

BIXLER, MATTHIAS

**Lemercier, Claire and Claire Zalc.
Quantitative Methods in the
Humanities. An Introduction**

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Lemercier, Claire and Claire Zalc. 2019. *Quantitative Methods in the Humanities. An Introduction*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press. (vii + 177 pages, PBK 27,50€/19,50\$, ISBN 978-0813942698).

1 Introduction

There is a shortage of text books on quantitative methods that are accessible to historians with little or no training in statistics. With their recent book Lemercier and Zalc try to bridge that gap by providing a non-mathematical overview of quantitative methods that have been successfully applied in historical research. Although its title suggests a broader approach (the humanities), for the most part the text clearly addresses historians and draws on examples from historical research. What follows is a general review of the book with a focus on the parts concerning Historical Network Research.



2 A very short summary

The book is as much an introduction to quantitative methods for historical research as it is a historical account of quantification in the field of history. Chapter 1 tells the story of the rise and fall of quantitative research among historians and the controversy over its use and misuse that started in the early 20th century and goes on to the present day. In subsequent chapters the particular methods are discussed against this background by pointing out their respective origins and showing where and how they were applied in historical research so far. The authors make an effort to reconcile quantitative historians and their critics by emphasizing throughout the book that quantitative methods are supposed to complement traditional hermeneutics instead of replacing them and by arguing against the naïve use of numbers.

The chapters on quantitative methods start with the premise that any source can be quantified regardless of its type or degree of standardization. Given that measurement, if adequately performed, transforms certain features of a source from its original to a numerical representation, I totally agree with that. Whether a quantitative approach is useful to answer a meaningful research question then depends solely on how these features are selected and what rules are applied to quantify them. The authors then elaborate on comparison and combination of data from different sources, sampling techniques and sample sizes that are both manageable and yield meaningful results. Those general remarks as well as the chapter on data collection come in handy for any historian in the process of developing a quantitative research project. Contingency tables and the chi-squared test serve as an example to explain the reasoning behind correlations and hypothesis testing in statistics. Subsequent chapters cover a wide array of more advanced techniques, i.e. regression, factor analysis, social network analysis, sequence analysis, visualizations, maps, and text analysis.

There is also a companion blog to the book.¹ By November 2019 it consists of 20 entries not all of which provide further insights into the topics discussed in the text. In the future it is supposed to be expanded with tutorials and recommendations for further reading.

¹ <https://quantum.hypotheses.org>.

3 What's in it for historical network researchers?

The coverage of social network analysis, however short (13 pages on SNA and 8 pages on techniques for visualizing network data), is certainly one of the strongest parts of the book. The authors point out the differences between relational data and variables for standard procedures including a separate section on data collection, before going into detail about the possibilities and restrictions of social network analysis in historical research. These sections are loaded with excellent practical advice that may save a beginner in HNR from wasting much time and energy in repeated trial and error. It is also rare to see a text book pointing out so clearly when a network approach is not appropriate. For example, referring to a type of research question that is regularly brought forward by beginners, they state:

Network analysis is not intended to find out whether or not an individual "is in the network" (p. 104).

As can be expected from an introduction, researchers who already made their first steps into HNR will presumably find little information that is completely new to them. The section on social network graphs provides a vivid example of how successive modifications on the same network graph can provide additional insights.

4 Critique

There are some points worthy of criticism. Historians who expect a hands-on introduction that actually teaches them how to gather data and to conduct quantitative analyses will be disappointed. The authors claim to follow a practical approach. However, they also make it explicit that the book is not intended to be a tutorial on any of the methods described (p. 3-4). The latter, however, written from the point of view of a historian and with an introduction to accessible software, would be necessary to reach the author's aim to really enable their readers to understand and criticize published analyzes (cf. p. 77f.).

For the amount of material covered in this book, it is incredibly short. Statistical models are presented at a very high level in order to be able to rely solely on verbal explanations and skip their mathematical foundations. To be as accessible as possible while providing a broad overview is a noble goal for an introductory text. But in this case it seems that the authors did too much of a good thing. In particular, they left out the very fundamentals of data analysis and statistics that are absolutely crucial to understand more sophisticated models, e.g. levels of measurement, how to construct hypotheses that can be tested, choosing among the most common descriptive statistics and how to interpret them, etc. In their discussion of visualizations, again, they skip most of

the basic plots than can yield so much insight to focus mainly on social network graphs and maps which only a small proportion of quantitative historians will ever use.

Therefore, a reader with no prior experience in quantitative research will have to read the book at least twice to be able to understand many of the best practice examples and suggestions on how to avoid pitfalls. Once before and once after he/she turned to other resources to learn about the fundamentals of quantitative methods and how to apply them in a practical manner. Those who are trained in quantitative methods, on the other hand, might be puzzled by sections, where the authors decided to leave out crucial information so they didn't have to introduce more formal language.

Finally, the book contains a multitude of useful suggestions that can help avoid requirement violations, overinterpretation of results, or time consuming reexamination of the sources. Some of them are clearly summarized in lists of best practice guidelines. However, many of them - and among them some of the most useful - are embedded somewhere in the text. It up to the readers to identify them in the first place and then find them again, when they need them.

5 Conclusion

That said, I think the book is useful as a primer, especially for traditionally trained historians who want to get an overview over quantitative methods in historical research and for quantitatively trained researchers who collaborate with historians and want to get a feeling for the peculiarities and potential pitfalls of working with historical sources. Historians who are intrigued by the possibilities of social network analysis for their own research will find a short overview that supports them in deciding whether a network approach is applicable to their sources and appropriate to answer their research questions or not.