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Illsex - A Databank for Studying Illegitimacy

*Peter Becker**

I would like to address the following three topics: Firstly I would make some remarks on the project for which the databanks were produced. Secondly I shall discuss the record linkage steps that have been carried out and then make some remarks on making record linkage using an ordinary PC. Thirdly I will try to give you a short overview of the kinds of information contained in the databanks that form together the logical unit named Illsex.

1. The project

The project, to begin with, studies studying premarital sexuality (Laslett 1978; Laslett, Oosterveen, Smith 1980; Mitterauer 1984; Phayer 1977; Shorter 1971; Stone 1977). Most of the hitherto existing reports on illegitimacy in historical perspective have used an aggregative data basis. Their idea is to make a cross-cultural comparison and/or to test hypotheses using aggregative data (Laslett 1980; Lee 1977; Mitterauer 1979; Shorter 1971). But there are other methodological strategies, of which my own project is an example. They are based on individual life course analysis and nominal record linkage. What these strategies aim at, are explanations of collective forms of sexual behaviour of ordinary people by analysing individual cases (Beck 1983, pp. 125-150; Ingram 1987; Lipp 1982; Sabeau 1982, pp. 54-76; Wrightson, Levine 1979).

A major disadvantage of many of the aggregative studies of illegitimacy is the lack of empirical evidence for individual patterns of sexual behaviour. Therefore, a central topic of my project was the analysis of such sources that contain information about the motivation that caused ordinary people to enter into illegitimate sexual relations. The most important sources that contain information on this topic are court records of, both, church and manorial courts. In these sources, everyday life of ordinary people - acting, hoping and dreaming - is represented. Although these are very important sources of information, one cannot analyze the phenomenon of illegitimacy without taking into account the surrounding demographic and economic structures and processes. A databank that in-

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tegrates, both, court records and demographic information enabling not only a text based, hermeneutical but also a formalized way of combining these different kinds of information, will be available in the near future (Sabeau 1976; Thaller 1981).

Up to now, results of a more traditional text-oriented research method had to be related to the surrounding demographic and economic structures and processes by means of interdependent hypotheses that cannot be discussed here. In the context of this paper, it is necessary to mention the second - quantitative - part of the study that was carried out by using parish registers and sources that document economic development. My project can be defined as a »micro-analysis« of one parish in the styrian Alps (Beckett, Foulds 1987; Macfarlane, Harrison, Jardine 1977; McNetting 1981).

The main part of this paper discusses databanks that contain demographic information - as mentioned above. Therefore, I will restrict my further comments to this topic. The parish registers were used for getting hold of the quantitative impact of the phenomenon of illegitimacy and for localizing the specific demographic situation of the region under study. The quantitative impact of premarital sexual contacts can be analyzed on the one hand by comparing illegitimately born children with the others, and on the other hand by comparing the legitimate offspring conceived before marriage with the rest of the legitimately first born children. In principle, illegitimately born children are marked in baptism registers. Unfortunately, this was not the case with premaritally conceived offspring. Therefore, one has to make some kind of record linkage to get this information. Baptism registers have to be connected with marriage registers to identify these couples who did not postpone sexual intercourse to the time after the priest's blessing.

2. Record linkage with kleio

Identifying premarital conceptions does not at all require a full-style family reconstitution. Besides that, other kinds of demographic information are necessary to analyze the demographic framework of illegitimacy. Therefore, further record linkage steps had to be taken. But unfortunately even the most interesting projects have time limits. Thus, of all the possible record linkage steps I could perform only the most necessary ones (Fleury, Henry 1985; Willigan, Lynch 1982, pp. 178-182; Wrigley 1966; Schurer 1987).

What kind of steps have been chosen? At first, the information contained in baptism registers was updated by combining it with the registers of illegitimately born offspring. The newly created baptism databank was connected with the marriage databank. Finally, the burial entries for couples were searched for in the burial databank.

2.1. Main problems of family reconstitution

Family reconstitution involved in this case some problems:

1. missing marriage records;
2. inhomogeneous distribution of identifying items before pro forma registration became common in 1787;
3. the surely limited discriminating power of the available identifying items;
4. variations in the spelling of names.

All baptism records pertaining to legitimately born children that could not be linked with a marriage record, are linked with each other. These are the families where the marriage remains unknown. Therefore, the birth date of the first legitimately born child is used as the »terminus ante quem« for the marriage date of the parents. In doing so, a dummy marriage is introduced into the marriage file and the other records belonging to this dummy marriage are added.

The inhomogeneous distribution of identifying items results from the fact that a great number of clerks - monks of St. Lambrecht monastery - were engaged in registration at a time. To overcome this deficiency, the advantages of the semi-automated record linkage that is part of the software used were applied. In that case sorting and comparing is the only task performed by the computer and deciding whether the proposals made by the computer are right or not is left to the user. One can, thus, make use of overlapping information structures for finding out identities by personal judgement that could not be formalized.

In order to compensate for the low discriminating power of the available identifying items, couples were dealt with instead of individuals. By that, the four resulting identifying items - christian name of the man and the woman, surname of the man and date of the event - had enough discriminating power to minimize the amount of false links. As the information of the parish records has been transcribed literally from the original records, misspelling has been a serious problem. The major variances are the same as described by Bouchard (1980). To normalize the differently spelled names, two variants of Soundex-Codes have been defined. About 90% of all misspellings could, thus, be resolved by it.

2.2. The result of record linkage

To give an idea of the efficiency of the record linkage, it can be said that about 65% of all baptisms could be combined with a marriage entry or a dummy marriage entry. Furthermore, for about 40% of all married couples a burial entry was found. One major reason for this low frequency is the total lack of burial entries for a great part of the 17th century records.

Although this is not up to the mark of a fully fledged family reconstitution, it is, nevertheless, a fully usable family reconstitution in a more project-specific sense, as far as it contains all the information needed for analyzing premarital sexuality. By combining all children with the marriage entries of their parents, I got all the information necessary for studying such phenomena like contraception or family specific fertility. The linkage of burial entries to the parents of the just mentioned children gives us additional information we need in order to handle the phenomena mentioned above.

3. A short description of the databanks

There are four databanks available that form together one logical unit named Illsex. They contain all entries from the parish registers from 1599 until 1850. Altogether, there are 14,583 baptisms, 2,169 marriages, 9,683 burials and 3,615 families recorded. Registration of baptisms started in 1599, registration of marriages in 1692 and registration of burials in 1676.

Besides, there is a lot of interesting information available that will be used in further studies on the rural society in pre-industrial Austria. In doing so, the available socio-economic information will be updated by linking further sources to these databanks. Socio-economic information about both, parents and godparents, form part of the baptism records as well as names, places of residence and legitimacy status of the child to be baptized. In the case of illegitimately born children, there are three further items of information mentioned:

1. the parental status of the child to be baptized;
2. the way in which the father of the child has been identified;
3. the witnesses for paternity.

Marriage records, however, are made up of the same information on the bride and the bridegroom - occupational information and the place of residence. Age at marriage is furthermore usually mentioned, as well as the marital status and the legitimacy status of both partners. Besides, we can retrieve occupational data for the parents of bride and bridegroom as well as the place of residence. Burial records contain occupational information as well as the place of residence of the person who died and his or her age, marital status and cause of death. The family databank contains all this information together. We can, therefore, analyze intergenerational as well as intragenerational social mobility broken down by various demographic categories.

3.1. Retrieving informations with kleio

There are some tools available that reduce the complexity of occupational and residual information into a specific analytical scheme. These coding schemes can be used for translating data of the databank into a numerical file for further statistical analysis as well as for specific retrieval procedures. One can therefore look e.g. for all persons who suffered intragenerational downwards social mobility. Another example for simple retrieval possibilities is the search for social alliances that have existed between different social strata. One can try to measure it, for example, by looking at the godparents of these families that belonged to a lower social stratum of the local society.

In other terms, we can select an analytically interesting group of persons and retrieve just the data necessary for answering specific questions, such as information on the »careers« of ordinary people.

As there are further tools available for normalizing differently spelled names - they consist of two specific variants of Soundex codes - one can retrieve the demographic biography of persons that are found in court records. In doing so, the interpretation of court records becomes more substantial.

4. Record Linkage at the PC - will dreams become true?

Some years ago, Ian Winchester (1985, pp. 39-40) charted in a booklet some prospects for record linkage in the future. A central point was record linkage at the PC. Although it involves some problems, record linkage as described above could be undertaken at a PC by now.

Before being able to link the data at your PC you have to prepare them in a software-specific way. If one has a bulk of data that does not fit into the requirements for working with this software, one can use the interface that will translate any input format into the format needed by kleio.

Another prerequisite for making record linkage at the PC is a medium to store a great bulk of data. Therefore, one should be equipped with an optical disk. But then you can do it on our own using the software mentioned above.

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