The Future Relationship between Archival Institutions and Genealogists due to Genetic Ancestry Testing

Abstract - the method used in this study is triangulation and the source material has been retrieved by analysing discussion forums, performing interviews, as well as DNA-testing. The theories used in the analyses are based on Saar’s three dimensions of genealogy along with Case and Givens’ understanding of information behaviour. The results have enabled us to conclude three different future scenarios: 1.) The commercial DNA-services will become the primary source of information for genealogists 2.) the research material generated by genealogists will be seen as valuable by the archival institutions 3.) the archival institutions will begin to facilitate information regarding genetic ancestry testing.

Keywords: Genealogy, genealogists, Archival institutions, DNA, Ancestry research, Genetic Ancestry Testing (GAT), 23andMe, Ancestry, FamilyTreeDNA, MyHeritage

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Introduction

For the longest time a common way to trace one’s ancestors involved a visit to an archival institution. However, around 2007 all this started to change. Commercial companies, such as Ancestry, offered individuals the opportunity to discover relatives by simply doing what is called a “DNA-test” (Larsdotter, 2008). There was no need for genealogists to visit archival institutions to discover relatives. Instead, one could simply compare DNA through saliva swabs.

Despite the changes that have happened in the process of discovering relatives and the field of genealogy, very few studies have been carried out on how these changes have affected the relationship between DNA-tests, genealogy, and archival institutions.

Much of the previous research that has been carried out regarding aspects of DNA, genealogy and archival institutions can be thematized into five different areas: 1) research in the field of law enforcement and the justice system (see Granja 2021; Petersson & Persson 2021). 2) DNA genealogy and identity creation (see Johfre, Saperstein & Hollenbach 2021; Putman & Cole 2020). 3) impact of DNA services on information retrieval (see Larsson 2014; Garrett 2010). 4) archaeogenetics (see Strand & Källén 2021; Reich 2018; Barot et al 2020). 5) and studies regarding genealogy of the hobby researchers (see Clemensson & Andersson 1983; 2003; 2004; 2009; Bojs 2015; 2016).

However, the research that has been done about DNA, genealogy and archival institutions has been able to show a clear gap in how these three aspects relate to each other. Despite studies such as ARA (Archives & Records Association 2018) which indicates that ancestral researchers are the primary visitor of archival institutions, this group of visitors is declining.

The purpose of this study was therefore to understand how the role of archival institutions as a source for genealogy in Sweden is changing with DNA-genealogy. In order establish an understanding of the current relationship between genealogy through DNA-testing and archival institutions, we asked the following research questions:

1.) What information do genealogists seek when performing DNA-tests?

2.) What kind of information can genealogists obtain by performing DNA-tests?
3.) What view do the archival institutions have on the process of genealogy through DNA?

METHODS AND SOURCE MATERIALS

Three different methods on three different source materials were used in this study, in a primary method called triangulation. Triangulation consists of collecting empirical data from multiple perspectives and approaches, which are then compared to each other to highlight complexities in a phenomenon (Alvehus, 2019).

One of the three methods used was netnography. By analysing discussions and exchanges among the genealogists themselves, it provided the opportunity to distinguish patterns in how genealogists relate to genealogy performed by means of DNA-testing. The method was applied on discussion forums in the form of two Facebook groups as well as a website forum. The two Swedish Facebook groups were DNA-Släktforskning and DNA-släktforskning för noviser. The selection criteria for the Facebook groups consisted of the quantity of individual group members and their activity level. Another decisive factor was whether the group focused on genealogy in general or whether they specifically concerned DNA-genealogy. Also included was the Swedish Association of Genealogist’s own website forum, also known as Anbytarforum, since the Swedish Association of Genealogists is Sweden’s largest association and forum for genealogy.

All threads created and active within a specific time frame were analysed to answer the research questions.

To answer what information genealogists can or cannot obtain from the commercial DNA-tests, it was necessary to access results that arise from a DNA-test. Therefore, DNA-tests were carried out through introspective action research, which can be understood as a form of autoethnography. The choice of this method meant that we sent one of our own saliva samples with DNA to the various commercial companies that target genealogists. The largest DNA-services in terms of database size and number of users were therefore included in this study. They were Ancestry, 23andMe, MyHeritage and FamilyTreeDNA. The DNA-tests ordered were part of the package that each of these DNA-services recommended or described as the most popular. By doing a DNA-test via these services, the study gained access to source material that could answer the study’s second question, which concerns what information genealogists can obtain via DNA-tests and thus what information they might need to seek from archival institutions.
In order to answer the question concerning the archival institutions’ perspective on DNA-genealogy, a contact with representatives of archival institutions was required. The method of semi-structured interviews made it possible to gain insight into how these archivists view genealogists, and thus the archival institutions' treatment of them. The selection of representatives of archival institutions included was based on whether the archival institution can be understood as non-commercial and whether they have a large proportion of genealogists among their visitors. Archival institutions that are more established and thus have greater resources for their activities compared to smaller private archives were also an aspect that contributed to the selection. The archival institutions that were included in this study are therefore the Stockholm City Archives, the Regional State Archives in Uppsala, and the National Archives in Stockholm. Contact was made with informants at the Stockholm City Archives as well as the Regional State Archives in Uppsala. The National Archives in Stockholm on the other hand declined the request for an interview. However, the e-mail response containing the rejection of an interview was comprehensive and useful for answering the purpose and question of the study. As a result, the National Archives in Stockholm’s answers were included in the study along with the two interviews that were conducted with the other archival institution representatives.

Even though the informants are representatives of their archival institutions in this study, the informants have clearly stated at first contact that the archival institutions have no official approach to the research subject. It is therefore important to notice that the answers given by the informants have been affected by their own personal view.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
A theoretical framework with additional conceptual understandings was applied in the analysis of the source material. The main theory used is based on Martin Saar's thoughts on genealogy (2002) since the theory clarifies the process involved in ancestral research. In addition to this, Donald O. Case and Lisa M. Givens (2016) theory of information behaviour since it aids understanding on how individuals interact with information.

Saar (2002) scientific work on genealogy is influenced by Michel Foucault’s ideas, which in turn are influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche’s thoughts. Saar’s theoretical basis for genealogy is constructed on two main ideas. The first idea is that genealogy consists of three separate dimensions of genealogy, that nevertheless are to be seen and understood as interwoven.
The first dimension of genealogy can be explained as a way of creating and writing one’s history. To highlight this creative process, Saar (2002) uses the term "historicization". The process of historicization involves changing one’s own subjective understanding of oneself and being affected by the information that emerges during genealogical research, i.e. aspects such as newly found family ties and other historical family information. Historicization is only possible when what emerges during an individual’s genealogy project can be linked to a specific family, individual or subject (Bishop, 2008). Collecting the names of different individuals and their fates thus has no purpose if that knowledge cannot be put into the subjective context of the genealogist.

If Saar’s first dimension of genealogy can be understood as something methodological, the second dimension is more of an evaluative kind. The second aspect highlights how genealogy can be used as a method of evaluation or, alternatively, as a form of criticism. Ann-Sofie Klareld (2022) describes the second dimension as measuring or valuing the life choices of one’s ancestors based on one’s own framework of what is right or wrong. The decisions and actions of the ancestors had consequences, something that then results in a feeling of gratitude towards one's ancestors for their sacrifices and choices. This feeling of gratitude can in turn lead to ascribing a higher value to oneself.

The third and final dimension means that genealogy according to Saar (2002), is seen as a form of storytelling. Klareld (2022) describes it as by using relationships that have emerged through genealogy, you bring your ancestors to life and make them part of the contemporary story. One thereby enables a dramatisation of one’s own individual history with the help of the fates of one’s ancestors. The third dimension can thus be understood as part of storytelling, that is, telling others about the history of one's own identity. Thereby one makes oneself immortal by telling the story of one's own origin and life, which in turn means that the story of oneself lives on.

The second main idea about genealogical research according to Saar highlights how the above three dimensions are affected in different ways by a subjectivity of the genealogist. The relationship between the subject and genealogy is crucial in all three aspects (Saar, 2002)

When individuals perform genealogical research, something happens in parallel, something that can be called an information behaviour or information research. The basis of studying information behaviour is namely to understand how individuals approach different forms of information as well as to understand how these individuals in turn interpret this information (Case and Given, 2016). The information behaviour perspective can also be
used in contexts that Case and Given (2016) explain as the exchange of information between a certain group of like-minded individuals. However, it is important to emphasise how information behaviour is a complex concept. For example, there are related terms such as information search, information practices or information experiences that can all touch upon the same thing. What has been necessary to discuss in this study is mainly information behaviour and information seeking. Case and Given (2016) point out that information seeking emphasises that there is an awareness of the individual to seek or provide information as a result of a knowledge gap. Information seeking can also include other individuals in one's environment providing information that they consider useful for the recipient. Information behaviour is, unlike information seeking, a more comprehensive concept. There is also an element of unawareness that is not emphasised in information seeking. By examining information behaviour, one can therefore also include processes where individuals do not actively encounter or seek information. Information behaviours also include how individuals interact in different ways and move in contexts containing information (Case and Given 2016).

The Genealogists’ Ancestral Research

The purpose of analysing source material retrieved from three different discussion forums was to understand what information and knowledge genealogists seek to obtain by using the various DNA-services that offer DNA-testing. Since the discussion forums somewhat differ, for example through their structure and the number of posts, the analysis of the discussion forums can also be perceived as somewhat different. Despite this, it is possible to see similarities, as well as differences, in the posts and discussions carried out across all forums. After the analysis of all discussion forums, it appears, for example, on several occasions that the same individual writes a post which he or she then shares in both DNA-anor as well as DNA-släktforskning för noviser. The same also applies to posts in Anbytarforum, the same individual writes a post in one of the Facebook groups and then shares the same post on Anbytarforum. An example of a post that has been shared in both Facebook groups is DNA-anor discussion thread number 5. The original poster begins his post by pointing out that the same text also appears in DNA-släktforskning för noviser, and then requests information about various DNA-services.

The reason why individuals choose to create and share the same questions and thoughts on several discussion forums can be understood
through Case and Given (2016). By sharing the same question in several forums, the individual finds himself in different contexts of information. The individual therefore needs to navigate between knowledge and information that is created as a result of members from different discussion forums answering the original post. This whole process, which includes navigation, can be described as information behaviour. Further analysis of the process of using multiple forums for the same question revealed how the process can also be interpreted as a conscious choice to gain knowledge and information, a process described by Case and Given (2016) as a form of information search. This means that when an individual is aware of a knowledge gap, there is an active process where the individual makes various choices to provide himself with relevant knowledge and information to fill this particular gap (Case and Given, 2016). By using different forums for the same question or thought, the individual thereby increases the chance of gaining access to relevant information. What is relevant in this context is how the process highlights whether the role of archival institutions as a source for genealogy is changing with DNA-genealogy. Through the analysis of how DNA-genealogists’ concerns or reflections are shared on several platforms, it is possible to examine whether the archival institutions can be understood, just like the discussion forums, as a source for relevant information. If the genealogists who perform DNA-research, equate the archival institutions with the discussion forums, it means that in the future the archival institutions may very well continue to function as a source for genealogical research. There are several discussion threads that re-enforced this conclusion, most often the original poster of the thread begins his or her question or consideration by explaining how he or she has been in contact with sources and information from various archival institutions and then intends to carry out a DNA-test through one of the various DNA-services (DNA-anor discussion thread 6 & 7).

What is important to note is that the type of knowledge and information the genealogists consider relevant, that are currently provided by the archival institutions, may change in the future. In all of the analysed discussion forums the posts that can be described and categorised as an interpretation of test results, often reappears. The original poster of discussion thread number 8 in DNA-anor wonders, for example, whether it is true that two cousins, whose fathers are brothers, get the same haplogroup and exact matches when performing a so-called Y-37 test. Currently, this is not information that can usually be answered with the help of sources and knowledge that can be found at an archival institution. If the archival institutions want to maintain a relationship with genealogists, and above all
genealogists who also perform ancestral research through DNA-test, this may change. Especially since questions such as the one in discussion thread number 8 in DNA-anor is very common among genealogists who perform DNA-tests.

Further analysis of the discussion forums exhibited the commonness of posts created with the topic of an unknown father. This was especially frequent in Anbytarforum and DNA-anor. The scenario of an unknown father is a familiar and universal issue among genealogists (Klareld, 2022; Karlsson 2015; Thorsell, 2022). Using Saar’s (2002) understanding of genealogy, it is no coincidence that an unknown father is the focus of an individual’s genealogy, whether it be DNA-genealogy or classic genealogy. According to the first dimension of genealogy, the need to unravel the unknown father can be understood as part of the genealogists’ historicization (Saar, 2002; Bishop, 2008). It is not enough for a genealogist to only gain knowledge and information that there is an unknown individual in the family tree if this individual cannot be identified. By the process of identifying the unknown father with the help of a DNA-test, a situation is created where the genealogist is given the opportunity to bring a specific individual in a context that concerns the genealogist himself. In this way, the genealogist gets the opportunity to encounter new knowledge and information that leads to the genealogist’s own self history changing. Something which, according to Saar’s theory, is a cornerstone of why one does genealogical research (Saar, 2002).

When the members of the discussion forums discuss DNA-tests whose purpose is to identify an unknown father, there is also room for what is described as the third dimension of genealogy, that genealogy is about storytelling. An example of how the third dimension can express itself is described in DNA-anor discussion thread number 2 where the original poster of the discussion thread described his perception of his Finnish origin and stated the following:

The greatest beguiler in the village was my grandfather. He left the heavily pregnant wife alone and entertained everything in skirts excluding his own bloodlines. I have lots of cousins to find and many are looking for their biological grandfather

3 Translation from DNA-anor tread 2: “Den största häradsbetäckaren i bygden var min morfar. Han låt höggravida frugan vara ifred och hältrade på allt i kjoltug utom sina egna blodsband. Jag har massor av kusiner att leta upp och många söker sin bio-morfar” [original]
In the above example, it is clear that the genealogist by conveying knowledge about the individual relative, brings his ancestors to life and thus makes them part of the contemporary story about himself. As described in the third dimension, the genealogist uses the specific relative’s fate to enable a dramatisation of the genealogist’s own individual history (Klareld, 2022).

DNA-Genealogy can to some extent be seen through the third dimension of genealogy. However, there is a risk that DNA-genealogy in itself is not sufficient for the genealogists. The DNA-tests can certainly confirm a relationship, but it says nothing about the individual. According to the theory, it is precisely the information and knowledge about the fate of individuals that is a determinate part in a genealogy process. Without this knowledge, the genealogist finds it difficult to dramatise his own history, and thus the genealogist cannot fully go through the third dimension of genealogical research. For the genealogist to be able to make full use of this knowledge, something more than just a DNA-test is required. The knowledge and information needed for the genealogist to be able to convey the fates of specific relatives can, however, be found within the archives sector. This is of relevance to answer the purpose of the study on how the role of archival institutions as a source for genealogy is changing with DNA-genealogy. If the genealogist would be satisfied with only confirming a relationship using DNA-tests, the archives serve no function for the genealogist. However, if the genealogist follows Saar’s theories of genealogy, there is a good chance that archival institutions can play a crucial role for DNA-genealogists as they can assist with more information and knowledge about specific relatives.

**Commercial DNA-testing**

In order to study what information genealogists can access by purchasing a commercial DNA-test, we too ordered DNA-tests from the major sites, using the same DNA as a sample. By doing this ourselves we gained added knowledge of what expectations an individual might have doing these tests based on the advertisement these commercial companies provide. Unfortunately, FamilyTreeDNA couldn’t provide a valid test result within the timeframe.

Ancestry and MyHeritage offered an ethnicity estimation, DNA-matches with other users, and the promise of learning of one’s different tribes. They also provided access to the collections, which consisted of archive material from the archive institutions. An example of this are scans from the Swedish Church Records Archive. They did add original source references
stating that the images were provided by ArkivDigital. This means that the DNA-genealogists can access archival records through Ancestry’s site without physically visiting an archive. This represents an information behaviour of interacting and moving between information contexts (Case & Given 2016).

The result of the DNA-test was presented by Ancestry as an ethnicity estimation linked to regions on a world map with percentages. A diagram of ethnic estimation is also provided based on the mother as well as the father. Further information provided is knowledge regarding what is named to be genetic tribes within these ethnic regions dating back fifty to three hundred years.

Ancestry explains how a DNA-test can be used to confirm a previous genealogical study based on the historical documents found at an archive. This is a use of DNA-tests that genealogists themselves mention in various discussion forums. While the commercial services do offer their members an auto-generated family tree after submission of DNA for testing, these family trees are based on the records information the users themselves provide or the information provided by relatives. The true resource of a DNA-match is confirmation of a relationship to another person. DNA-matches are presented in percentages and in centiMorgans, indicating the strength and thereby distance of relationship. Whether this person is known to the genealogist or not. This is an expression of the first dimensions of genealogy. The importance of connecting a life story to a specific individual, and in turn to the genealogist (Bishop, 2008; Saar, 2002).

MyHeritage has a feature they refer to as “släktplatsen” that represents an important part of the information behaviour amongst genealogists, which is the exchange of information in a group of like-minded individuals with a common aspect. Which in this case is kinship.

Another tool available at MyHeritage, Ancestry, and 23andMe is the chromosome reader, which can be used to compare the DNA-segments one shares with a DNA-match to determine, through triangulation and clusters based on shared segments, how individuals are related to one another.

Further information that is offered by the sites are statistics and general information of different aspects of one’s family. For instance, MyHeritage provides statistics on names or marriages within one’s family, maps of birth or death locations. The statistics are based on information the genealogists themselves have submitted to MyHeritage and information found in historic records. Users are then able to see other users' family tree and information which then causes one of the problems with the commercial sites, reliability. The information found in another user’s family tree may be
wrong, as sources are not required when users enter information on the site. Common Swedish surnames can also be very prevalent. An issue that could have been resolved by referencing the sources.

Aided by historic records, the commercial sites provide the potential for the third dimension of genealogy: Connecting a life story to an individual a user is related to, and then emotionally evaluating their life choices in connection to oneself (Bishop, 2008; Klareld, 2022; Saar, 2002). This is a process that DNA-segments and chromosomes cannot possibly provide. By giving genealogists access to historic records the commercial sites thereby satisfy the basic needs of the genealogist. Thereby offering all relevant information at one site.

An important aspect of DNA-genealogy is the understanding that the test results are not static, but ever changing. The results are based on one's DNA-sample, which is static, but the interpretation done by the companies’ unique algorithms are created in correlation with all other data available in the database. This means that every time an individual somewhere in the world provides their DNA for testing, the database grows, and the algorithms are recalculated to account for this new information for every user.

A company’s database is thereby the result of its users. Few users result in a lack of data. As a result of the ever growing database our own DNA-test at Ancestry has changed over time, adding Finnish and Baltic ethnic ancestry information to the previous purely Scandinavian result. However, the result is only stated as “Baltic” while the Scandinavian result can be traced down to a particular region within Västergötland. This is due to a lack of data in the Baltic region, and a surplus of data in Sweden. If many users in Sweden send in their DNA to the database the algorithms can form tribes within a region, giving a more complex result.

This growing and changing of results creates a form of limbo for the users where they are taken back and forth through the different dimensions of genealogy. The first dimension where they receive new information and knowledge to the second dimension where they value that information and create a narrative. To then be forced back into the first dimension because of the change of information. It is a process that could be interpreted as an addictive state, where they are never given the opportunity to reach the third dimension of genealogy.

However, 23andMe does join the other DNA-testing companies by providing the ethnicity estimation and matches with DNA-relatives. They also provide information on the maternal haplogroup that matches our DNA-sample with Marie Antoinette, thereby allowing the genealogist to fulfil the
third dimension of genealogy by forming a connection with a well known personal fate.

23andMe differentiate themselves from the other DNA-testing companies by focusing on providing information of the user’s health and personality traits. They do not provide access to historic records or options to form a connection with long lost relatives. Instead, they encourage their users to explore their own genetics and experiences to form a narrative of the family story based on physical aspects. This is contrary to the other DNA-testing companies who focus on social history by providing information regarding birthplace etcetera.

**Genealogists in the Archives**

The study involved questioning three different archival institutions how they view their relationship to genealogists and how this relationship changes because of DNA-testing.

At first contact with all the institutions it was made clear that they did not have an official opinion of genealogists nor DNA-tests. They also made it clear that they could not represent the institution as a whole. What they said could only be understood as the informant’s personal opinion (Informant 1, Informant 2, Informant 3). To thereby answer the question regarding how the archival institutions view DNA-genealogy becomes a somewhat complex question, since they don’t actually have an official opinion on the subject, nor a modus operandi. Despite this, the study was able to discern a general unofficial view of DNA-genealogists.

Commercial DNA-tests can function as a way to complement genealogical research done with historic records. It can both be a bridge across the gap of knowledge users face when encountering the archive, as well as a means to fill the inevitable gaps that are present in historic records.

The current legislation says that the archives shall accept, store and supply access to records that have a future research value. The archive's current definition of genealogical research seems to be that it holds no value for the future. However, during the interviews it became apparent that the interpretation of what is deemed to be a valuable record might be subject to personal preference. Academic research already hints at a larger change of attitude, as genealogical research has already been used as research material (see Charpentier & Gallic 2020).

It is not a part of the National Archives assignment to provide educational activities towards the public. They stated that they would like the
public to use the records that are available, but it’s not their responsibility to guide and teach beginners how to actually find and understand what they are looking for. This is due to limited budget from the government, which have resulted in great cut downs in staff. Due to the sparse resources the staff are only able to prioritise areas such as organising and/or providing access to records. There is nothing that would prevent an archivist to go further to aid a member of the public, but it’s no longer a part of their assignment (Informant 1 and 2).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the public’s access to records were greatly infringed upon with limited opening hours. All activities in collaboration with genealogical organisations, such as Släktforskarförbundet, ceased. Our informant at the Regional State Archives in Uppsala stated that they are a government agency, their assignment is to provide access to the records, what form that access takes is irrelevant. And that genealogist ceased to be their largest user group when they first started publishing access to the records online. They no longer hold the position they once did in the archives.

**Conclusion**

The aim of our study was to perform a simple reconnaissance of the current situation in an effort to understand how the archives' role as a source of genealogy is changing due to DNA-genealogy.

By having analysed the various discussion forums, we were able to answer the study’s first research question. That is, knowledge about the type of information that genealogists who perform DNA-test request and search for when they use the various DNA-services. Many of the discussions that have been analysed have led to the conclusion that genealogists who perform DNA-tests are largely seeking confirmation when using the various DNA-services. A recurring example of this confirmation is that the DNA-genealogist wants to establish who an unknown ancestor is, but it can also mean that they want to confirm the ancestral research already carried out through archival institutions.

The information the DNA-tests provided was who and to what degree a person is related to another now living individual and thereby calculating how their family trees are connected. Another aspect of the DNA-tests that are highlighted by the companies themselves, is referred to as an ethnicity estimation. This aspect appears to be of little interest to the genealogists in the forums that were examined in the study.
Due to the fact that the archives lack an official opinion of any form of genealogy, whether it’s based on DNA or historic records, results show that the institutions’ work towards genealogists is entirely based upon the individual archivist’s personal interests. What is clear is that there is great uncertainty about the value of genealogical research.

Looking to the future it appears that the commercial DNA-services will affect the archives and replace them as a primary source for genealogy, something the archive institutions don’t seem to realise. The purpose of the DNA-tests is described as a means to get confirmation, while the purpose of the genealogical research is to answer questions about specific life stories. Today the archive institutions provide the historic records that help create an understanding of one's ancestors’ lives. However, the commercial platforms already provide scans of the same historic records, this to an ever growing degree. This is something that would result in a future where the goal and purpose of the archival institutions is purely to care for the records physical storage. The way these records are being used is of less importance as long as they are somewhat used, even if it is only through commercial services.

Further conclusions indicate that the archive institution's definition of the term “value” in relation to records will most likely change, and in the future, we will most likely see an inclusion of genealogical research material. The study also indicates that due to the fact that our informants describe the archives’ function, to a certain degree, to be based on public demand, their focus of operation might come to shift in the future. If the genealogist demands information regarding ancestral research through DNA, the archival institutions might very well be a future hub for such information if that is what their visitors require.

The study has therefore shown that ancestral research through DNA, will for certain affect the role that archival institutions hold for genealogists. However, the role archival institutions have will change in more than one regard.
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DNA-test results


Interviews

Informant 1, Employed by Stockholm’s City archive. 2022. Recorded interview 4th of April.
Informant 2, Employed by The Regional State Archives in Uppsala. 2022. Recorded interview 5th of April.

Written communication