12. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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I talk to many historical sociologists and individuals in other social science disciplines who do historical research, including historians, geographers, as well as ethnic studies and feminist studies scholars. Overwhelmingly, most of those I speak with share concerns that historical methods are under-discussed and unclear even for established scholars. For example, during my historical methods courses as a graduate student our professor didn't even discuss how to access archives, let alone practical tools to help make sense of the huge amount of data that comprises most historical work. Many professors who teach introductory research methods come from quantitative or ethnographic backgrounds and may lack training in or personal experiences with historical research. As a result, historical methods can sometimes be poorly or superficially taught. Other texts touted as an introduction to historical methods can be dense and are often focused on more abstract questions relating to writing, crafting a narrative, or incorporating theory rather than basic technical practices utilized in historical research.

All background research can be considered a type of historical methods, allowing scholars to ground the various themes they are interested in exploring through the research design of any project within a broader social and cultural context. This makes historical approaches a vital component of *all* research regardless of the main methods used, and an important skill for sociologists to develop.

So, what is historical sociology, and what are some specific practices that historical sociologists use during their research? In this chapter, I will review some key features of historical methods, discuss how to begin designing a historical research project, share some key tools and practices for data collection and analysis, as well as review a number of challenges and weakness of historical approaches.

WHAT ARE HISTORICAL METHODS?

Historical methods are a powerful tool. You can literally study anything and data is everywhere—in books, poems, newspapers, music, art, letters, classified ads, laws, constitutions, memoirs, shipping manifests, videos, and more. It's a method that is easy to pursue, since it is often low cost and can take less time than other approaches (e.g., surveys or ethnographic field methods). Another strength of historical methods is that it's possible to study longer time

periods, allowing scholars to think in terms of decades and centuries, not just months or years. The data used by scholars is generally free and open to the public, relics of a particular time and place that have been preserved for posterity. This means it is possible to return to the data at any point in a project to correct errors, often only by redoing a portion of the project. This also means that historical research is easier to check and to replicate than other methods, an important element to any social science aimed at creating a shared body of knowledge that is peer-reviewed and critically assessed to ensure validation and accuracy. With this said, historical research can also be a chaotic experience characterized by copious (dare I say overwhelming) amounts of data of various types that the researcher must sift through and reduce to a theoretically insightful and compelling narrative.

Historical sociologists examine various forms of historical data to create generalizable explanations of social processes. Such projects often utilize comparative analysis of multiple cases with the aim to create new theoretical insights, uncovering general patterns while developing theories about processes or structural relationships. Historical methods are a form of *unobtrusive research*, referring to the way data collection and analysis processes carried out by the researcher do not change the behavior or participants. Historical methods are always unobtrusive, except perhaps in cases where researchers collect oral histories, but it's worth noting that unobtrusive research does encompass other approaches utilized in disciplines like cultural studies (not discussed here in this chapter).

How is historical research in sociology different than history? Ultimately, the answer to this question lies in the types of research questions asked, not so much the methods used. Historical sociology seeks to *explain* causal mechanisms of social and cultural change, meaning historical sociologies are ultimately interested in "why" events occur as they do, not just "what" happens. Although they utilize specific case(s), historical sociologists seek to generalize from this to create unique theoretical insights about social processes. As such, they are interested in general populations and the actions of people in general, more so than in specific figures. Historians generally seek to *describe* events, particularly watershed moments or important figures or groups. The specific case(s) is the main focus and goal of historical research, and as such they are interested in "what" happens more than anything else. With all this said, the boundaries between historical sociology and history can often be blurred.

BEGINNING HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Once you have established your research question, brainstormed a potential case(s) and thematic interests you want to study (chosen a topic), and engaged in a preliminary literature review, the next step to a historical research project is to generate a sampling plan. Sampling in historical work begins by "poking around" to get a sense of what types of historical documents are available for the time frame you are interested in studying and your case(s). What data actually exists, and that you can also access (affordably)?

Sometimes we might be interested in a particular case, or want to compare cases, but find ourselves unable to do so because of a lack of artifacts to draw from as data, high cost of access, inaccessibility due to language barriers, or even danger in recovering the information. For example, when I entered graduate school I wanted to pursue a historical project investigating human rights abuse in war, news media censorship, and accountability for war crimes in the United States' War on Terror and Russia's Wars in Chechnya. However, at the time (around 2011), Russia was the most dangerous country in the world for journalists. In 2006, Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist who spearheaded reporting on human rights abuses during the Chechen Wars, was shot dead in broad daylight in her apartment complex, widely believed to be an assassination ordered by Vladimir Putin. At the time pursuing archival research in Russia would have been dangerous, not to mention expensive, so I shelved the project.

Getting a sense of what data is out there allows you to re-adjust and narrow the direction of your project and your research question before you invest immense time and energy. It can also help you develop a more focused plan for how to access and analyze the various data you think will allow you to accurately measure what you want to study. For example, let's say you wanted to research how gender norms have changed over the last fifty years. To study a time period that long, you'd want yearly data that is fairly consistent and reflects dominant cultural norms (which would be different than gender presentation in subversive cultural groups). What type of data exists that you can access? Perhaps, you could analyze magazines or product catalogues that came out regularly during the window of time you are interested in.

Historical methods generally rely on four main types of data.

1. *Archival sources* include any primary historical sources, meaning these sources are not analyses of historical events by scholars or political analysts but rather original records or artifacts created by participants in those very historical events. As mentioned previously, such data can include a myriad of artifacts, although textual sources can be particularly rich data for more historically distant time periods.

2. *Secondary sources* include the works of other academics and historians who have already written about related topics.

3. *Running records* are ongoing series of statistical data or other types of records like censuses or certificates of birth.

4. The final type of data used in historical sociology are *recollections*, including autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, or oral histories gathered through interviews.

Data used in historical projects can come from many different sources, including archives. If you are interested in using archives, note that they are not the same as libraries and generally consist of unique collections of published and unpublished materials, that depending on type and age must be cared for to ensure preservation and protection from theft. There are a number of guides available to help you find and access archives (see the resources section at the end of this chapter). Most archives have access guidelines that include registry and personal identification, storing

coats or bags, no food or drinks, request forms for special items, and sometimes restrictions on laptops, cameras, recorders, or scanners. If you are planning to visit an archive, make sure you familiarize yourself with their policies and procedures beforehand.

SPECIFIC TOOLS AND PRACTICES FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical work is predominantly qualitative, but using quantitative measures can sometimes help us capture trends and patterns across time. Quantitative historical analysis typically entails creating some sort of tracking system that quantifies patterns in primary source images or texts across time. For example, returning to the historical shifts in gender norms example, we could select a single issue to study from something like the Sears Catalogue each year for fifty years. Image analysis could be used to track (count) the images in each issue and whether each image features a male, female, or nonbinary gender individual or group, along with other measurements of interest for your specific project, such as race/ethnicity, the color of the clothing individuals are wearing, gendered postures, or indications of sexualization. You can also analyze catalogue text quantitively by counting the number of occurrences of certain phrases or words.

It is always important to get a better sense of the broader social and cultural events that might impact your case(s). Initially, you might want to engage in concept mapping or brainstorming important events or cultural realities of the time period you are investigating that you can then engage in secondary research to better understand. What was going on politically in that region of the world, or globally, and how might these events or cultural contexts impact what you are studying?

One of the most important things historical researchers should always do is create a timeline of all events relevant to your topic, updated regularly across the course of your project. This can be done for your private use by using a rolling Word or Excel document, or some other application that you prefer. Events can be categorized or color-coded as desired. A timeline can also be intended for public use, which might entail incorporating photo, video, or web links in an online application like Tiki-Toki. Creating a timeline might seem simple but it can help you sift through the massive amount of data accumulated during the research process and can also help you get a visual sense of the sequence of events you are investigating. Timelines can also be helpful to remember such sequencing, since research work takes time and keeping track of all the details can be challenging across the course of a project. Making a timeline is tied to a broader set of historical methods known as *sequence analysis* (see Abbott 1995). There are a variety of strategies to approach sequencing in historical research, and those hoping to learn more should engage in a deeper dive into this literature after you begin creating a basic timeline for your project.

Sometimes it can also be helpful to map network connections of important individuals or groups involved in your topic and their interrelationships (Wetherell 1998). You can do this with written notes or visually in many different ways. A basic network diagram includes nodes, or circles, that represent people or groups, with lines between them to represent

relational ties. Such ties can be color-coded as needed to distinguish different types of relationships. There are a variety of applications that can be used to generate network diagrams, or diagrams can be sketched out by hand or even pieced together in scrapbook fashion with hard copy photos or written scraps of paper connected with string on some sort of tack board.

Historical projects often synthesize a variety of historical documents or artifacts about many aspects of your project, ranging from primary to secondary sources. Data organization is absolutely essential throughout your project to help you sift through such data. Generally it's ideal to develop your own method of data organization that works best for you and that is oriented to help you categorize sources as you collect them. The organizational strategies you approach for your project will likely evolve as you gather more data, so this is something you should refine and revisit throughout your research. These organizing strategies can be creative, including specific filing systems for articles or books, tracking thematic categories for each primary source document, using particular applications or programs (e.g., reference management software like Zotero), or whatever else you can think of that helps you sift through your data more quickly or better visualize and recognize patterns.

The analysis and writing process in historical sociology is similar to other qualitative research work and relies heavily on coding historical documents to draw out patterns and generate theoretical insights. I will not talk about the coding or theory development process of research in this chapter, but other general resources on these topics are deeply relevant to

historical work and I recommend exploring these topics further depending on your interests. In particular, common theoretical approaches pursued in historical-comparative work include Foucault's genealogical approach (Dean 1994; Garland 2014), grounded theory (Seaman 2008), or Bourdieusian field theory (Gorski 2013).

CHALLENGES AND WEAKNESSES OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

I want to close with some notes of caution. There are a number of challenges and weaknesses to historical research to consider as you begin your project. As with all qualitative research, it's important to recognize that the researcher's analytical interpretations of historical data can still be biased. In addition, our measurements may not be valid or complete representations of the concepts we are interested in. Because primary documents are artifacts as well as data, historical sociologists must also grapple with the possibility that time can destroy records or that some time periods or groups might be harder to access and study because of a lack of archival sources.

Historical sources are always biased by power and the positionality of record keepers, and as such, are generally characterized by a myriad of archival silences. According to Foucault,

Knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true…. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not

presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (1977:27).

Simon Fowler also argues that "sources and archives are neither neutral nor natural. They are created" (Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson 2017:1). What and who is missing from our records? Who decides what is worth recording or saving? How is what gets recorded a reflection of the power dynamics at the time? Is what is recorded reliable or biased information? Historical data generally prioritizes textual sources from dominant groups, meaning marginalized populations or those cultures that rely more heavily on oral records are typically under- and/or mis-represented. All historical documentation is thus going to be incomplete in some ways.

Researchers must be attentive to *how*, not if, archival silences and biases affect their specific project. Carter (2006:215) notes that "researchers can read archives 'against the grain' and begin to highlight these silences and give voice to the silenced. This, however, may be a difficult and contentious activity and one that should not be entered into lightly." Recent work by Fuentes (2016) on enslaved women in the United States demonstrates this type of archival reconstruction. Some critical questions to consider whenever digging into a historical project include: Why were the documents I am analyzing written? What methods were used to acquire the information in the documents? How inclusive or representative is the sample contained in the documents? What are some of the biases in the documents and how might you go about checking or correcting them? If you relied solely upon the evidence contained in these documents, how might your vision of the past be distorted? What other kinds of documents might you look at for evidence on the same issues? (Questions inspired by Ron Aminzade and Barbara Laslett's "Reading and Evaluating Documents" in *The Practice of Social Research*.)

Considering the incomplete nature of historical data and the complexity and scale of the social systems being studied, determining causality can be tricky in historical methods. Careful research design, rigorous checking, and consistent, critical curiosity about your topic can help ensure you effectively utilize these methods and avoid these pitfalls.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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