

The Human Relations Area Files

LIBRARY SCIENCE, like medical science, is advancing not through the discovery of a universal cure-all, but through the gradual solution of small problems, one by one. In the hundreds of years which have elapsed since the frenzied search for the fountain of youth, average life expectancy has greatly increased. Though the fountain was never found, many smaller problems have been solved meanwhile, which contribute to the same end. In the field of librarianship, the Human Relations Area Files comprise one such solution within a limited area.

Carrying the analogy a bit further, the medical man of today cannot hope to master all the diverse specialties of his science, but even the rural general practitioner needs to know of their existence, in order to make proper referral of the occasional, unusual case. To place it in its proper perspective, it must be observed that the Human Relations Area Files also would serve only a minor portion of library patrons, but because of its high quality and high degree of specialization, it is very important that these occasional patrons should be directed to the service which can be of such great help to them. For this reason, librarians dealing with the general public, and more especially those dealing with scholars, should know of the existence of this service, and have some idea of who can use it, and how.

The Human Relations Area Files (hereafter referred to as HRAF) seem to

Mrs. White is Assistant Catalog Librarian, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University.

represent a unique compromise between the old-fashioned research library and the latest mechanized developments. In the following description and explanation of the HRAF, it should be noted that the mechanical equipment is simple, and that there is provision for flexibility, insertion, and growth. At the same time, there is a great saving for the librarian in space, processing, and operating costs, and a great saving for the scholar in time and energy required to retrieve basic data.

Headquarters of the HRAF are in New Haven, Connecticut. From there, complete sets of duplicate materials are distributed to the several government agencies and sixteen member universities, which are especially interested in subjects pertaining to human relations. These universities include Cornell, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale in the East; North Carolina, in the South; Chicago, Iowa, and Indiana, in the Midwest; Oklahoma, in the Southwest; Colorado and Utah, in the West; and Southern California and Washington, on the Pacific Coast. The University of Hawaii is also a member.

The HRAF is a research tool. It is a new kind of library for use primarily by social researchers. In this library the material has all been analyzed in detail and shelved, not volume by volume, but page by page; reproductions of the same page reappearing in as many places as necessary if it mentions a diversity of topics. The approach to the material is not through a card catalog, but through two guidebooks. One lists the main classifications—countries, cultures, peoples, or societies—and the other lists and defines the subject headings that utilize

the terminology painstakingly developed to serve the needs of researchers in human relations. Designed to supply factual data to social scientists, it has been used primarily by students of anthropology, sociology, political science, conservation, psychology, and history. But as it develops by the addition of substantial amounts of material, it becomes increasingly useful to others as well. While still very incomplete, it has been used by representatives of at least twenty-seven different disciplines, to date.

Established "to collect, organize, and distribute information of significance to the natural and social sciences and the humanities,"¹ this library "consists of actual reproductions of scholarly and scientific material so processed, organized, and filed that it gives the student of humanity easy and rapid access to the significant information known"² concerning his topics in specific cultures. It has also been described as "a repository for human knowledge that gathers these materials into one easily accessible place, translated, analyzed, coded, and compactly organized."³

EXAMPLE OF USE

The best way to make clear the use of these files seems to be first to give an example: Professor George Peter Murdock, an established anthropologist, was asked to prepare an article on "Family Stability in Non-European Cultures." After thinking over the subject, he decided his best procedure would be to analyze data on marriage and divorce from eight countries in Asia, eight in Africa, and a like number in Oceania, North America, and South America. First, he used the handbook listing the societies which have already been included in the still incomplete HRAF (*Outline of World Cultures*). Needless

to say, he drew upon his own background in making his selection in such a way that it would represent a balanced sample for his purposes. After selecting the societies he wished to cover, he then turned to the other handbook (*Outline of Cultural Materials*) which lists and defines "categories" (corresponding to librarians' subject headings), and noted the code the numbers of those pertinent to his subject.

The materials he needed were filed geographically, by name of country or ethnic group, and there broken down by categories, so that very little time was required to pull from the files the packets of 5 x 8 slips pertaining to his subject, although they may have represented data from several hundred sources. In twelve hours of actual working time, his study was completed; not a superficial job, but one that the editor to whom it was submitted considered a "real contribution," which may be confirmed by referral to the article itself in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCLXXII (1950), 195-201.

Professor Murdock figured that without the labor-saving aid of the HRAF, three or four weeks of intensive research would have been required, whereas with this aid, his research time was cut by 95 per cent. He does not claim that this is a typical example, but thinks probably about an 80 per cent saving of time is more nearly average. He points out that these files enable the users to devote their "research time to concentrated creativeness, free of the routine drudgery of traditional scholarship."⁴ In this way, they make a positive contribution to the advancement of research.

While there are many projects for which these files are not appropriate,

¹ *Guide to the Use of the Files*, p. 4.

² *Human Relations Area Files. Function and Scope*.

³ *H.R.A.F.*, p. 8.

⁴ G. P. Murdock. Feasibility and Implementation of Comparative Community Research; With Special Reference to the Human Relations Area Files. (In *American Sociological Review*, XV (1950), 720.

Sample File Slip

Showing Features of Filing System

SOURCE NUMBER EVALUATION (Ethnologists, original work) AREA FILE CODE

AUTHOR(S) DATE OF FIELD WORK
PUBLICATION DATE

CATEGORY NUMBERS

Income and Demand

Real Property

Accumulation of Wealth ..

13: Fei & Chang E-5 (1938-1943) 1945 AFI China AFI

302 EARTHBOUND CHINA

434 that exists, it is inconceivable that a brother's family should be allowed to perish in such a way. But, so long as the customary principle of equal inheritance among siblings exists, time is a strong disintegrative force in landholding. Even the owners of sizable farms must be on the watch for any opportunity to enlarge their holdings, in order to insure the future of their descendants.

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556 The question thus arises: How can the peasants accumulate enough wealth for the acquisition of land? Following our analysis above, it is clear that, for an average farmer, it is already difficult to win subsistence from the land. If there is a certain surplus, it will easily be exhausted in periodical ceremonies. Moreover, there are famines, bandits, and personal misfortunes. That land breeds no land is all too true. Those who seek for security look beyond agriculture. Ambitious people leave the village to find fortunes either by obtaining a position in the government, by risking their lives by joining the army, or by engaging in even more dangerous adventures in illegal traffic. If one is shocked by hearing of this unhappy choice of ways of attaining wealth, he should remember that in the traditional economy the concentration of wealth usually takes place outside of industry and agriculture. "Through power to wealth" is the general formula in a precapitalistic society. The basic truth is that enrichment through the exploitation of land, using the traditional technology, is not a practical method for accumulating wealth.

Opportunity in industry acquires, therefore, a new significance in an agrarian situation. This significance resides in the fact that the concentration of wealth through violence or power does not lead to further accumulation of wealth and thus is maintained with difficulty. An official may become rich; but, unless he can invest his wealth in getting more power and becoming richer, he will gradually begin to sink when he retires to the village and becomes a landowner. But industry is different. Through it, wealth can be accumulated continuously. When the wealth obtained from industry is used to buy land, the owner can continue to buy, and the disintegrating force of division through inheritance is no longer effective. The landowning class thus becomes more or less permanent.

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II. INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE IN RURAL ECONOMY

454 The analysis of rural industry in Part II is significant at this point in the discussion. Rural industry has two bases: one the necessity for finding employment on the part of the farmers, and

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Classes (Brackets for
single sentence reference)

Saving and Investment

Labor Supply and

Employment

they have been used in such diversified ways as the following:

By a student of drama who was interested in the function of drama in the life cycle of primitive people; by a writer who needed background information for a novel about an island in the Pacific; by a botanist preparing a bibliography on the flora of Oceania; by an anthropologist preparing a cross-cultural study of the structure and function of kinship groups; and by a psychologist interested in testing hypotheses about the relation of child training practices to various aspects of adult culture. They have also been used in the preparation of guides and handbooks on peoples and cultures throughout the world and by personnel from governmental and other agencies who needed background information on particular societies.⁵

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Any one of the sixteen universities having membership in HRAF now has over twenty-seven drawer-filing cabinets, each drawer containing two rows of 5 x 8 slips similar to the accompanying sample. All the books, articles, and manuscript materials processed for these files, if not written in English, have been translated into English. It is possible to consult the complete book or article, reproduced on 5 x 8 file slips, filed consecutively, with the pages in straight numerical order, preceded by a bibliographical slip giving, in addition to all customary bibliographical data, an annotation on the coverage and nature of the complete work. However, the principal utility of the system derives from the topical categories numbering some 700 in which the data on each society are placed.

The researcher wishing to use the files proceeds generally as Professor Murdock did. That is, before coming to the files, he will have decided upon the problem he wishes to study, the approach he in-

⁵ *Guide to the Use of the Files*, p. 6-7.

tends to use, the size and distribution of his sample or comparable considerations. In the HRAF room he will consult the *Outline of World Cultures*, to identify the areas or ethnic groups he intends to include. He will then proceed to the Outline of World Cultures Index File, which will indicate the availability of processed material on the cultures he wishes to study. The next step is to search the *Outline of Cultural Materials* for the categories, or subject headings, pertinent to his topic. In using this volume, he will note the definitions of the categories, to make sure they apply to what he has in mind, and will also check additional categories to which they are cross-referenced as well as adjacent categories which may also be relevant to his subject. In this connection, it might be noted that there are now 707 categories, and that new material is constantly being added to the files.

The scholar is then ready to withdraw from the files those packets of file slips pertinent to his study. They may not be removed from the room, but the room is provided with work tables and rather generous space for typing or other note-taking by several people at a time.

It should not make any difference to our scholar which of the sixteen member universities is giving him this opportunity. All have equally complete files. However, some are more competent than others at keeping them up to date and providing convenient and comfortable working quarters.

All the file slips have been prepared at HRAF headquarters, according to the following steps:

1. Selection of source materials for inclusion is made by research associates (subject specialists), who also designate the heading under which the complete text will be placed.
2. The publication is xeroographed; i.e., each page is reproduced photographically.

cally on a mat from which it can be printed on 5 x 8 slips.

3. An analyst (subject specialist) reads and codes the mats. This coding is checked by another analyst, then returned to the first for reconciliation of points on which there may be disagreement.
4. The bibliographical slip and cross-reference slips are prepared.
5. Mats are then used to print, on 5 x 8 file slips, sufficient copies so that there will be one to go with the complete text, and one for each category coded, for each of the member institutions.
6. The slips are collated and sorted.
7. They are shipped to the member institutions, and filed uniformly by code numbers (categories).⁶

Each member university has a set of instructions for operating the files, and receives supplementary instructions as innovations are developed at headquarters. There is no option as to the system by which the material should be filed. However, local practices differ as to who may use the files. Some are restricted to graduate students and faculty members, others are open also to undergraduates and to outsiders.

Another matter left to local decision is the extent to which HRAF material should be included in the general card catalog. Location of the files is also a matter for local determination. A recent survey indicates that those located in the general library of a university are apt to be most used.⁷

LIMITATIONS AND ASSETS

The system has both limitations and assets. Perhaps chief among the former is that its effectiveness is limited to factual data. It does not lend itself well to theoretical material.

Secondly, a question might be raised as to whether a real scholar is willing to trust others with the manipulation of

the data on which his work is based. However, since no abstracting is done, and since the researcher may always refer to the complete text, right on the premises, if he ever suspects that the coding has not been done to his full satisfaction, this criticism seems invalid so long as the selection and analysis done at headquarters is competent.

Incompleteness of coverage may be most detrimental, especially when the would-be user finds that materials on some of the cultures he wishes to study have not yet been processed. With increased financial support and time in which to expand their work, these untouched areas may be substantially reduced. In certain types of studies, however, it may be desirable for the researcher to cover not only the background material, but also the most recent publications concerning his subject. In determining whether the HRAF material is sufficiently up-to-date for this purpose, or whether he will have to seek recent material elsewhere, the researcher can readily ascertain dates of both field work and publication of processed material on his subject by consulting the pertinent bibliographic slips.

Of course, the HRAF is not, and can never be, complete. No matter how fast and how hard their staff works to approach this objective, there will always be new discoveries, new relationships, new publications, to invalidate any claim of absolute completeness, except that which is limited to a specific subtopic as of a specific date.

1. It serves the scholar by saving his time and energy while assuring him of reliable coverage of the primary data available for the areas which it includes.
2. It serves the administration of the member institutions by providing material already expertly selected and processed, requiring only clerical personnel to service it locally.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷ F. W. Moore, *Report on a Survey of File Use at Eight Member Universities*. (p. 5).

3. It provides unmodified reproductions of primary material, thereby reducing to a minimum possible mistakes in emphasis or interpretation such as may result from abstracting.
4. Complete texts are available, in a separate section of these same files, to clear up any doubts which may be caused by separating some pages from their context, and full bibliographical citations also make it possible for the user to look up the original publication.
5. All processed material originating in another language has been translated into English and it is the English-language version which has been coded. However, the user may consult the complete text in either English or in the original language, both of which are included adjacently in a separate section of the files.
6. Cross-reference slips direct the researcher to data from unexpected sources, where his subject may have been mentioned incidentally in works devoted chiefly to a different topic and which, consequently, he might not have discovered for himself.
7. Sources are evaluated at headquarters, the evaluation being noted, by code, on each slip. Where there is a multiplicity of material, the best is selected, but where there is a paucity of material, it may be necessary to use poor material rather than neglect the area. The researcher may benefit from the experience of the experts at HRAF headquarters whose judgment may sometimes surpass his own.
8. Material is arranged by country, society or people (with possibly chronological subdivisions, where appropriate), then broken down by subject headings especially devised for human relations area materials.
9. The process of xerography used for reproduction facilitates copying not only the printed page but also manuscripts, charts, pictures and other types of illustrations.
10. The whole device is sufficiently flexible to permit insertions and changes

while retaining the basic framework.

11. Absence of data on some topics for cultures which have been processed for the files, so far as available material permits, "exposes gaps in our knowledge and provides a blueprint for original investigations."⁸

HISTORY

This set-up was not originated by librarians. Its inception is described as follows:

The great sociologist William Graham Sumner, following in the footsteps of Herbert Spencer, was perhaps the first to formulate in specific terms the goal toward which HRAF is now striving. Sumner was convinced that enduring generalizations about human behavior will emerge from a context comprised of the facts about the ways in which the different peoples of the world live their lives.

Even in Sumner's time much useful data, in the form of recorded observations of different ways of life, were available. But nowhere were they brought together and made available for study by scientists and other scholars. What was needed was a storehouse of organized information to which could be added new observations as they were made. Such a storehouse would provide the student of humanity with . . . data, which, would exist in printed texts and pictures, classified by topics; each society would have its own shelf. Once the many relatively small bits of knowledge were ordered into a consistent, cross-cultural scheme new figures could be expected to emerge from the pattern.⁹

The initial step was the development of the Cross-Cultural Survey at the Institute of Human Relations of Yale University, beginning in 1937. The system of abstracting used originally has now been abandoned by the HRAF, which evolved from the Cross-Cultural Survey, but the system developed there for classifying the cultural, behavioral, and

⁸ Human Relations Area Files. *Function and Scope*. pp. 67.

⁹ *Ibid.* [pp. 6-7]

background information of societies led directly to the topical classification in the *Outline of Cultural Materials*, the backbone of the HRAF system.

The original set-up existed only at Yale University. During World War II, several governmental offices sought its cooperation in studies of Latin American and of Pacific cultures. Later, the Yale organization cooperated with the University of Nebraska to apply the *Outline of Cultural Materials* to information on ten Indian tribes, producing identical files for both universities. Subsequently, the present organization was developed, with the aid of the Social Science Research Council and the Carnegie Corporation. In 1949, the HRAF was incorporated as a non-profit agency. Since then, a number of projects have been undertaken for Federal agencies. Remuneration under these contracts has facilitated recent enlargement of the files, as have grants from the National Science Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Rubicon Foundation and Carnegie Foundation.

PLANS AND OBJECTIVES

Until lately, the amount of material in the files was very limited, and the use made of the files confined almost entirely to anthropologists, for which reasons the directors avoided what they considered premature publicity, not wishing to attract people to the files who would be disappointed in them. Now that they have wider coverage and have been used productively by a number of disciplines, they are beginning to seek wider publicity, desiring acceptance in libraries as a basic tool for inter-disciplinary research. Among their plans is one to issue a microfilm edition, which will probably be available on a yearly subscription basis.

The HRAF is also publishing a series of bibliographies, of country surveys,

and of behavior science monographs, outlines, reprints, and translations. These publications may be purchased individually, by anyone. Many are apt to be found on the tables in the HRAF rooms of member institutions.

Future developments are likely to be influenced by contracts and grants. For example, the interest of the Federal Government is reflected in the recent material on the "hot spots" of the Middle East. However, if not too much of their financial backing has strings attached which would pull them from their course, it may be anticipated that the HRAF will gradually approach their ultimate objective, which is to make available all the significant facts about an adequate sample of the world's societies, both historic and contemporary.

CONCLUSION

Consideration should surely be given to the claim made by HRAF that this is "a major research tool of far greater depth and scope than any single scholarly resource created by an individual university."¹⁰

It may also be desirable to give further thought to this method of organizing materials, in view of its possible application to other fields. Note that, unlike some of the recent technological developments, it requires no investment for mechanical, photographic, or electronic devices and consequent expert servicing at the member institutions. Moreover, it really works, and its usefulness is constantly being increased.

It is certainly a good example of current efforts to develop means of retrieving information with maximum coverage of pertinent sources and minimum expenditure of time, energy, and money on the part of the scholars using the material as well as the administration providing it.

¹⁰ *H.R.A.F.*, p. 4.