

Comparative Anthropological Research Today

The WORLD CULTURES Electronic Database and New Substantive Developments

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"The interpretations offered will have to be corrected, the tabulated material improved in quality and quantity . . . , yet at any rate it will remain clear that the rules of human conduct are amenable to classification in compact masses, so as to show by strict numerical treatment their relations to one another. . . . The key of the position is . . . that in statistical investigation the future of anthropology lies" (Edward B. Tylor 1889 [1966: 22])

This paper reviews current trends of comparative research in Cultural Anthropology, concentrating on the development of electronic databases and new lines of research. These current developments are tied to the increasing use of personal computers within the anthropological community and the growing emphasis on quantitative analysis. The databases being developed offer a wealth of information covering different aspects of community life and should thus be of interest also for the wider social science community.

1. Background: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in Cultural Anthropology

Comparison of human cultures in space and time lies at the heart of the anthropological endeavor. Statistical comparative approaches reach back in time at least 100 years when Edward B. Tylor presented his cross-cultural study on avoidance between in-laws in 1889 [1966: 2]: "... the barbaric etiquette between husbands and their wives' relatives, and vice versa: They may not look at one another, much less speak, and they even avoid one another's names." Since the 1930s clustering techniques, factor analysis, and multidimensional scaling have been applied to cross-cultural and regional comparisons to assess the similarity of cultures in Q-mode analysis (Driver 1970; Jorgensen 1974). In addition, causal connections between cultural variables have been established by way of contingency tables (as of Tylor), correlation, and regression models. Up to now, the quantitative and statistical tradition within anthropology has its strong-

hold in comparative studies of extant ethnographic data. Besides the qualitative comparison of few cultures, two types of quantitative comparative studies can be distinguished, (1) regional studies of a larger number of geographically contiguous cultures (as has been done for North America; cf. Jorgensen 1980) and (2) cross-cultural studies of world-wide samples. Scholars like G. P. Murdock, R. Naroll as well as J. W. M. Whiting and H. E. Driver have brought comparative secondary analysis to a bloom in American Cultural Anthropology.

Nevertheless the collection and analysis of qualitative data by a wide variety of methods still lies at the heart of anthropological fieldwork. To capture the actors' point of view by eliciting native texts has been a major preoccupation in ethnography (Werner and Schoepfle 1987). Today, the gap between the comparative statistical and the ethnographic tradition has narrowed. To ensure an understanding of how the ethnographer arrives at a description of the "observed," the interviews, as a primary source, are usually tape-recorded, transcribed, and, at a later stage, processed by text analytic procedures. It is here, that microcomputers are increasingly used, already in the field, for the collection, retrieval, and preliminary analysis of these text-data bases. In addition, they have facilitated the more and more common collection of specialized quantitative data and multivariate analysis, both now a part of modern fieldwork (Chibnik 1985; Bernard 1988). The microcomputer revolution had its impact on comparative anthropological inquiries as well, since the rather small cross-cultural datasets are still manageable. Thus there is a considerable amount of responsiveness towards the application of microcomputers within the anthropological community.¹ Before in-

1 The main split in the discipline is between explanatory and interpretive approaches. This distinction cross-cuts thematic content (e.g., materialist vs. mentalist research strategies) and it is not congruent to quantitative vs. qualitative analysis. The explanatory paradigms stress the quality of data collection, the control of ethnographic insights, and the need to transcend mere description, whereas the interpretive paradigms are less inclined to these points. Cognitive anthropology in contrast to symbolic anthropology is for example a methodologically controlled explanatory paradigm employing a mentalist and qualitative research program. The recent trend to computer applications and statistics can be observed in the *American Anthropologist* as the leading journal of the explanatory paradigms. In 1988/89 a new *Journal of Quantitative Anthropology* has been founded. There are several newsletters on computer applications in anthropology. Subfields and specializations like demography, economic anthropology, network analysis, and cognitive anthropology are particularly prone to these new trends (cf. Mitchell 1980; Chibnik 1985).