

A Content Analysis of Toronto's Business and Sporting Clubs, 1827-1881

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Almost a decade ago, historian Samuel P. Hays called for the development of a "systematic social history" that would concentrate upon and illuminate "patterns of human interaction and the processes of change in those patterns". More specifically, Professor Hays called for the intensive study of changes in the American "social structure", which he defined as "those patterns of human interaction which relate some people and differentiate others, which reflect characteristics held by some in common and by others in distinction.

This definition incorporated two conceptually distinct goals; the study of "patterns of human interaction" and the charting of shared characteristics across elements of past populations. Each of these imposes different methodological limitations and evidential requirements upon the researcher. Not surprisingly, progress toward the latter of these objectives has not been matched by advances toward the former.

This paper sought to examine a methodology which would allow the historical researcher to focus in on both the patterns of human interaction and the shared characteristics across elements of past populations. The study investigated the inter-related characteristics of common business and sporting club memberships in Toronto from 1827 to 1881. The shared characteristics examined were frequency and length of executive status, ethnicity, religious, political, educational and fraternal associations.

Via the examination of primary documents, such as membership lists, club rosters, parliamentary hansard, the researcher was able to determine common "pattern" memberships of Toronto's early business elite. The journalistic technique of "content analysis" was utilized to systematically and objectively record members names and thus, allow correlated characteristics to be compared between membership groups.

The study was conducted in three main phases. The first was a pilot study which took into consideration past historical evidence and tested the initial research question. All major procedural steps were included in this aspect of study. The second phase involved the data collection segment which included the alphabetic recording of club member's names. As well, it was a sub-function of this second phase to infer, based upon Toronto's past social, business and sporting history, the interpretive associations between clusters of names and/or individuals. Phase three represented the "back-check" or cross-validating procedure. For those names which presented confusing or confounding associational patterns, the "back-check" procedure allowed clarification via voluminous secondary historical sources.

This study marked an initial step toward the implementation of a pseudo-empirical technique for historical inquiry. It was the intended desire of such a “systematic social history” to not only allow individual and group comparison but also to prompt further historical comparative questions about particular populations which will lead to a fuller understanding of the social dynamics of past societies.