

GROUP RESEARCH METHODS IN LOCAL HISTORY

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The academic value of aggregation and family reconstitution studies, pioneered in France and introduced to this country by the Cambridge Research Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, is now widely accepted. The methodology of these two approaches is in some ways as remarkable as their results. The methods employed could in fact have wider applications to the whole field of English local history than merely to analyse parish registers. The purpose of this article is to suggest a method by which a group of students can effectively record the relevant detail from documents available to the local historian. The method can be applied to such sources as Marriage Bonds and Allegations, Poor Law Settlement Certificates, Removal Orders and Examinations, Apprenticeship Indentures, Churchwardens' Presentments, Wills and Probate Inventories.

Family reconstitution techniques involve what is in effect the production of questionnaires. These questionnaires put certain specific questions to one class of documents. At the rudimentary level of data accumulation they simply ask for the recording, for a specific male or female, of the dates of baptism, marriage or burial, together with any other information involved in the register entry. At the second level a more sophisticated questionnaire, the Family Reconstitution Form (FRF), defines groups of such specific individuals in terms of the conjugal family. The data on these forms are so assembled that information can readily be extracted to provide the basis for a variety of demographic and social analyses, ranging from age at first marriage to intergenetic intervals. One most important advantage of such well designed forms is that any student or group of students who have been well briefed or have read the manual of instruction (1) can subject a register of their own choice to the questionnaire. Assuming that this work is scrupulously performed, the results may have a greater objectivity and a far higher comparative value against similar studies than individually designed and executed research. The approach is peculiarly adapted to group research

because of the direction of its aims and the ways in which it effectively organises the assembly of large quantities of data for analysis. These advantages far outweigh the problems that arise in any group effort from the variation in the interest, ability and precision of group members.

An extension of these methods to problems other than demographic and to documents other than parish registers is possible at several levels. The first stage is the same as for any type of historical research - formulation of the problem that is to be studied and investigation of the sources that will provide valid evidence. If the problem is to be investigated by a group using forms, then questions have to be defined that will elicit the relevant data from the document, and the group has to be instructed on the purpose and the peculiarities of the document to be studied. The form on which the group records its findings has to be as unambiguous in its wording and design as possible and so constructed that results can be easily extracted.

One of the simplest examples of this sort of approach would be the study of male and female age at marriage in the eighteenth century, using marriage bonds and allegations. These documents give, in the chinks between the bureaucratic formulae affirming that there is no ecclesiastical impediment to the granting of a marriage license, the age of the potential bride and groom. They also give marital status - bachelor, spinster, widower, widow - so that it is an easy matter to widen the scope of the research and ask that each researcher record marital status as well as age. The 'questionnaire' necessary to produce and record this information can be simple in the extreme. A sheet of A4 duplicating paper with headings on the top for the fundamental divisions of bride and groom, each half sub-divided to provide both sexes with a subdivision for age and status will suffice. If horizontal lines are drawn so that twenty five marriages are recorded on each form, addition at the end is simplified; and there is room at the foot of the page for compartments for the totals of ages, teenage marriages and numbers of differing relationships that went to form marriages, for example spinster/bachelor and spinster/widower. There are necessary qualifications to be made about marriage evidence derived from these sources. They record only the intention to marry, and the expense of the license meant that few of the poor could afford to marry in this way. But all historical documentary evidence has flaws, not excluding parish registers. Comparing the declared age of individuals who wished to marry by license with their actual age as revealed by family reconstitution is one check on the reliability of the evidence. Another check is to

plot the distribution of the ages declared in the allegations to see if they cluster unnaturally at decennial and quinquennial figures. Certainly, in the diocese of Worcester in the period 1690-1760, evidence of marriage age from the allegations seems good. There has in the past been some reluctance to accept evidence based on marriage licenses as valid, in the belief that many such marriages were unplanned and rushed because of pregnancy. This does not seem to have been common enough a reason to cause serious inaccuracy. Social ostentation and social emulation may have been more common motives for licensed marriages than the shot gun. There are usually, in any diocese, hundreds of these allegations and bonds for each calendar year. With a questionnaire, a group of researchers can each accumulate hundreds of examples in an afternoon's work. From a Worcestershire parish that had a population of 1,172 in 1801 reconstitution methods for the period 1663-1801 required a considerable number of afternoons to produce evidence of some 200 marriage ages.

Even a questionnaire as simple in design as the one described above has very positive merits. It defines and directs research as well as partly organising the presentation of data. Moreover it gives confidence to the worker, especially one untrained in research, and this confidence leads to rapid and effective work. The bonds and allegations, in fact, contain other valuable information, much of it worth analysis. They give the parish of potential bride and groom, usually the occupation of the latter, and the bonds, with their two signatures of the groom and his guarantor, give evidence for literacy(2). As the documents are each single sheets all these kinds of information are easily discernible. It becomes a nice point of questionnaire planning whether to include the recording of some or all of this information on the same sheet. A multiplicity of tasks makes it more difficult to achieve an efficient working rhythm. In some areas, and for some research groups, rapidly acquired data on these topics might well seem to be more interesting and significant than marriage age or status at marriage.

Marriage bonds and allegations have the enormous advantages of quantity and of a stereotyped layout which make their exploitation by this method easy. They do however have the disadvantage of being available only in a Record Office. This makes their use by part time research groups, which can normally only work in the evenings, almost impossible. The guide lines established by a form do however make it easier to do the documentary work for the benefit of a group project which can then be analysed in individual time. In the

field of Poor Law, settlement certificates, examinations, removal orders and apprenticeship indentures can still be found in the custody of a local vicar, sometimes in large quantities. All of them are susceptible to form-based analysis. The first can be recorded on a form in terms of date, male occupation, motives given for the move, size of families involved, printer of certificate, direction and distance of move (3). Removal orders provide answers to similar questions. A well designed questionnaire to a series of Poor Law examinations produces masses of evidence on mobility, wage rates, promotion patterns and duration of service. However, form-based research is most effectively employed on large numbers of documents, and this means that a Record Office is the most natural and satisfactory source of material. A group working on local documents can however more effectively obtain the comparative evidence that will enrich and define their parochial research if their work on local material has been recorded in a way that permits easy comparison with material from the nearest Record Office or further afield.

In a well stocked Record Office, whole classes of documents can be analysed by applying the directed question on a well planned form as a basis for group research. Churchwardens' presentments, probate inventories, wills, consistory court material and the whole range of poor law records are in bulk so daunting that mass attack seems to provide the best way of establishing satisfactory foundations of evidence for making generalisations. The possibilities are, literally, endless. Probate inventories provide material on social structure and wealth, agricultural practice, the diffusion of luxuries and technology. An analysis of large numbers of wills provides evidence of excellent quality for all the problems of kinship. The poor law records, if they are to be studied by group research based on forms, pose fascinating problems of question definition and questionnaire construction, but, given this direction, the results could be of considerable value.

Every research worker at any level must evolve his own methods for recording and correlating the evidence he thinks valuable. Generally only his interpretations become public in pamphlet, article or book. His cards, his notes and his methods which are revealed by them gather dust in a cupboard. Although family reconstitution studies have demonstrated the importance and intellectual rewards of sophisticated methodology, method receives too little public attention in most other fields of historical work. Between the two extremes of unpublicised private enterprise and massive national projects

there is scope and need for much experiment in methods of research. The scope for such experiment amongst English local records is enormous. Directing work amongst these records by means of a group working to common aims, summarised in the form they use to record their findings, is pleasurable. It is satisfying to define aims, design a form and analyse a mass of results. There is satisfaction for the recorders too, especially if all are associated at the planning stage, but even the routine of form filling has a confidence and purpose about it. This is a confidence that the worker who is unused to documents can find hard to acquire when, without direction, he tries to cope with and extract what is significant from diverse kinds of local records. The form filling will not become boring provided the basic problem, the document and the quantity of material necessary for interpretation are matched to the stamina, physical and intellectual, of the group involved. The greatest advantages of directed group research are, firstly, that the problems considered will almost always have a relevance outside a particular locality; by definition such studies must be problem-based and non-parochial in their outlook. Secondly, the results stand a good chance of being of more than parochial interest - they will be, at least in part, quantifiable and therefore of comparative value to workers elsewhere. It is probably too hopeful, and certainly too early, to envisage courses and classes in form construction for historians, especially local historians. It is altogether too imaginative to imagine a national form-promulgating body, if only because the tradition of independence in England is too strong. But wherever there are groups interested in the history of a locality or history in general - evening classes, College of Education groups, History Societies -- with an adequate supply of documents, a duplicating machine and paper, they might find that a questionnaire to past documents is more valuable and interesting than some we fill in today about present day society.

NOTES

- (1) E.A. Wrigley(ed.) - An Introduction to English Historical Demography (London, 1966).
- (2) See L. Stone - 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900' in Past and Present No. 42 (Feb. 1969) pp. 69-139.
- (3) See P. Styles - 'The Evolution of the Law of Settlement' in University of Birmingham Historical Journal Vol. IX, No. 1 (1963) pp. 33-63.