Social Context and the Kinship Determination Project (KDP)

Sponsored by the Board for Certification of Genealogists®, 16 December 2025

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Incorporating social context into a Kinship Determination Project isn't just about weaving historical events and descriptions of daily life into a family narrative. Community and culture shape behavior and relationships. To understand and document our ancestors, we need to understand the society in which they lived. When we estimate a marriage date based on the birth of a couple's first child (or that the birth of a child implies a marriage), we base those assumptions on context. This lecture will explore the topic of social context and address how to research and write about it within a Kinship Determination Project.

Objectives

Here's what you'll be able to do by the end of this presentation:

- Understand what social context is.
- Use social context to improve your research.
- Strengthen your writing with social context.
- Apply this knowledge to your KDP.

What is Context?

Context is "the situation in which something happens."[1]

Historical context refers to the social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions and events that influence a particular event at a specific time.

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[1] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "context," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context.

Social context falls under the historical context umbrella. Social context includes the rules, expectations, customs, values, and relationships within a particular group or society at a specific time.

A Glossary of Other Important Terms

Kinship Determination Project: "a descending narrative lineage that documents and explains linkages among individuals through three ancestral generations…"[2]

Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG): "We promote attainable, high, and uniform standards of competence and ethics among genealogists through programs of outreach, publication, and education."

BCG publishes *Genealogy Standards*, a slim volume of 90 standards for documenting, researching, reasoning, writing, and teaching genealogy. BCG awards the Certified Genealogist® credential to those whose work meets the standards. Applicants submit a portfolio which contains several written work samples, one of which is called a kinship determination report.

Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS): Chapter 1 of *Genealogy Standards* outlines five components that help us "measure the credibility of conclusions." In order to meet the GPS, all five components must be fulfilled. The first is **Reasonably Exhaustive Research**.

"The Rubrics": This phrase refers to the PDF available on the BCG website entitled "Rubrics for Evaluating New Application for BCG Certification, Revised 1 July 2025." The rubrics are a tool that judges use to evaluate each element of submitted portfolios. The most up to date application guide and rubrics can be found here: https://bcgcertification.org/become-a-certified-genealogist

I strongly recommend accessing these documents from this link rather than a Google search to make sure you are viewing the most up to date versions.

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[2] Board for Certification of Genealogists, "The BCG Application Guide 2025," p. 5, https://bcgcertification.org/images/files/BCG_Application_Guide-2025.pdf

Tips for Learning about Social Context

Academic journals, theses, and books are some of the best starting points for learning more about social context. Look for journals related to the region, time period, and culture you are researching. The search may include a broad range of academic disciplines: history, social science, anthropology, economics, cultural studies, political science, and legal history. I'm sure you can think of a few more!

Some places I like to look for articles and theses include:

JSTOR: searchable online archive of academic journals. Individuals can access 100 articles per month for free. www.jstor.org

Google Scholar: a search engine of scholarly articles, theses, and other documents. This search engine will often identify articles of interest, but you may need to find a way to view them. https://scholar.google.org

Google Scholar may not provide the entire article, but they do typically show a list of sources as well as a list of other works which cite that article. Both should be closely examined for source mining purposes!

If you find a thesis on Google Scholar, you may be able to request a copy from either the author or the university the author attended. Some universities have digitized theses. Others may be requested via interlibrary loan or viewed on site.

Google Books is another good place to search your keywords. A plain old Google search should always be done as well.

One potential way to read an article you find on Google Scholar is to search for it at **Academia.edu** or **ResearchGate.net.** Both are websites where academics can upload their published papers. The sites allow potential readers to connect with authors for copies of articles that are otherwise paywalled.

If you live near a university or happen to be vacationing near one, consider searching their databases. Due to licensing, these are sometimes reserved for students only, but some libraries, such as the Houghton Library at Harvard, allow other researchers to access these amazing resources.

Context Related Rubrics and Associated Standards

The full text of the standards listed below may be found in *Genealogy Standards.* Be sure to use the most recent version available. At the time of this webinar (December 2025), the current edition is the 2nd edition, revised.

Anyone preparing a Kinship Determination Project should review each standard thoroughly.

KD1. Extent of Research

Standard 12. Broad context.

Standard 14. Topical breadth.

Standard 17. Extent.

Standard 41. Evidence scope.

Standard 58. Research scope.

KD8: Biographical Information

Standard 73. Biographical information.

Resource List

Books

Anderson, Robert Charles. *Elements of Genealogical Analysis.* Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014.

Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards.* 2nd edition, revised. Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2021.

Carmack, Sharon Bartolo. *Telling Her Story: A Guide to Researching and Writing about Women of the Past.* Salt Lake City: Scattered Leaves Press, 2024.

Chicago Manual of Style. Seventeenth Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Curthoys, Ann and McGrath, Ann. *How to Write History That People Want to Read.* New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2011.

Dymond, David. *Researching and Writing History: A Guide for Local Historians.* Lancaster, England: Carnegie Publishing Ltd, 2016

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft.* New York: Scribner, 2010.

Stratton, Penelope L. and Henry B. Hoff. *Guide to Genealogical Writing.* Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014.

Webinars

Search Legacy Family Tree Webinars for the word 'context.' Watch them all! I especially love "Context: A Powerful Tool for Problem Solving," by Elizabeth Shown Mills and Barbara Vines Little's "The Importance of Context in Record Analysis."

National Genealogical Society Family History Writing Contest

The National Genealogical Society (NGS) hosts an annual Family History Writing Contest. Writers submit a 3-4 generation narrative, similar in some ways to a Kinship Determination Project. Winning pieces are typically published in the December issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly (NGSQ).

These pieces demonstrate masterful use of both historical and social context and should be studied by anyone considering board certification. One of my favorites is Warren Bittner's "Without Land, Occupation, Rights, or Marriage Privilege: The Büttner Family from Bavaria to New York," published in September 2012. There were two contest winners that year, so remember to look at the December issue for the other.

Writers should also seek out the special issue "Putting Family History into Context" published in December 2000. This issue features both a Family History Writing Contest award winner as well as several articles related to writing family narratives and incorporating context.

Archives may be found here: https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/