

SPANNING 150 YEARS OF RECORD LOSS: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO IDENTIFYING PARENTS IN SWEDEN

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We love case studies! But sometimes it's like watching a movie, one in which we are not involved. We as learners should focus on the methodologies used. Methodologies are transferable. This case study focuses not on the ethnicity and record sets, but instead uses them as a framework for presenting the methodologies used to span 150+ years of record loss. The example happens to be set in Sweden. This problem could have been set in any locale with a similar research question and with a limited set of resources.

The list of techniques used is not comprehensive, nor is it a checklist. Instead, the techniques used will vary with each problem. The following may need to be applied multiple times or even continuously during your research:

- Understanding cultural context
- Identifying known information
- Conducting radial research
- Analyzing the FAN Club
- Building and utilizing hypothesis
- Recognizing when you have reached a conclusion

You will probably identify other methodologies to use in your research.

The research question was to identify the names of the parents of Elna Johansdotter. Piecing together clues from the small number of extant records and using the identified techniques can assist in reaching a conclusion.

Understanding cultural context

Context informs our decision-making by allowing us to “squeeze” all evidence from a particular source. Context can assist our understanding of what is unusual or seemingly out of place. For example, a female marrying in Sweden at age 18 is unusual in 18th century Sweden but not so in early America. It is these oddities that alert us to ask more questions. It is not always obvious what resources will yield results, so a broad search is necessary to sharpen the lens through which we view evidence. Investigating context is necessary at the very beginning of any research project in a new area and should continue throughout the research process as new topics or gaps in knowledge are identified.

Genealogy Standards outlines for us the broad topics we could search, but it is by no means exhaustive list.¹ It is up to us to decide which ones will improve our understanding. The more difficult the problem (era, source limitations, etc.) the broader the search will probably need to be.

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards, Second Edition* (Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2019) 12.

“When planning research, genealogists consider historical boundaries and their changes, migration patterns and routes, and sources available... They also consider economic, ethnic, genetic, governmental, historical, legal, linguistic, military, paleographic, religious, social and other factors...”²

In our example, it was necessary to have an understanding of geography, migration patterns, available sources, ethnic mores, legal (taxation) issues, religion and social factors.

Identifying known information

This may seem an obvious step, but don't be too quick to judgment. Verify that you are identifying the known information about your person of interest and not the piece that you wish you had. Known information provides the foundation for any research question. With a weak foundation, the outcome may be inconsistent--or at worse, wrong.

The crafting of a good research question relies on known information about who and what you are looking for. If you have multiple common named individuals, you might be wise to back up one or more generations and verify that you have the right person of interest. This is a good exercise, even if you know you have the right person. Surprises can emerge.

The “entry point” to the next generation is often the birth of a known child. Elna Johansdotter was the mother of Johanna Troedsdotter. Elna had no pre-marriage entries in Hishult Parish church books.

Using “radial research”

This technique is helpful if you have identified a locale, but the origin of the person of interest is elusive. Search in surrounding jurisdictions. Depending on the mobility of your ethnic group and the era, you may need to expand your search to the second tier of jurisdictions or even wider.

In our example, radial research was conducted to determine if Elna Johansdotter had been born or married in any of the six parishes surrounding Hishult. No direct evidence was found, but the process of elimination suggested Markaryd Parish. The context investigation uncovered extensive record loss in the parish due to fire.

Analyzing the FAN Club³

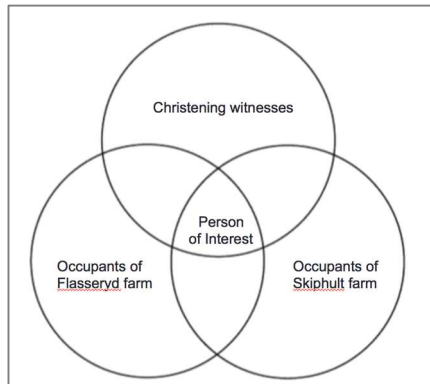
Most problems cannot be successfully solved without utilizing some level of cluster research. Researchers often utilize family members as our first cluster. These family members might be clearly identified, such as in an obituary. Sometimes one has to pick them out of a crowd of individuals. There might be multiple groups you identify: passengers on the immigrant ship from the same village, members of a church or a fraternal organization, or witnesses to events such as marriage or births of children. The more difficult the problem, the more likely you will need to look beyond the immediate family. You will need to track them all.

Early research might also identify multiple candidates, each of whom must be analyzed until they can be dropped from the candidate pool. The development of a cluster stems from the questions thoughtful genealogists ask themselves, “Are there other candidates?” or “Is there another way to interpret this information?” The multiple candidates might also form a negative “FAN Club.”

² Ibid.

³ Elizabeth Shown Mills, *QuickSheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2012).

Your research will identify those who are not in the person of interest's immediate friends/family, associates and neighbors, thus leaving the best candidate remaining.



Venn Diagram of intersecting clusters
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Most often there will be more than one cluster you will be looking at. Think of it like a Venn diagram with multiple circles over-lapping and intersecting with your person of interest.

The christening witnesses to the children served as the first cluster in our example, but the families of Johan Svensson of Flasseryd farm, Johan Svensson and Johan Persson of Skipphult farm each formed other, intersecting clusters.

Building and eliminating hypotheses

At some point in the construction of the body of evidence, a possible answer may emerge. Forming a hypothesis statement can provide focus for identifying evidence that will prove it wrong or prove it right.

Investigating three same-named individuals presents a good example. The hypothesis states that Candidate #1 matches the profile of your person of interest; however, the facts don't match. Candidate #1 is unlikely to be your person of interest. You move to the next candidate, forming a new hypothesis. Candidate #2's facts match your person of interest, but don't stop there! You must research Candidate #3 with the same effort you put into Candidates #1 and #2. The hypothesis building continues until all candidates are investigated. Only then can you assess whether you are left with one candidate or there are still competitors. Should the latter occur there are two choices—continue researching or quit.

The use of DNA to identify a father is another example. A family is identified as the one harboring the unknown father, but with multiple males in the family you cannot identify which one. You can target test descendants of each candidate to find the likely one. Then you must analyze the results, the pedigrees of each and correlate the documentary evidence before reaching a conclusion. *Genealogy Standards* provides the framework for assessment of DNA evidence.

In our example, geographic locale and candidates for siblings provided the hypotheses and cluster research narrowed the options to investigate. Was Elna born in any of the proximal locations? Was Elna a sibling of either Anna or Jon?

Reaching a conclusion

The Genealogy Proof Standard requires us to do reasonably exhaustive research, cite our work fully with informative citations, analyze and correlate our information, resolve conflict, and write up our conclusions.⁴ The reality is that we might not reach a conclusion. There are many reasons this can happen, including reaching the end of available records, setting the project aside for another day that never comes, lack of access to repositories, etc. Even if you do not come to a

⁴ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards, Second Edition* (Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2019) 1.

formal conclusion, you have made many (documented) discoveries that may help someone in the future.

And even if our written research is incomplete, the written record will make it easier to resume our project at a later date. Use “Write As You Go!” principles to assemble the evidence in one place. And using your research report as a launch point, you can produce an article if you so desire.

RESOURCES

Morelli, Jill. “Spanning A Record Gap of 160 Years: Identifying Parents for Elna Johansdotter, Who Died in Hishult Parish, Sweden, 13 February 1795.” *Swedish American Genealogist*. 1: March 2019.

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https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Sweden:_Solving_Common_Problems_in_Swedish_Genealogical_Research

Morris, Geoff Frøberg. *A Practical Guide to Swedish Church Records for Genealogy and Family History*. Salt Lake City: self published, 2020. Book is not yet available, but can be found at

<https://swedishgenealogyguide.com/store>

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Bittner, Warren. “Dora Lühr’s Hannover Origins: A Case of Conflicting Direct Evidence.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*. 98 (September 2010): 165-176.

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Building and Eliminating Hypotheses

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Reaching a conclusion

Johnson, Melissa. “A Lesson in Reasonably Exhaustive Research,” NGS Monthly, 7 November 2015.

<https://ngsmoonthly.ngsgenealogy.org/a-lesson-in-reasonably-exhaustive-research-2/>

Sites for Swedish originals (Ancestry and FamilySearch have coverage, but limited):

Swedish Archives: <http://sok.riksarkivet.se/svar-digitala-forskarsalen>

ArchivDigital (\$): <http://www.arkivdigital.net/>