



Ethical dilemmas in Italian genealogy

I'm just researching my family, what possible problems could there be?

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"I don't understand why my DNA ethnicity is Italian, when I've never even been there."

"I have discovered about my great grandfather's criminal records and I don't know whether to add this information to my online tree."

"Some of my family are on someone else's tree and they have loads of wrong information on there, but I'm not sure if I should tell them."

"I've looked at my great grandparents' marriage certificate, and I'm not sure if I should tell my grandfather that his mother was 7 months' pregnant when she got married."

When we have options, choosing the *right* solution, when values are involved, is an ethical dilemma, which can be defined as, '*a situation in which there are genuine reasons pointing toward two different courses of action.*'

Genealogy is now a very popular hobby

Genealogy is a very popular hobby that many people are involved in. Self-administered DNA tests have become more affordable; and there is easier internet access to records and indexes. *Because such a huge variety of people are now doing family history, and very few of us have had any training in ethics before, we may feel confused as to what to do if a difficult or awkward situation arises.* We do much of the searching online now, so there's often nobody to discuss things with, because most hobbyists and many professional genealogists work from home.

What is the relationship between ethics and genealogy?

Philosophy (from the Greek φιλοσοφία or ‘*philosophía*’, meaning ‘*the love of wisdom*’) is the study of knowledge, or ‘*thinking about thinking*.’ It feels like the word ‘ethics’ means ‘right *versus* wrong’, but ethical issues are on a continuum. Researching family history now involves finding information quickly on the internet and dealing with strangers that you will probably never meet in person.

An Ancestry forum '*Ethics in Genealogy*' included the following topics as cause for concern:

- poaching information (80 comments)
 - people downloading and re-uploading photos as their own (42)
 - people not amending older incorrect pedigrees, just uploading new ones (17)
 - people asking for people to be removed from trees (12)
 - relatives asking for living people's information to be removed from a tree (11)
 - including offensive labels from censuses, for example, 'insane', 'idiot' (10)
 - people refusing to collaborate (10); users demanding help (5); strange attitudes (5)

What constitutes a relative? Who is included in our tree?

How many people do you have in your tree? Our relationship overlaps by 50% with our two parents, but only a 0.1% overlap with ancestors from 10 generations ago. Have you asked anyone in your tree if you have permission to include them? Distant relatives are someone else's close relative. ***How much information about our relatives should we be exposing on our online trees?***

Tree errors

We often find people with trees that overlap with ours, which have obvious mistakes on them. Or even worse, people who have trees with ‘not very obvious’ mistakes, but we know the correct

information. It is quite easy to start an online tree, but then incorrect information may be added and then others can then add and perpetuate incorrect information. ***Should we point out people's tree errors, and should we alert those who seem to rely on our tree for information, that we have discovered some errors on our tree?***

Sharing and collaborating

It is so exciting to get new DNA matches, or hints from other people's trees, who we can potentially collaborate with. It's disappointing when people won't reply. Many people only wanted ethnicity estimates, some don't know how to devise a tree, others feel that it is 'their' research, and don't want to share any of their hard work. Should we search for and send messages to matches via social media? The dilemma here is ***should we try to persuade or even coerce people into collaborating?*** We forget it's not compulsory to collaborate.

Secrets and lies

Maybe there is a vicarious pleasure in researching ancestors; we can look voyeuristically into other people's lives, with the added benefit that they are related to us, and we are not too far on the 'outside' for it to be considered 'snooping.' Some people report with an element of wry amusement that their ancestor was a bigamist, a criminal, or a prostitute; however, those situations would have been a major ordeal at the time for all concerned. Is there any benefit adding ancestors' criminal records to their section on your tree, or would not adding them be glossing over or deleting some of the past? A dilemma here is ***should we be sleuthing***, and secondly, ***should we expose our findings?***

DNA

DNA dilemmas include: not understanding the implications of the results; revelations that relatives aren't biologically related; unexpected ethnicity results; a clash between DNA results and paper trail; and the implications of big data. Should we pursue 'relationships' with DNA cousins that we don't have a previous history with? A recent DNA dilemma involves ***whether or not***



law enforcement should be allowed to use biologicals from crime scenes and utilise genealogical DNA testing sites. This has raised huge dilemmas about the benefits of arresting a suspect of crimes, versus the privacy issues of those who have uploaded DNA to testing sites. Many family historians probably hadn't understood that their DNA information could be utilised for other purposes. ***Do the ends justify the means? Is this the way forward for crime detection?***

Ethnicity and identity

DNA testing companies have placed a huge emphasis in their advertising on customers finding out about their ethnicity, and suggest that the result will bring great revelations and fascinating insights into heritage. Because people inherit such a huge variety of DNA from different ancestors, it can often be the case that siblings inherit different ethnicities from ancestors, which can initially (erroneously) cast doubt and cause problems over paternity. A dilemma here is that ***some descendants who want to hold onto their diaspora ancestors' culture could be accused of 'cultural appropriation.'*** Could it be argued that people have a 'romanticised' notion of having ancestors from another country?

Italian ethical dilemmas

19th century Italy was deeply rooted in tradition, religion, and superstition

- pregnancy outside of marriage
- infanticide
- babies put in "ruota" at the church (abandoned babies)
- unmarried couple, but father acknowledged the child/ren
- intermarriage of cousins

- rape, pregnancy, and "honor" - a woman being obligated to marry her rapist and bearing the child (and perhaps later, getting an annulment)
- DNA revealing endogamy

Adoption

Many societies frown upon or forbid having a child outside of marriage. This has led to huge numbers of girls and women feeling that there is no option but to give their child up for adoption. Much of the secrecy involved in giving up a baby can mean that information was concealed, and many official records are sealed, which can lead to massive frustrations and anger, especially with the bureaucracy involved with trying to gain access to these records.

Found babies' name origins

Since their parents were unknown, found babies had to be given a name, and this was done by the receiver of the baby, or the priest baptizing the child, or the civil official registering the event. On an ordinary birth or baptism record, usually only the given ('first') name of the baby was recorded, since its surname was the same as its father's. But with found babies, both the given and the surname had to be assigned. Sometimes the surnames strictly revealed the event of the neglect, as in surnames like "Proietto", "Esposito" (meaning exposed to the wheel), "Trovato" (found), "Rotile" (of the wheel). Other methods were used to choose the surname of a found baby, for example, the name of the saint of the day; the location where the child was found such as 'Gradini' (the steps of a church) or 'Del Rio' (of the river); reference to the will of God, 'Salvato' (saved), 'Diotallevi' (God will take care of you), 'Piacquaddio' (God wanted like this), 'Fortuna' (luck), 'D'Angelo' (of an angel), 'Del Popolo' (of the people), or specifics such as 'Di Giugno' (born in June). Many of these surnames exist to this day, with their bearers not necessarily realising that somewhere in their ancestry there was a found baby.

Dilemmas or difficulties in Italian genealogy?

- arranged marriages
- heraldry
- abandonment of wife (grass widow) when her husband emigrated
- criminal records - particularly if Mafia connections or during prohibition / gangsters
- DNA discoveries of grand/ father not being biologically related
- not discussing things vs. being open
- harder to deal with in a conservative Italian home

The ethical genealogist

We all think that we're a 'nice' person and aren't involved in being unethical. As a relatively new discipline, however, ethical issues within genealogy are starting to become visible more, especially since DNA testing, and therefore many and varied ethical dilemmas will follow, some of which can maybe be alleviated or controlled by people studying accredited courses and/ or joining a professional body, which all have relative advantages, disadvantages, time implications and costs. Who 'polices' the Code of Ethics or Conduct? The ethical genealogist should ideally respect human rights, values, customs and spiritual beliefs of the individual, family and community.

Ethical decision-making includes:

- addressing the impact of the action or decision on others or relationships with them (altruistic considerations)
- determination of the 'right thing to do' - as defined by the values and principles which apply to this situation (idealistic considerations)
- potential consequences of the action or decision (individualistic considerations)
- business consequences of this action or decision (pragmatic considerations)

Inevitably, some of these ethical issues raised may well have **legal** implications.

Giving unexpected or bad news

Genealogists investigate very personal aspects of people's lives, and it can be very difficult to know how to give bad or unexpected news. The saying '*DNA doesn't lie*' shows insensitivity. Most of us aren't trained as counsellors; genealogy education has placed more value on technical proficiency than communication skills, leaving many genealogists unprepared.

Checklist: you could use some of the following tests:

- harm test: does this option do less harm than the alternatives
- publicity test: would I want my choice of this option revealed
- defensibility test: could I defend my choice of this option before my peers
- reversibility test: would I still think this option was a good choice if I were affected by it
- colleague test: what could my colleagues say when I describe the problem and suggest this option as my solution
- professional test: what might my profession's professional body say about this option
- organization test: what does my company say about this



So what is the way forward?

Ideally it would be best to discuss and debate the ethical dilemma with genealogy peers, to engage in continual professional development (CPD), to see examples of good practice, and suggest solutions. If you are delivering unexpected or bad news to people, then you could discuss potential outcomes with them beforehand, explaining your own limitations or expertise with analysing DNA, ethnicity results and trees. If you are writing a report for someone, then writing an 'informed consent' agreement is useful, especially when sharing information, or doing 'reveals.' When asking people for their recollections or recording their oral history, has their permission been clearly given? Do they understand what you're doing with that information they gave you?

There are no clear-cut rights and wrongs, and the debate about issues can be more informative and enlightening than any notion of a fixed answer.

Reflections

1. what are the ethical issues you feel are emerging and developing
2. what are the most important ethical issues each example raised for you
3. what, if anything, would you do differently if you were one of the key people in the example/s
4. what lessons have you learnt from reading and reflecting on the example/s about how to promote ethical practice in genealogy

Stay in touch:

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Author of:

- '*Ethical Dilemmas in Genealogy*' 2019.
- '*The Psychology of Searching*' 2020.

Both available on Amazon in paperback or kindle

