Prosopographical Research Questions

Historical research questions that are suitable for a prosopographical approach

What is prosopography?

- Lawrence Stone: "Prosopography is the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives."

- ≠ Social network analysis

Sort of information captured

- Person-centred
- External features of people: gender, age, family relationships, ethnic background, religious denomination, social class, personal relationships, education, occupations, political faction

Hartlib's circle

Samuel Hartlib (c.1600-1662)

(Correspondence) network:

- > 4,250 letters with ±325 correspondents in EMLO
- Another > 400 people mentioned in letters
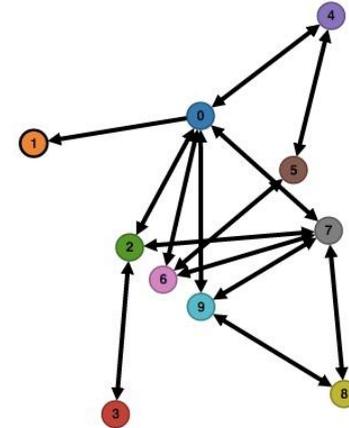- Widely dispersed
- Highly mobile
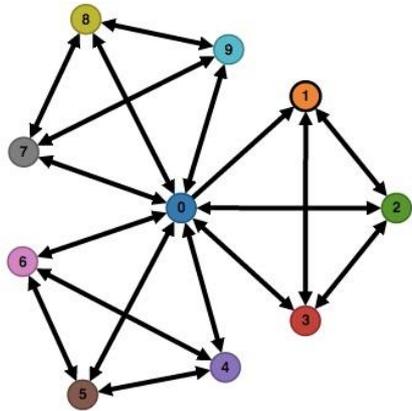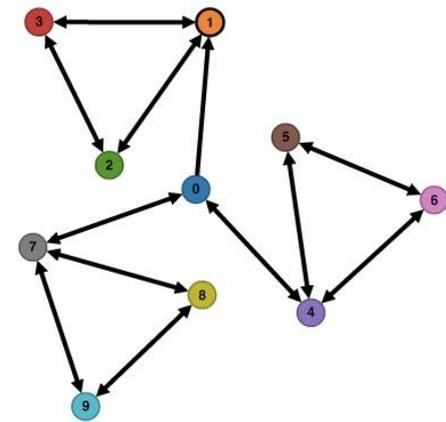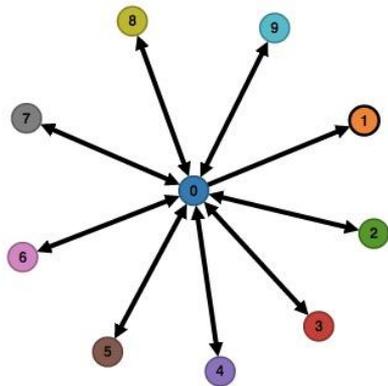- Little-known figures

Research questions focus on:

- Geographical origin
- Family relationships
- Contact history
- Location history and institutions attended
- Educational and occupational history

Example research questions

- Who belonged to Hartlib's circle and how did it originate?
- Did the composition of the network substantially change or did it only increase over time?
- Was Hartlib instrumental in the formation of subgroups?
- What role did his contacts have in the growth of the network?
- Were there pre-existing networks which Hartlib's wholly absorbed?
- To what extent did all members of a subgroup have contact with Hartlib or did certain individuals act as contact person?

- To what extent was Hartlib's circle centred on him?
- To what extent was it interconnected?
- To what extent did it consist of subgroups?

Example research questions (continued)

- What can we say about the ethnical, religious, social, or occupational background of the members of Hartlib's circle?

- Can we speak of a fairly homogeneous group?

- Did the nature of the composition of the network change over time?

- How do people who, e.g., were only active in it for a short period of time fit the profile of the other members?

Categories of research questions

1) Ethnic, religious, and socio-economic background of members of social group

2) Origin, composition, and structure of network, and how networks intersect

3) Contextualization of specific individuals and subgroups within larger group