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Reference analysis of the *American Historical Review*

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Keywords

History, References

Abstract

This paper attempts to evaluate the literature of the field of history through a multi-decade reference analysis of the *American Historical Review*. Reference analysis, a subsection of the larger field of bibliometrics, is a method of determining the characteristics of a field or subject by careful examination of the literature of that area. This study will analyze references from one issue of the *AHR* from the years 1950, 1970, 1990, and 2002 in five areas: total citations, age of the citations, language of the citations, format of the citations (e.g. monograph, journal, etc.), and the number of authors per citation. Hopefully, this analysis will help to define the patterns (if any) that have characterized the field of history through time.

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to evaluate the literature of the field of history through reference analysis. Reference (or citation) analysis is a method of determining the characteristics of a field or subject by careful examination of the literature of that area. It is based on the principle that "the actual use of the material is indicative of its relevance to current research" (Nisonger, 1983). There are two directions that a citation analysis can proceed:

(1) to the theoretical, which is useful for understanding the development of literatures as they impact bibliographic and budgetary matters; or
(2) to the specific which allows professionals in a particular field to gain knowledge about the details of their field (Buchanan and Hérubel, 1997).

This study will attempt to address both aspects, to determine the impact on librarians and historians.

References will be measured in five areas:
(1) total citations;
(2) age of the citations;
(3) language of the citations;
(4) the format of the citation references (e.g. monograph, journal, etc.); and
(5) the number of authors per citation.

This analysis should help to determine the patterns (if any) that characterize the field of history. As Heinzkill (1980, pp. 352-65) states:

Citation studies are based on fairly simple premises. References by one scholar to the work of another are part of the process of scholarship. An analysis of the references, therefore, might be expected to yield information about the working habits of scholars.

Although reference and citation analysis studies have been done for other fields (e.g. Baum *et al.*, 1976; Nisonger, 1983; Palais, 1976 in political science; Baughman, 1974, Broadus, 1967, 1952 in sociology; Peritz, 1981 in library science, in addition to many of the hard sciences), history has not received the same attention (notable exceptions are Goedeken and

Hérubel, 1995; Jones *et al.*, 1972). This may be due in part to history's place in the social sciences and humanities being somewhat blurry, so it is often excluded from studies that place it in a different category[1]. Perhaps the reasoning for this is that not many have cared to know the citation make-up of history because the answers seem obvious (i.e. low immediacy index, long half-life). Another problem could be that, since the field is so broad, to lump the citation analysis of two disparate areas (for example, the Revolutionary War and the Second World War) together does not give an accurate picture of the field. This study hopes to overcome these obstacles by drawing the reference analysis from one major journal in the field of history, the *American Historical Review (AHR)*, that (despite its name) encompasses modern to ancient history as well as US and foreign historical study.

It should be emphasized that this study is a reference analysis not a citation analysis, meaning that each work cited is recorded only once. Compare this to a citation analysis where every citation is used in the study no matter how many times the same source may be referenced. "Citation literally means each occasion upon which a work is cited in the footnotes, whereas a reference is the actual work cited" (Jones *et al.*, 1972). While this is a reference analysis, for the purposes of this paper, the terms are used interchangeably.

As stated above, this evaluation is being performed using the *AHR*. Although there are multiple journals; that have an impact on the field of history, due to time constraints this study could not accommodate the evaluation of multiple journals, therefore, the *American Historical Review*, the official journal of the American Historical Association (AHA) and one of the best-known and respected journals in the field of history, was selected. The AHA is "a non-profit membership organization founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the collection and preservation of historical documents and artifacts, and the dissemination of historical research. As the largest [15,000 members] historical society in the USA, the AHA serves as the umbrella organization for historians working in every period and geographical area"[2]. In the 2000

ISI Journal Citation Reports[3] the *AHR* ranked first in the history subject category in the following categories:
- immediacy index;
- total citations; and
- impact factor,

making it an excellent source to use for a broad understanding of citation patterns in history.

Methodology

One issue from the *AHR* was selected at random[4] from each of the following years, 1950, 1970, 1990, and 2002. Every reference in the four issues was tabulated from the articles contained therein except for book reviews and other miscellaneous material, which were not included in this study. Theme issues or other similar issues that might skew the results were avoided (another issue was randomly selected to take its place). By this method this study attempts, not only to evaluate the citations on the below mentioned criteria, but also to gain longitudinal knowledge on the evolution of citations through the last five decades. From the chosen references five pieces of information were extrapolated:
(1) *Total references.* For each issue the total number of references was tabulated to get a better understanding of citation patterns over the decades.
(2) *Type of material.* Whether the citation referred to a journal, monograph, book chapter, government document, newspaper, unpublished material (e.g. manuscripts, archival material), dissertation, or oral material (e.g. speeches, lectures).
(3) *Language.* All the languages in which references were cited were recorded. Therefore, the following languages were tabulated for frequency of occurrence: French, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, Russian, and English.
(4) *Age of the citation.* In reviewing the references, the date of the citations was tabulated (e.g. 1929, 1607, etc.). Then, these dates were converted into time frames (e.g. ten years old from date of the issue being examined, 20 years old, etc.). For

example, a citation from 1929 in the 1950 issue was placed in the "20-29 years old" row.

(5) *Number of authors*. How many authors each citation had was recorded as follows: one, two, three, four, unknown but more than one.

Advantages and disadvantages

The methodology used in this study has advantages and disadvantages. Bibliometrics is a well-known evaluation method that has been applied to numerous subjects throughout the years. Not only does it help researchers to identify the characteristics of subject literature (Buchanan and Hérubel, 1997, p. 37), but it is also an aid to librarians in the areas of collection development and evaluation by giving them quantifiable figures on journal frequency, use, and impact on the field. From these data, librarians can more comfortably make remote storage, weeding, and acquisitions decisions.

This methodology does have its weaknesses. Primarily, it is time-consuming to carry out. Broadly, another weakness is that bibliometrics really only gives the user a string of numbers which may not be the most important part of a journal's importance and impact on a field of study. In addition, interpreting the results can often be difficult and confusing (Nisonger (1983) gives a thorough explanation of the pros and cons of the method in his article).

In addition, this study could have the same flaws as the Jones *et al.* (1972, p. 139) analysis of English history periodicals, most notably the fact that studies have shown that articles tend to cite articles more than books and books cite books more than articles. By using one journal and not examining monographs this study may not be getting a representative reading of the field of history.

Another weakness in the methodology of this study lies in the fact that manuscripts or other unpublished materials were counted as only one reference. For example, three separate references to different parts of James Madison's papers would be counted as only one reference. As some unpublished collections have thousands of items, the calculations in this study could underestimate the amount of manuscript material cited (Jones *et al.* (1972) detail a plausible explanation for low

manuscript usage figures). However, given time restraints, it was not possible to calculate all manuscript and other unpublished material separately.

Results and discussion

Results are based on the 1,915 total references (see Table I) drawn from one volume each of the *AHR* from the years 1950, 1970, 1990, and 2002. The first area examined, total references, shows an increasing number of references with each passing decade. While the 1950 issue had less than 100 references, the 1970 issue had fewer than 400 and the 1990 and 2002 issues top 700 references each per issue. That is certainly a remarkable increase. However, this may be due in part to the growing importance of citations. Perhaps, in 1950, material that was instrumental in research was not cited as diligently as it is now in this era of increased awareness/paranoia regarding plagiarism, copyright issues, and the scholarly community where citations are expected.

With respect to serial vs monograph citation frequency, Baughman (1977, pp. 241-8) found that the *AHR* cited serials 23.3 percent and non-serials 77.6 percent. In their reference analysis of English history, Jones *et al.* (1972, p. 141) discovered that, of all the references they analyzed, 12.6 percent were unpublished sources, while 87.4 percent were published, 59.8 percent of the material was non-serial and 27.1 percent was serialized. Combining journal and newspaper references, this analysis (see Table II) found similar serial vs non-serial results with 39 percent serial vs 61 percent non-serial in 1950, 27 percent serial vs 73 percent non-serial in 1970, 25 percent serial vs 75 percent non-serial in 1990, and 28.6 percent serial vs 71.4 percent non-serial in 2002. The 1950 data do have a slightly lowered

Table I Total annual references

	1950		1970		1990		2002		
	No.	%[a]	No.	%[a]	No.	%[a]	No.	%[a]	Total
Total references	84	4	335	18	776	41	700	37	1,915

Note: [a] Percentage is percentage of total references for all four years. Total references includes notes that could not be considered references

incidence of non-serial material but, on average, the data show no significant change in the ratio of serial vs non-serial through the decades. However, the study data did differ from those reported by Jones with respect to published vs unpublished sources (see Table II). This may be due in part to the area of history that was being analyzed by Jones and the fact that each reference to a manuscript source was counted only once (see "Advantages and disadvantages" above). Whatever the reason, it is interesting that this citation study found a much-lowered rate of unpublished sources than Jones *et al.* Are articles in less specialized historical journals such as the *AHR* less likely to cite unpublished sources? Are low numbers of unpublished sources a trend in monographs as well or purely a serial phenomenon? Unfortunately, these questions are beyond the scope of this study.

Language of citations is another valuable area to examine. While so much of historical research depends on primary sources, many of which are in foreign languages, it is interesting that studies have shown that only a small fraction of articles cite foreign language material. Jones *et al.* (1972, p. 146) found that only 7.7 percent of all references were in a foreign language. Heinzkill's findings, although in the field of English literary journals, are similar to those of Jones *et al.*, where 9 percent of references were to foreign language material (Heinzkill, 1980, p. 361). This reference analysis generated higher numbers of foreign language material but that may be due in part to reasons such as: the fact that the two studies referenced above deal specifically with English

history or literature, and I was only able to analyze one issue per year. While theme issues that would skew the results were avoided, one article about Russian history did artificially inflate the amount of foreign language material in 1990. Despite this fact, the years 1970 and 1990 revealed a fairly high percentage of citations in languages other than English. In 1950 just 1 percent of references were to foreign language material, in 1970 that number had risen to 26 percent, and in 1990 it was 39 percent (34 percent if the 5 percent of Russian citations are removed). However, in 2002 this figure had fallen back to only 9 percent (see Table III), which is similar to the findings in the Jones *et al.* and Heinzkill studies.

The languages, other than English, most often referenced were French and German, which is not surprising. One interesting fact is the lack of Spanish language material. Especially as Spanish is the fastest growing language in the USA, this study fully expected to find an increase through the decades in the amount of Spanish history and material utilized. Perhaps the overall lack of foreign languages has something to do with what Buchanan and Hérubel (1977, p. 42) state (emphasis theirs):

> Certain journals function as *official* organs of a field of intellectual interest and in turn represent the "sanctified" efforts of members in specific disciplines … As such, they represent *hegemonic* attempts at uniformity and disciplinary activity.

Do mainstream, less-specialized journals lose out on diversity when they become the "spokesman" for a profession?

Table II Material format

Type of material cited	1950		1970		1990		2002[a]		Total	Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Total	%
Journal	23	31.0	80	25.0	170	23.0	183	26.0	456	25.0
Monograph	20	27.0	200	63.0	427	57.0	384	56.0	1,031	57.0
Book chapter	0	–	16	5.0	71	10.0	84	12.0	171	9.0
Government material	15	20.0	4	2.0	28	4.0	3	0.4	50	3.0
Newspaper	6	8.0	6	2.0	15	2.0	17	2.6	44	2.0
Unpublished material	10	14.0	10	3.0	22	3.0	12	2.0	54	3.0
Dissertation	0	–	0	–	6	0.5	3	0.4	9	0.5
Oral communications	0	–	0	–	5	0.5	4	0.6	9	0.5
Total	74	100.0	316	100.0	744	100.0	690	100.0	1,824	100.0

Note: [a]In 2002 there was only one footnote that was cited solely with an Internet address; it is included with the journals section for the purpose of this study

Table III Language of references

Language	1950 No.	1950 %	1970 No.	1970 %	1990 No.	1990 %	2002 No.	2002 %	Total	Total %
English	74	99.0	240	74.0	450	61.0	613	91.0	1,377	76.0
French	1	1.0	9	3.0	228	31.0	41	6.0	279	15.0
German	0	–	70	22.0	17	2.0	4	0.5	91	5.0
Latin	0	–	0	–	5	1.0	13	2.0	18	1.0
Spanish	0	–	4	1.0	0	–	1	0.1	5	0.3
Italian	0	–	0	–	0	–	3	0.4	3	0.2
Russian	0	–	0	–	40	5.0	0	–	40	2.0
Total	75	100.0	323	100.0	740	100.0	675	100.0	1,813	100.0

Note: The totals in Tables II-V may not add up to the total number of citations in Table I due to missing elements in citations (e.g. a reference that does not list the authors of a monograph). Also percentages have been rounded up

Citation age is an important, and obvious, factor in citation/reference analysis studies. The 2000 *ISI Journal Citation Reports* report that the *AHR* has a cited half-life of more than ten years[5]. In addition, Baum *et al.* (1976, p. 905) state that the half-life for citations in the *AHR* is 42.5 years. This would seem to make sense, as the backbone of historical research is historical material. Interestingly, however, the data of this study and others reveal an interesting twist to the figures above. Jones *et al.* (1972, pp. 147-8) found that, in the field of English history, historians reference a great deal of recently published material, then there is a dip which picks up again as the age of the material enters the time period of the field being studied. Heinzkill (1980, p. 361) reported that 21.6 percent of references in US history and 22.8 percent of references in early modern English history were ten years old or younger at the time of the study. This analysis uncovered similar results (see Table IV). While in 1950 44 percent of all citations were 30-50 years old, by 1970 this trend had slowed and 62 percent of citations were less than 20 years old, in 1990 51 percent of citations were less than 20 years old, and in 2002 that figure had risen again to 61 percent. While 20 years is a long time, as far as history is concerned that is recent material and speaks to a reliance on current material that is much greater than thought.

What would be interesting to note, and which this study was unable to carry out due to time constraints, is the distribution of primary vs secondary material (see also "Conclusion") as it is that type of breakdown which would give the collection development librarian a better idea of what material to keep on-site, what to ship to remote storage, what to weed, and what retrospective items to purchase. More specifically, it would be valuable to note the proportion of references in history to more current secondary material, older secondary material, and older primary sources. Perhaps, older secondary sources do not impact the field as much as other areas and can safely be weeded or put into remote storage. Jones *et al.* (1972, p. 153) found this to be the case and determined that, in the area of median citation age of journals, history shows similar characteristics to those of the social sciences, rather than the humanities. Others have postulated that the half-life of periodicals is similar irrespective of subject (Wood and Bower, cited in Jones *et al.* (1972, p. 154)).

A final area of the references that was analyzed is the number of authors. This was in order to determine, to some extent, the amount of scholarly communication/cooperation in the field of history. This study examined this aspect of the citations based on an article by Baum *et al.* (1976, p. 899), in which the authors state):

> [I]s collaboration a sign of scientific achievement and an indication of teamwork which can take place because there is a recognized theoretical structure about which scientists can easily communicate? Is the lack of collaboration in a discipline a sign of scientific underdevelopment or is it an indication that the subject matter and problems of a field are more akin to the humanities than to a science?

From this analysis, the latter statement is the most valid and history is still firmly a humanity, at least in this area. Hagstrom (1965, p. 129)

Table IV Reference age

Years[a]	1950		1970		1990		2002		Total	Total %
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
> 200	11	18.0	0	–	5	0.7	14	2.0	30	1.7
191-200	0	–	0	–	5	0.7	0	–	5	0.3
181-190	1	1.5	0	–	0	–	0	–	1	0.05
171-180	0	–	0	–	5	0.7	0	–	5	0.3
161-170	0	–	0	–	33	5.0	1	0.2	34	0.02
151-160	0	–	0	–	45	6.0	1	0.2	46	2.6
141-150	0	–	0	–	27	4.0	0	–	27	1.5
131-140	1	1.5	0	–	18	2.0	4	0.6	23	1.3
121-130	0	–	0	–	13	2.0	6	0.9	19	0.01
110-120	0	–	0	–	21	3.0	20	0.03	41	2.3
100-109	1	1.5	0	–	12	2.0	37	0.05	50	2.8
90-99	0	–	1	0.2	8	1.0	14	0.02	23	1.3
80-89	0	–	3	0.8	17	2.0	23	0.03	43	2.4
70-79	2	3.0	9	3.0	2	2.0	5	0.7	28	1.6
60-69	4	6.0	28	9.0	11	1.5	2	0.3	45	2.5
50-59	1	1.5	21	7.0	18	2.0	7	0.01	47	2.6
40-49	16	25.0	16	5.0	8	1.0	20	0.03	60	3.3
30-39	12	19.0	21	6.0	40	5.0	54	0.08	127	0.07
20-29	5	8.0	22	7.0	61	8.0	61	0.09	149	0.08
10-19	3	5.0	58	18.0	150	21.0	141	21.0	352	20.0
< 10	6	10.0	141	44.0	220	30.0	270	40.0	637	35.0
Total	63	100.0	320	100.0	729	100.0	680	100.0	1,792	100.0

Note: [a]Calculated by subtracting the date of the cited document from that of the citing document. Thus, a citation made in 1970 to an article published in 1945 would equal a value of 25

reported that only 4 percent of journal articles in history had more than one author. This study also found a low incidence of multiple authors and the trend has remained relatively constant throughout the decades. In 1950 96 percent of references were by a single author, in 1970 that figure had only dropped to 95 percent, in 1990 it was lower than previous years but still the dominant pattern at 92 percent, while 2002 demonstrated that the trend was by no means abating with 94 percent of citations to material authored by one person (see Table V).

of the references (like that done by Nisonger, 1983 and Palais, 1976 in political science, Peritz, 1981 in library science, and Broadus, 1952 and Baughman, 1974 in sociology) could be performed. As Baughman (1977, p. 245) states:

> The grist of the librarian's mill is the subject; thus, a major concern should be to determine the inter- and multi-relationships among subject areas.

Subject analysis of citations can be an aid to both librarians and historians and would be a valuable asset to both professions.

Questions for further study

There are many avenues in which this study could be expanded. It would greatly benefit the historians and librarians if a breakdown of the use of primary vs secondary material (such as Cauchi and Cave, 1982; Jones *et al.*, 1972; McCain, 1987) as well as a subject breakdown

Conclusion

Despite the limitations stated above, this reference analysis reached the following conclusions. The articles in the *AHR* primarily cite relatively current, English language, monograph material placing the discipline squarely in the humanities. It would seem that

Table V Number of authors per reference

Number of authors	1950		1970		1990		2002		Total	Total %
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Total	%
1	26	96.0	284	95.0	519	92.0	611	94.0	1,440	93.0
2	1	4.0	8	3.0	37	6.0	32	0.05	78	0.05
3	0	–	0	–	4	0.5	3	0.5	7	0.5
4	0	–	0	–	2	0.5	1	0.2	3	0.2
? > 1	0	–	7	2.0	5	1.0	2	0.3	14	0.9
Total	27	100.0	299	100.0	567	100.0	649	100.0	1,542	100.0

the hypothesis of Bebout *et al.* (1975, pp. 40-4) regarding the humanities fits the field of history almost perfectly. The authors state that the humanist:

> Uses monographs more than journals. Informal personal contact is valuable. Older material more important than in the social sciences or science.

From my analysis, monographs are without doubt the primary material cited. The number of multiple authors is so low that informal contact must be one of the primary means of scholarly communication. While this study found that relatively current material is more heavily referenced than older material, the age of citations is still much greater in history than, for example, in the hard sciences where half-life can be as low as two years. There is certainly no danger of that trend occurring in history. These data would suggest that librarians should maintain a broad selection of current monographic materials for use by historians and that perhaps historians should analyze their use (or lack thereof) of foreign language material, as this is one area where librarians could save many collection development dollars.

As far as the impact on libraries is concerned, there is very little danger that they will cancel their subscription to the *AHR*. It is the top journal in the field of history and will probably stay there for some time. However, librarians could benefit from the knowledge that their primary collection development tasks should be in maintaining a broad collection of current material as well as a good base of primary source material. Areas to examine for weeding or remote storage would be older journals and secondary source monographs as well as foreign language material. For smaller liberal arts libraries, cooperative collection development is a good option for these materials. Especially since budgets can be tight, if the material is

used infrequently, interlibrary loan is a perfectly reasonable option for those scholars who do need the material.

Specific knowledge of the field, gained through studies such as this, can only aid historians and librarians. Even if findings support assumptions, the more knowledge librarians possess about a field, the better able they will be to aid those who come to the library to research it, and the better able historians will be to pass their knowledge to the next generation of scholars.

Notes

1 For example, Fitzgibbons (1980) does not include history in her study of the social sciences, labeling it a humanity.
2 American Historical Association, available at: www.theaha.org/info/
3 Journal citation reports, ISI, available at: jcrweb.com/
4 Note: as there was only one issue available for 2002 at the time of this study the 2002 journal selection was not random.
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