

The Genealogical Approach Re-examined: Ancestral Reconstruction as a Mechanism for Analysing Social Transformation in Modern Field Research

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ABSTRACT

The genealogical approach, pioneered by W.H.R. Rivers in 1910 to extract kinship terminology and social organization in societies lacking written documentation, is typically regarded in the methodological canon of the discipline as a relic of structural-functionalist kinship research, now overshadowed by survey tools and life-history interviews. This study contends, based on field research conducted in five villages of Durgi Mandal, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, that the genealogical approach possesses unique comparative benefits for examining intergenerational social transformation — benefits that are not mirrored by cross-sectional survey data or standalone life-history interviews. The study illustrates that genealogical reconstruction, utilising three reconstructed lineages over three to five descending generations and a structured schedule from 513 respondents, enables within-family, cross-generational comparisons while maintaining caste, locality, and frequently economic status relatively constant — thereby isolating generational change as a variable in a manner unattainable through between-household survey comparisons. The approach additionally reveals patterns undetectable by survey tools: the aggregation of premature mortality, the underreporting of domestic violence, and the failure to engage with health schemes associated with particular marital alliances (especially parallel and cross-cousin marriages), as well as the differing paths of siblings brought up in the same household environment. The article culminates in a methodological evaluation of the technique's constraints — respondent recall bias, the susceptibility of lineage revelation to trust and rapport, and the ethical implications of recording identifiable, multi-generational family information — while suggesting guidelines for its judicious application in modern, change-focused fieldwork.

Keywords: *genealogical method, kinship, research methodology, social change, ethnography, intergenerational analysis, W.H.R. Rivers*

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I. INTRODUCTION

W.H.R. Rivers's (1910) genealogical approach was formulated as a data-gathering strategy to address a particular historical issue: obtaining precise kinship terminology and social structure among the Toda and similar societies devoid of written genealogical documentation, by prompting informants to extend their familial connections outward from themselves (ego) for as many generations as their recollection allowed. Later generations of anthropologists incorporated genealogy into conventional fieldwork methodologies, primarily as a supplementary technique for analysing kinship and descent rather than as a principal method, and its application has diminished even more as quantitative household surveys and narrative life-history interviews have emerged as the predominant instruments for examining rural social transformation. This article presents a study where genealogical reconstruction was intentionally preserved and expanded—not for the purpose of documenting kinship terminology, but to examine the varied adoption of state welfare programs and the continuity or alteration of particular social practices across as many as five successive generations within identified lineages—and contends that this approach highlights methodological advantages of the technique that are uniquely suited to the investigation of change, which cannot be sufficiently mirrored by either cross-sectional surveys or disassociated individual life-history data.

II. APPLICABLE METHOD

2.1 Configuration

The research presented herein involved genealogical reconstruction conducted concurrently with a scheduled schedule provided to 513 female participants across five villages in Durgi Mandal, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. Three genealogies, each originating from a living individual and extending to include both

ancestral and descendant relatives over three to five generations, were meticulously reconstructed with comprehensive ethnographic detail: types of marital alliances (cross-cousin, parallel-cousin, or non-kin), age at matrimony, educational qualifications, professions, location and circumstances (institutional or home, trained or untrained) of childbirth for every documented delivery, experiences and reporting status of domestic violence, and involvement in each of the principal state welfare programs operational in the region (self-help-group/DWACRA credit, MGNREGA employment guarantee, Janani Suraksha maternal cash incentive, old-age and widow pension, and Indiramma housing). Every data point was linked to a specifically identified individual with generational coding (e.g., ego's husband's brother's wife, designated B7), enabling the reconstruction of both vertical (generational) and lateral (sibling, affinal) comparisons within a unified kin network.

2.2 What the methodology reveals that survey data fails to provide

The relative superiority of this approach compared to the associated 513-respondent schedule is most effectively demonstrated by certain trends revealed in the genealogy data that the survey-level analysis, when seen in isolation, would overlook.

Initially, intra-lineage comparisons among successive generations enable the discernment of generational transformation while maintaining caste, locality, and frequently household economic status relatively stable — a control that a cross-sectional survey utilising unrelated households throughout the study population cannot attain, as inter-household comparisons in survey data inevitably conflate generation with various other dimensions on which sampled households diverge. The lineage data gathered for this research revealed a distinct generational transition in childbirth locations: in the earliest documented generation of each lineage, deliveries predominantly took place at home with the assistance of untrained local midwives (dais), whereas in the ego's generation and those that followed, a rising — albeit inconsistent — percentage of births occurred in government or private hospitals, with specific instances of this shift linked to the assignment of a female physician at the local primary health center rather than a widespread change in perspective. A questionnaire enquiring about the location of respondents' latest delivery would document the result of this transition, although it would not reflect its generationally phased and locally initiated nature.

Secondly, the approach reveals the aggregation of negative outcomes associated with particular structural characteristics of the kinship system, which a survey would capture just as discrete individual-level factors. In the genealogical data, instances of fatalities linked to domestic violence and the overwhelming prevalence of unreported domestic violence to law enforcement or community entities predominantly transpired within marriages identified as cross-cousin or parallel-cousin unions, with participants specifically attributing the proximity of the familial connection between the individuals — and the resulting engagement of mutual relatives in any official grievance — as the rationale for non-reporting or for retracting a previously lodged complaint. A survey inquiry on "domestic violence reporting" would document the absence of a report as a binary result, neglecting to provide the marital status variable that the genealogy data of this study indicates is significantly correlated with it.

Third, the approach uncovers varying paths among siblings brought up in the same household and economic environment, a comparison inherently inaccessible to any method that selects a single respondent per household. The paired-sibling cases documented in this study's lineage data — for example, one daughter who left school and married at puberty while her younger sister, born several years later, attended residential schooling once it became available and completed her education — illustrate that the timing of a policy intervention concerning a child's life-stage, rather than solely the household's overall socioeconomic status, can influence outcomes, a conclusion that genealogical comparisons between siblings within the same household are particularly adept at revealing.

2.3 A fourth capability: identifying variability in results despite seemingly uniform underlying circumstances

A further trend shown by the genealogy data, beyond the three previously mentioned, warrants distinct methodological discussion as it counters a potential overestimation of the method's ability to identify structural causes. In the third reconstructed lineage, alcohol dependence among husbands is prevalent across various branches; however, the reporting of domestic violence to authorities, community leaders, or investigators during fieldwork shows significant variation among these branches: in certain documented marriages, extreme and recurrent violence remained completely unreported and unrecognised outside the home; conversely, in at least one other marriage with a husband exhibiting a similar pattern of alcohol dependence, the wife reported no instances of domestic violence, a discrepancy that informants could not clarify when questioned directly. A technique that selects one instance from each structural category (such as one household per caste-and-income group) may misrepresent the prevalent outcome for that category as if it were an unequivocal result of the structural condition; the genealogical approach's ability to incorporate multiple occurrences of the same nominal structural condition (such as alcohol dependence or cross-cousin marriage) within a single traceable kin network highlights this internal variability in a manner that a single-case or matched-pair analysis would not, and it is a warning this paper

deems essential to articulate clearly: the method demonstrates correlation, and at times significant clustering, yet the same lineage data that illustrate the marriage-type/non-reporting correlation in Section 2.2 also serve as a caution against regarding any singular structural variable as entirely definitive of the outcome.

2.4 Disparities in occupation and education within a singular generation

The reconstructed lineages additionally disclose significant intra-generational variation in vocational and educational achievements among cousins who hold fundamentally analogous positions – offspring of siblings, reared in the same village, of the same caste, within a certain age range. In the third lineage, first cousins of the same generational descent are documented as either adhering to the family's conventional iron-working trade without formal education; obtaining an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) certification and securing government positions (such as with Indian Railroads or the state electricity department); or, in one instance, achieving postgraduate education while conducting doctoral research under a national fellowship. This extent of intra-generational, intra-lineage variation — observable solely due to the genealogical approach maintaining the kin connection among these individuals instead of treating them as independent survey participants — suggests that both generation and structural position, while insightful, do not entirely dictate individual paths, and that lineage-level data are best interpreted as illustrating a range of outcomes influenced by generation and structural position, rather than a singular generationally dictated result..

III. CONSTRAINTS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The advantages of the strategy include associated expenses that the fieldwork experience presented in this study elucidates. Initially, genealogical depth is constrained by the limits of living memory and the readiness of individuals, including the ego and other informants, to reveal delicate family histories — the three lineages completely reconstructed for this research constitute a mere fraction of the households in the scheduled sample, as comprehensive multi-generational disclosure, encompassing revelations of suicide, domestic violence, and unreported fatalities, necessitated a level of rapport and trust that could not be cultivated with the entire sample during the study's duration. Genealogical information gathered under these circumstances should not be regarded as statistically representative; its significance resides in its depth and internal analysis, rather than in generalisations about the population, and results from genealogical case studies should be clearly articulated as examples of established mechanisms instead of proof of their commonality, with prevalence assertions limited to the related survey tool.

Secondly, the methodology imposes a unique ethical obligation that differs from conventional interview-based research: since a reconstructed genealogy reveals not only the primary participant but also numerous other living and deceased relatives by name and their relationships, frequently encompassing sensitive topics such as domestic violence, suicide, and infant mortality that those individuals did not consent to reveal, the responsible application of this method necessitates either complete anonymisation of all lineage members at the time of publication (as implemented in the accompanying papers of this study) or, when identification is preserved for archival or legal reasons, a significantly more rigorous consent protocol that includes every named individual in the reconstructed lineage, not just the primary respondent.

Third, the precision of recollections regarding events from several generations ago—especially exact marriage ages or the specific order of occurrences within a lineage's earliest documented generation—is fundamentally constrained by the informant's memory and the often-lacking documentary evidence (such as birth or marriage registrations) within the study population; thus, genealogical information of this nature ought to be regarded as a reflection of present recollections and narratives, rather than as a chronologically verified account.

Fourth, the approach relies on a singular or limited number of ego-informants within each lineage, usually the most senior or cooperative family member, whose status in the kinship network influences what is revealed, excluded, or highlighted in the narrative. A daughter-in-law's narrative of the same ancestry, had she been the principal informant instead of her mother-in-law, could highlight alternative occurrences or assign causality in a distinct manner, especially concerning contentious issues like domestic violence or misappropriation of loans; the genealogical reconstructions presented in this research, akin to any singular informant's narrative, inherently reflect the interpretive viewpoint of the family member who agreed to act as the focal point, and this should be recognised as a subjective account of the lineage rather than a unified or resolved one.

Fifth, the method's demand for extensive relationship cultivation renders it ill-suited for time-limited fieldwork or research frameworks necessitating swift data acquisition across numerous instances; the three lineages reconstructed for this investigation entail a significant commitment of fieldwork time that is disproportionate to the three cases generated, a consideration that must be balanced against the method's analytical output when planning a study's overall time distribution between survey and genealogical elements.

IV. DISCUSSION: ADAPTING THE APPROACH FOR TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED INQUIRY

4.1 Transitioning from familial organization to evolution pathway

The situation presented indicates that the marginalisation of the genealogical method in modern fieldwork stems from its historical ties to an outdated structural-functionalist approach to kinship studies, rather than any intrinsic shortcomings of the method for alternative analytical applications. Rivers (1910, 1914) created the technique to address a synchronic inquiry - what is the kinship framework and nomenclature of this civilisation during this period? — suitable for a period of anthropological investigation focused on structural analysis. The application demonstrated in this paper repurposes the same elicitation technique to answer a diachronic question — how has a specific practice or outcome changed, or failed to change, across the generations of a single kin network, and through what locally identifiable mechanism? — and this shift from structural description to change-trajectory analysis is, this paper argues, sufficient to justify treating the contemporary application as methodologically distinct from, rather than a mere revival of, Rivers's original programme, even though the elicitation technique itself (tracing named relatives outward from an ego across generations) is substantially unchanged.

4.2 Synergy with survey and life-history methodologies

Reframed as a mechanism for intra-family, intergenerational analysis, the approach provides a unique ability to account for household-level variables while distinguishing between generational and life-course timing, serving as an analytical complement to, rather than a replacement for, cross-sectional survey tools. It is both separate from and supportive of unlinked life-history interviewing: a life history captures the narrative depth of one person's journey but does not allow for systematic comparison with their siblings, parents, or cousins unless those relatives are interviewed independently and their narratives are later cross-referenced — a laborious reconstruction that the genealogical method, by its nature, achieves as a cohesive data-collection process centred on kinship rather than the individual respondent. This implies a fundamental design tenet for research on social and policy transformations in kin-centric rural communities: genealogical case reconstruction, performed on a selectively restricted number of lineages for analytical profundity, in conjunction with a comprehensive structured framework for estimating population-level prevalence, enables each approach to mitigate the other's inherent limitations — the survey's failure to maintain consistency in kinship and household context, and the genealogy's inadequacy in facilitating population-level generalisations.

4.3 Consequences beyond the current research domain

Although the empirical data pertains specifically to Durgi Mandal, the methodological discourse possesses wider relevance for any ethnographic research aimed at societal transformation within communities structured by extended kinship — a characteristic prevalent in much of rural South Asia, and, as indicated by comparative kinship studies (Barnard & Good, 1984), in rural societies throughout South and Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Melanesia, where Rivers's initial approach was originally implemented and later expanded by his successors. Scholars examining the varied adoption of policy interventions—such as agricultural extension, health initiatives, and cash transfer programs—within these contexts might employ a similar integrated approach (a limited number of thoroughly analysed lineages coupled with a wider survey) to achieve the precise analytical insight into generational and sibling-level differences that this study has illustrated.

V. CONCLUSION

This article contends that the genealogical approach, first designed for analysing kinship terms and social frameworks, possesses considerable and often overlooked merit for examining intergenerational social transformation when adapted and integrated with modern survey tools. Its primary comparative advantage lies in its ability to maintain constant variables of kinship, caste, and locality while distinguishing generational and life-course variations — a design characteristic that revealed, in the field data of this study, generationally staged transformations in childbirth practices, a structural link between types of marriage and the non-reporting of domestic violence, and sibling-level disparities in educational outcomes that are not apparent in household-level su Prudent application of the approach in modern research necessitates careful consideration of its representational constraints, its unique ethical implications about third-party disclosure, and the intrinsic unpredictability of deep-generational memory.

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