciplines.

Merging the two lists, we have a framework within which we can assess whether or not genealogy is an academic discipline. According to this merged list, an academic discipline should have:

- Particular objects of research
- Unique research methods
- 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
- Institutional manifestation

Let us now examine how genealogy fits this list.

**Specific Objects of Research.** Obviously, people are the main object of most genealogy research. Genealogists investigate people's life spans, look for documentation about people, trace migration paths of people, decipher tombstones telling about people, and more. One also can extend the scope of genealogy research to families. Although the definition of the term "family" may be open to debate, as used here it means "a group of people who are related to each other," a definition that fits families from the 16th century as well as new families from the 21st century, and may also fit other familial configurations genealogists often research, such as groups of individuals who all descend from the same individual (or couple). A research object may extend also to communities, groups of individuals and families who reside(d) in the same place at certain periods. Although communities do not have a birth date and cannot be interviewed in toto, they do have growth and decline patterns, changing borders and collective memory.

Genealogy often deals with other objects as well. Two of the most common are names and family trees. Names borne by people, both given names and surnames have been extensively studied historically, etymologically, culturally, biologically, and from other angles. Family trees which describe the relationships between people and families, also might be treated as research objects in themselves. Genealogists have raised interesting research questions about their visualization, growth rate and more.

Although people, families, communities, names and family trees all are objects of research in other disciplines (for example, people in History, families in Sociology, communities in Economics, names in Linguistics, and family trees in Genetics)—research interests in them in genealogy are different and unique.

Thus, we may conclude that genealogy does have particular objects of research.

**Research Methods.** Genealogy certainly uses some unique research methodologies to answer potential research questions, although some of the methods are not fully for-
Named after the Ethnography qualitative research method to understand cultural phenomena in context. Docography involves the gathering of empirical data on people, families or communities based on various genealogically relevant documents, such as vital statistics and archival families or communities. Genealogists might discover family relationships otherwise not possible to know. The methodology also allows one to discover family relations otherwise not possible to know. Hence, genealogy definitely possesses its own unique research methods and special techniques. Significant Market Demand. Without a doubt, a huge market demand exists for genealogy, the extent of which is not illustrated by Ancestry.com, the largest online family history resource, which has 1.6 million paying subscribers (as of August 2011) and revenue of more than 300 million dollars annually. Genealogy certainly meets this requirement. Significant Market Demand. Without a doubt, a huge market demand exists for genealogy, the extent of which is not illustrated by Ancestry.com, the largest online family history resource, which has 1.6 million paying subscribers (as of August 2011) and revenue of more than 300 million dollars annually. Genealogy certainly meets this requirement.

Specific Terminologies or Technical Language. A physician overhearing two genealogists tattle about BMD (births, marriages and deaths), might think they are inter­ested in testing their Bone Mineral Density; the genealogists, however, mean something entirely different. When a reader knows that a certain publication demonstrates new advances in genealogy research. When comparing information appearing on the two different trees, who are assumed to be the same individual—are indeed the same person. This problem is accentuated because if genealogists do not document dates of birth or death, either because of objective limitations such as a lack of such information, or because of a bad habit of not following documentation standards (if such standards exist). For fitting family trees on a time scale and, therefore, allowing a comparison between them, at least two methods, which might be considered theoretical frameworks, have been devised: Paul Jacobs’ Absolute Generations Scale and Michael Honeys’ Jewish Historical Clock. These two examples are an exception and highlight the need for theories and grounded-theories (theories generated from data) of fundamental topics within genealogy research. Without such theories, and without basic standards, no body of genealogy literature can exist; neither can its academic quality be assured. It is at this stage, that we may talk about theories of genealogy research when the basic structures needed for any theory still are missing in genealogy. Standards for documenting names, dates and places—the elementary units of any genealogy research—are still not to be found; only in 2008 was such a standard first proposed. A suggested standard for citing sources (a necessary auxiliary search) was published only a few years before that and was widely accepted.

An example of a genealogy theory—which is not a theory grounded in the discipline of History or in any other academic discipline—is the one related to the growth rate of family trees, regarding the number of ancestors in each generation. The astronomical doubling number of ancestors in each generation leads to the Ancestor Paradox, according to which in a certain generation in the past, the number of ancestors was (much) larger than the world population at the time. 25 A theory suggesting a solution to this paradox was suggested by Pears a few years after his original publication.26 Using the so-called The Diamond Theory of Ancestors, this theory suggests that at a certain point, through a number of (early) generations, the number of ancestors is actually decreasing and not increasing.

Another example grounded in the discipline of History or in any other academic discipline is the need for a general model to demonstrate the need for theories in genealogy research. When comparing information appearing on two or more family trees, or when desiring to merge families, genealogists might have been advised: Paul Jacobs’ Absolute Generations Scale and Michael Honeys’ Jewish Historical Clock. These two examples are an exception and highlight the need for theories and grounded-theories (theories generated from data) of fundamental topics within genealogy research. Without such theories, and without basic standards, no body of genealogy literature can exist; neither can its academic quality be assured. It is at this stage, that we may talk about theories of genealogy research when the basic structures needed for any theory still are missing in genealogy. Standards for documenting names, dates and places—the elementary units of any genealogy research—are still not to be found; only in 2008 was such a standard first proposed. A suggested standard for citing sources (a necessary auxiliary search) was published only a few years before that and was widely accepted.

A Theory, Concepts and a Body of Literature. Psychologists have Freud, Kinsey, Pavlov, and Piaget (and many more); physicists have Einstein, Hertz, Lawrence, and Ohm (and many more); Economists have the Theory of Public Expenditure, Theory of Capital, and Theory of Demand (and many more). But what are the main theories or models of genealogy research? And who are the "ancestors" of this field? As the answers to both questions (and to similar ones) are unclear, it is difficult to ponder a body of literature in genealogy research. It is always a great delight to talk about theories of genealogy research when the basic structures needed for any theory still are missing in genealogy. Standards for documenting names, dates and places—the elementary units of any genealogy research—are still not to be found; only in 2008 was such a standard first proposed. A suggested standard for citing sources (a necessary auxiliary search) was published only a few years before that and was widely accepted.

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Cerically, a specific genealogy jargon is used on a daily basis. Professionals working essentially in the field. Many genealogists worldwide are self-educated. Currently, no one needs a degree or some specific training in order to practice genealogy (either as a hobby or as a profession). Two organizations credit genealogy as a profession: The Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) and the International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (ICAG). A few manuals that collect materials on this topic are the most popular of which is the one published by Board for Certification of Genealogists and the book Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, written by Elizabeth Shown MILLS.

Most genealogists are not accredited at all and not required to adhere to any standards in practice. Currently, a genealogist is basically anyone who defines himself as such. The same is true of "professional genealogists." Overall, genealogy has professionals working in the field.

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Professional Journals Regularly Publishing New Advancements in the Subject. Many genealogy journals and magazines have been published for decades or even hundreds of years, others are published by local genealogical societies or by commercial ventures. How can we measure, however, if a given journal publishes "advances in the subject?" Some topics might seem important from an academic point of view, while others might seem important to some individuals in the subject, such as new details about the genealogy of a "communal ancestor" (e.g., a historical figure from whom many sub-branches descend, e.g., Sales Wahl), new methods for bypassing the multi-spelling problem of surnames, discovery of new archival resources, or suggestions for tree merging. It might be suggested that a certain publication demonstrates new advances in genealogy if it contributes to the knowledge base of the community. To make sure that studies are worth publishing, academic communities all over the world usually employ peer-review mechanisms and standardizing the format of their publications. This standard format is necessary for easily communicating research and research results among members of the community, as it is a way of knowing and enabling fruitful discussions of studies in the field.

It seems that this requirement is implemented only to a limited degree within the genealogy community, with few journals making sure their published materials are peer-reviewed and follow certain guidelines.24 Institutional Manifestations. Although the libraries of many academic institutions have genealogy divisions, only a few institutions have genealogy as one of its academic branches. The root most common classification places genealogy as a sub-discipline of history. "Biography, genealogy, inscriptions" is number 920 in the Dewey Decimal Classification Cata C90; "History, geography, biography," and "Genealogy" is Subclass CS in the Library of Congress Classification's Class C, "Auxiliary Sciences of History (Genealogy)." Only a handful of U.S. academic programs focus on genealogy. The Institute of Genealogy and History Research at Stanford University (Huntington, Alabama); Boston University's Center for Professional Education (Boston, Massachusetts); The Center for Family History and Genealogy at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah); the Genealogy Program at Wallace State College (Hanceville, Alabama); and professional-oriented certificates of the Board for Certification of Genealogists, the National Genealogical Society, and the International Society of Hispanic Genealogists (Washington, D.C.) are examples of genealogy-focused programs. Ethnography if it contributes to the knowledge base of the community. To make sure that studies are worth publishing, academic communities all over the world usually employ peer-review mechanisms and standardizing the format of their publications. This standard format is necessary for easily communicating research and research results among members of the community, as it is a way of knowing and enabling fruitful discussions of studies in the field.


characteristics of an academic discipline, 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 papers regularly published, special jargon, specific objects of research, and some unique methodologies—but also highlights the difficulties that must be overcome before such a step can be completed. What genealogy lacks is a comprehensive and organized body of knowledge involving theories and concepts and institutional manifestation—and the former seemingly is a prerequisite to the latter.

Bottom-Up Leveraging Genealogy
As an Academic Discipline

Although genealogy is a pursuit being undertaken by many people around the world, and although it heavily involves inquiry, it still lacks an academic facet. According to the analysis described in this article, the fundamental barrier preventing recognition of genealogy as a discipline is its lack of a core body of knowledge involving theories and concepts and its absence from the academic milieu. In addition, the type of milieu in which it might be represented in the near future is not quite obvious. The social structure of the newly suggested field is crucially important, as academic disciplinarity does not only require a curriculum, but also an organized social grouping and network of communications. It is primarily the communication within such networks that plays a major role in a field’s formation and progression.

Moreover, when using the term “Academic Genealogy,” one must wonder what is an example of academic research in this field. Clearly, single family research is not of interest academically, for academic research must have some anchors in previous research, as well as some implications going forward, in order to make it interesting.

- Revealing the truth about one’s great-grandfather’s military service may be interesting family lore to investigate, but if it also is a case study that uses a novel research methodology, this might be of interest also as academic research.
- Compiling a list of a certain tiny farming community population according to census and vital statistics records may indeed be an interesting community research project, but if from these data some knowledge about changes in the population age in that tiny farming community over the years is to be extracted, or some comparable data is to be extracted, this might be inspiring academic research.
- Merging trees according to common information is a practical tool for solving mysteries in family research, but determining the minimum number of trees and the distribution of their sizes (say, within a certain ethnic group) which assure such a merging is a fascinating research question to be resolved (probably with the help of Mathematics).

These are just a few examples of possible research interests that might comfortably fit beneath the “Academic Genealogy” umbrella. It is clear that genealogy is an interdisciplinary research field, and this might promote its formation, as it would be an accessible field for genealogy-interested scholars from across disciplines.

In recent years, genealogy has been discussed in academic studies, either as the methodological used or as a phenomenon examined. Professor Gur Alroy of the Faculty of Humanities, Haifa University (Israel), has studied the role of Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) and Jewish Territorialism Organization (ITO) in the Jewish emigration from the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire in the early 20th century. The results of his research—published in a number of journals enrich knowledge of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century. This helps many genealogists, since Alroy constructed a novel resource as part of the study: a database of applications made by Jewish immigrants to JCA and ITO’s information bureaus.29

Another example is a History masters thesis submitted by Christine Garrett, entitled: “Genealogical Research, Ancestry.com, and Archives.”30 The primary conclusion of the research, which was based on surveys taken by professional genealogical researchers, was that while Ancestry.com has

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30 The research was done in Auburn University, Auburn, AL; thesis submitted in 2010.
made genealogical research easier, it has not replaced the need to visit archives for the participants in the survey. Such a conclusion is important when discussing the extent to which archives are accessible to the public, and it can serve as empirical evidence when negotiating with policymakers about public access to records (since administrators might claim that today, with “everything on the Internet,” people don’t really need access to actual archives).31

Another dimension of potential academic genealogical research is visualization. As genealogical data may be quite a complex structure to visualize (think not only about a family tree that holds a few ancestral families, but also about family trees connecting families from the same community), researchers—mainly from Computer Science departments—have suggested novel ways to make the task of browsing this data easier. Recent examples include:

- **TimeNets**, a visualization that makes temporal relationships—in particular, births and marriages—as important as family structure, with individuals represented using timelines that converge and diverge to indicate marriage and divorce, and directional edges, i.e., arrowed lines connect parents and children;32
- **PedVis** is a new way to arrange family trees visualization, with the root person in the middle and his parents above, below or to the sides of the root individual, with positions of parents alternating between generations;33
- **GeneaQuilts** is a visualization that takes the form of a diagonally filled matrix, where rows are individuals and columns are nuclear families.34

The developers of these visualizations suggest that the methods not only assist in genealogical data representation, but also in genealogy research per se and, thus, may be important to both software developers and end-users.

The examples cited above clearly demonstrate the multifaceted nature of possible academic genealogy research. It might be conducted in various departments and its implications may be relevant to many individuals in the genealogy field and beyond. Genealogy is not only about people and families, but also about communities and family trees as objects of research; it is based not only on documents but also on common research methods (e.g., surveys) or on unique methodologies. More than that, these examples demonstrate that genealogy-related research has been conducted in academic institutions for some time. Those interested in making genealogy a bona fide academic discipline might use this fact as part of an attempt to leverage genealogy into its own field of study.

**How Genealogy Can Be Academized?**

A first step in the academization of genealogy might be, therefore, the mapping of genealogy-related academic research that already has been conducted, and of affiliated scholars who might be interested in bringing genealogy to the front of their research interests in order to examine it from their academic point of view, be it mathematical, biological, historical, linguistic, sociological, legal, medical, or any other. These scholars might potentially form the core of a new multidisciplinary community the members of which will discuss and promote research in the field, via meetings, journal publishing and other communication. This way, the field will be built bottom-up from within the academic system with a non-empty core. Hopefully, such a community will grow in content (i.e., as more research is undertaken, the more a body of knowledge will grow), size (e.g., by the joining of new generations of researchers into it), and visibility (i.e., by publishing a journal and/or organizing conferences). When that happens, we will know that the journey to the academization of genealogy has ended and that a new journey of the academic genealogy community has started.

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