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