



Constructing and Managing Prosopographical Data in the Social Sciences

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Abstract:

This guide provides practical guidance for constructing and managing prosopographical data in the social sciences. It addresses challenges in transforming biographical traces into structured data, with attention to population definition, source assessment, variable construction, database organisation, preservation and reuse, and conditions for sharing.

Keywords: prosopography, biographical data, data collection, data management, database

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prosopography is an approach for constructing collective biographical data on a defined group of individuals at a given point in time. Originating in historical scholarship, it relies on compiling information from a wide range of sources, such as official registers, biographical dictionaries, archival materials, and press coverage (Stone, 1971). Since the second half of the twentieth century, prosopography has been increasingly adopted in the social sciences to study different types of social groups, notably business leaders (Fellman, 2014), elites, and power more broadly (Lunding et al., 2020).

Because prosopography is based on the construction of biographical data from secondary sources, it has traditionally involved extensive work with archives, registers, and other documentary materials. In recent years, however, technological progress has affected prosopographical research in two main ways. First, the digitalisation of archives, institutional and corporate documents, and media sources has made vast quantities of biographical information far more accessible. Secondly, new digital tools and infrastructures have changed the ways in which prosopographical data can be constructed, stored, preserved, and shared.

Whether based on printed archives, digitised records, or online sources, prosopographical research raises important issues of data construction and management. Heterogeneous biographical traces need to be transformed into structured data, standardised for systematic comparison, kept traceable to their sources, and preserved for reuse over time. These are all challenges that arise throughout the life cycle of prosopographical data. This guide aims to address these challenges by supporting researchers in the creation and management of data in prosopographical research.

While prosopography has become increasingly important in the social sciences, there is still limited guidance on how to address these challenges. This guide therefore provides concrete recommendations for the construction of data, discussing how a prosopographical population can be defined, how sources can be selected and assessed, and how biographical information can be turned into variables. It then addresses data management issues, including the organisation, documentation, hosting, preservation, and sharing of data. Rather than prescribing rigid rules, it outlines good practices that can help researchers collect and manage prosopographical data.

2. PROSOPOGRAPHY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH

2.1 WHAT IS PROSOPOGRAPHY?

The term *prosopography* has a long history. According to Delpu (2015), its use can be traced back to the eighteenth century, although its meaning has varied over time. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek *prosopon*, meaning 'person' or 'face', and *graphein*, meaning 'to write' or 'to describe'. Initially, the word referred mainly to the compilation of lists of individuals. Adopted by historians at the end of the nineteenth century, it acquired a more biographical meaning, referring to the production of individual biographical notices. In its contemporary scholarly use, the meaning remains close to this earlier sense, but with an important nuance: prosopography is not solely used to describe isolated individuals, but studies them as members of a defined group through the systematic collection and comparison of biographical

information. In this sense, prosopography is often described as a form of collective biography. Rather than reconstructing a single life course, it seeks to identify common characteristics, trajectories, and relationships within a population whose boundaries have been defined in advance (Stone, 1971).

The analytical value of prosopography therefore lies in the use of individual biographical information to understand the collective properties and social structures of a group. Its sociological relevance goes beyond the reconstruction of life stories, as in strictly biographical approaches: individual trajectories are analysed comparatively to identify regularities and variations within a defined population. This comparative perspective can also extend beyond the study population, by comparing it, explicitly or implicitly, with individuals or groups that do not belong to it, as well as across different points in time. Prosopography therefore allows researchers to examine how social origins, education, careers, institutional positions, networks, and other biographical properties are distributed within a given population, and how these distributions contribute to understanding the group as a social formation.

The development of prosopography is closely associated with the work of historians of Antiquity (Charle, 2013). Published between 1897 and 1898, the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* is often considered a foundational work. It described prominent figures of the Roman Empire through a series of biographical entries, thereby establishing a model based on the systematic compilation of information on members of a historically defined population. This model later inspired a wide range of historical studies throughout the twentieth century (Cameron, 2003). Prosopography was then progressively adopted by contemporary historians and sociologists to study different groups of individuals (Lemerrier & Picard, 2012). Broady (2002) notes, for instance, the development of a significant body of French prosopographical research in sociology, notably in connection with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The adoption of prosopography includes, but is not limited to, studies of groups occupying positions of power, such as intellectuals (Sapiro, 1999), political elites (Best & Cotta, 2000), and economic elites (Kansikas, 2015; Araujo et al., 2024).

But prosopography cannot be reduced to the study of influential actors. It can also be applied to less visible social groups, such as victims of persecution (Mariot & Zalc, 2016). One reason for its close connection with elite research is that such actors are more likely to leave written traces. Prosopographical research depends heavily on institutions that produce lists of individuals, biographical notices, registers, directories, or archival records. As Denord et al. (2025: 80) note, this makes it easier to collect information on people who have been involved in such institutions or who belong to powerful families. In this sense, the affinity between prosopography and elite studies is linked to the unequal production and preservation of biographical traces. For this reason, this guide will often draw on examples from elite research, including our own work, while keeping in mind that the issues discussed could also apply to the study of less visible and powerful groups. This emphasis also reflects our own research experience, which has largely focused on the construction and analysis of prosopographical data on elites within the Swiss Elite Observatory (OBELIS) and the World Elite Database (WED).

2.2 IS PROSOPOGRAPHY A METHOD?

Prosopography is sometimes described as a method, notably in historical research. In the social sciences, a method usually refers to a set of procedures used either to collect and process data, such as interviews, surveys, or archival research, or to analyse empirical

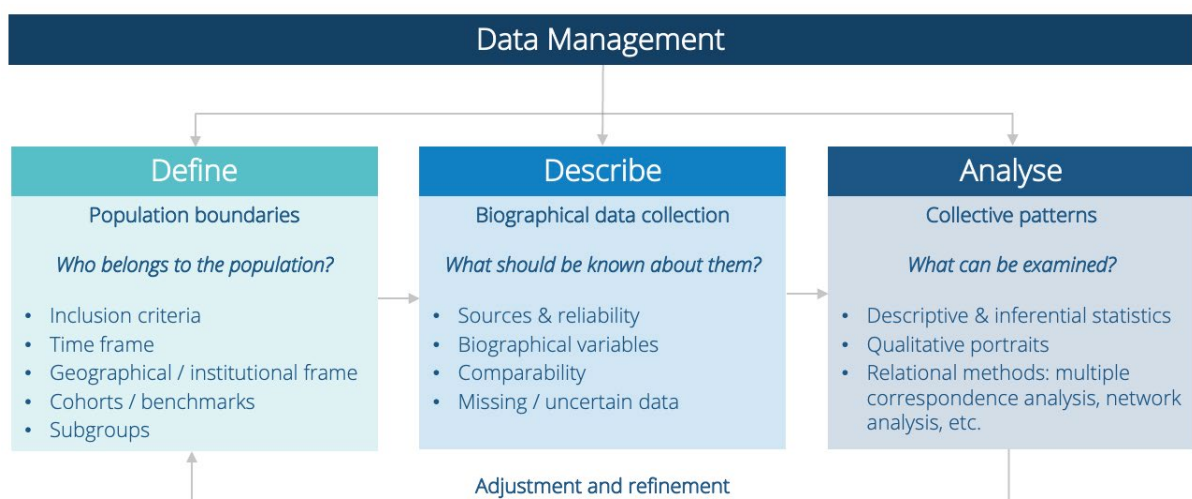
material, such as statistical modelling, network analysis, or discourse analysis. Prosopography is not a method in this sense, since it does not prescribe one specific procedure for collecting data or one specific technique for analysing them. Rather, it is an approach to constructing collective biographical data, which can be built, processed, and analysed in a variety of ways.

Following Lemerrier and Picard (2012), we argue that this approach should not be understood as the mere accumulation of biographical notices structured for data analysis. Prosopography must be guided by a research problem and research questions concerning a specific group, institution, field, or social space. Each stage of the work should therefore be informed by what researchers seek to understand, compare, or demonstrate about the group under study.

Without proposing a rigid model for conducting prosopographical research, this guide distinguishes three key stages that are central to most projects: defining the population, describing its members, and analysing collective patterns. These operations are analytically distinct, but they are closely connected. The way a population is defined shapes the information that needs to be collected. The information collected determines what kinds of comparisons can be made. The intended analysis influences both the delimitation of the group and the construction of variables. None of these stages should be treated as a purely technical operation. They involve choices about what is relevant, comparable, and meaningful for the study of the group.

Figure 1 presents prosopographical research as a data construction process organised around three main stages. It also highlights data management as a transversal dimension throughout the research process. Each stage corresponds to a central question in the prosopographical approach: Who belongs to the population? What information is needed to answer the research question? Through which forms of analysis can scientific evidence be produced?

Figure 1. Prosopographical research as a data construction process



Note: Authors' own elaboration.

The next two sections (3 and 4) of this guide focus mainly on the first two stages, defining and describing a prosopographical population, while also addressing transversal data management issues. These are the dimensions of prosopography that can be most directly standardised through explicit procedures. By contrast, the analytical stage depends more directly on the initial research question, the theoretical framework, and on the information that has been collected. In this guide, we do not engage in such discussions. We can nevertheless stress

that relational methods are particularly well suited to prosopographical research because they make it possible to map the social structures that emerge from the groups under study. For instance, multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) has been widely used to analyse fields of power (Hjellbrekke et al., 2007), sequence analysis to study career structures (Araujo & Davoine, 2024), and network analysis to examine relations, affiliations, and forms of cohesion within a group (O'Brien, 2024). For more in-depth analytical discussions, readers can refer to Lunding et al. (2020) and Rossier (2019), who examine the articulation between relational methods and prosopography.

3. CHALLENGES IN CONSTRUCTING PROSOPOGRAPHICAL DATA

This section examines some of the main challenges involved in constructing prosopographical data. It focuses on three closely connected operations: defining the study population, selecting and assessing sources, and transforming biographical information into comparable data. Across these dimensions, the central issue is not only to collect information, but to make explicit the decisions through which heterogeneous biographical traces are turned into research data.

3.1 DEFINING THE STUDY POPULATION

Any prosopographical study should begin with a clear definition of the population under investigation. This step consists in identifying the contours of the group or groups to be studied and in specifying the criteria according to which individuals will be included or excluded. Such decisions cannot be made convincingly without reference to research questions and a theoretical framework guiding the project. Defining a prosopographical population is therefore not only a practical operation, but also a conceptual one. It requires researchers to clarify which social properties make individuals relevant for the study.

For example, in a study of the transformation of urban elites in Switzerland between 1890 and 2020 (Mach et al., 2024), the definition of the population was guided by a positional approach, a well-established framework in elite studies (Mills, 1956). Following this approach, elites were defined as individuals occupying the highest positions in four main social spheres: academic, cultural, economic, and political. For each of these spheres, specific positions of power were identified as corresponding to elite positions. In the economic sphere, for instance, this included the chief executive officers (CEOs) and chairs of the boards of directors of large companies. In the political sphere, it included members of local parliaments and executive bodies. Since the research question focused on the transformation of elite profiles over time, the population also had to be defined in a way that allowed continuities and discontinuities to be compared. It was therefore delimited geographically and temporally by focusing on the three largest Swiss cities at seven benchmark years between 1890 and 2020.

This example shows that defining a prosopographical population usually involves a combination of criteria. In this case, the conceptual framework provided the main principle of inclusion: individuals were selected because they occupied top positions in specific social spheres. This principle then had to be translated into a more concrete mapping of the social space under study. The four spheres had to be defined, the main institutions and organisations within each sphere had to be delimited, and the positions considered sufficiently central or powerful had to be selected. The research question also required additional criteria: a defined number of cities, several benchmark years to show the evolution across time, and a population

structured into comparable subgroups. The study population was therefore not considered as a pre-existing group that could simply be extracted from a source or an institutional category. Rather, it was constructed through a set of explicit decisions linking theory, research questions, and practical criteria of inclusion.

This constructed character should not be overlooked. A prosopographical population is a conceptualisation of social reality: the group exists as a research population because it has been defined as such for analytical purposes. In the case of elite studies, for instance, many individuals included in an elite population would not necessarily describe themselves as 'elites', nor would they necessarily perceive themselves as belonging to the same group (Reeves & Friedman, 2024). The boundaries of the population may therefore have little direct existence in the actors' own experience. This does not weaken the validity of the population, but it makes it more important to define, justify, and document the criteria through which the population has been constructed.

3.2 SELECTING AND ASSESSING SOURCES

The selection of sources is one of the fundamental steps in constructing prosopographical data. Although it usually follows the definition of the study population, the process is often iterative: assessing available sources may lead researchers to adjust their initial definition of the study population and the methodological choices, especially when some groups or institutions leave few traces to allow systematic biographical reconstruction. We will highlight three aspects to consider when selecting and assessing sources.

Sources are not neutral

The sources used to construct prosopographical data are produced by a wide range of actors, including institutions, public administrations, private companies, media organisations, families, professional associations, and interest groups. Researchers should therefore ask not only what information a source contains, but also who produced it, how, and for what purpose. Sources may reflect different logics. They may be created for historical preservation, administrative classification, public communication, family memory, or even self-promotion.

This critical assessment is necessary to avoid treating sources as neutral repositories of information. For instance, when collecting information on groups of influential individuals, researchers often encounter an abundant literature produced by the actors under study. Sources such as commemorative books, company histories, and family monographs can be extremely valuable for reconstructing social properties, educational trajectories, professional careers, family ties, and institutional affiliations. However, they are also often embedded in logics of celebration, legitimation, or reputation. They may reproduce a 'great man' view of history by adopting a hagiographic tone, presenting triumphant narratives of success, continuity, and merit. In doing so, they can produce coherent biographical narratives that obscure ruptures, failures, uncertainties, and discontinuities often found in individual trajectories. In that sense, they may reinforce what Bourdieu (1986) called the 'biographical illusion'.

Such sources should not necessarily be discarded because they are marked by biases. Instead, researchers should distinguish information that can be objectified and cross-checked, such as dates, positions, educational credentials, position takings, family ties, and institutional affiliations, from narratives that contribute to the symbolic construction of individuals or groups.

Distinguishing encompassing sources from case-specific sources

Not all sources have the same function in prosopographical research. We propose a useful distinction between two types of sources based on their primary function: *encompassing sources*, which allow researchers to collect systematic information across the whole population, and *case-specific sources*, which provide rich information on particular individuals, institutions, families, or subgroups. Encompassing sources provide the basic information needed to delimit the population and construct comparable variables describing the social structures of the group under study. Case-specific sources are often less suitable for systematic comparison, because they concern specific cases or unevenly documented individuals. However, they can be extremely valuable for interpreting trajectories, illustrating typical or exceptional cases, and giving biographical substance to the patterns observed in the dataset. Put simply, encompassing sources provide the skeleton of the prosopographical dataset, while case-specific sources give flesh to this structure.

Encompassing sources often take the form of public registers, membership lists, directories, annual reports, institutional records, or commercial databases. Their main strength lies in their coverage. They provide the names needed to identify individuals, as well as information on the positions they occupied, the institutions to which they belonged, and the dates attached to these positions. Depending on the source, they may also provide such basic characteristics as age, gender, nationality, place of birth, and educational credentials. For example, when studying elected politicians, national parliamentary registers are often among the first sources to consult, because they help delimit who should be included in or excluded from the study population.

Case-specific sources typically include biographies, monographs, press articles, family archives, interviews (whether written, audio, or video), and commemorative books. Their main strength lies in the richness of the information they can provide on a particular individual or on a limited group of individuals. They may also be used as complementary sources to complete standardised variables for the systematic comparison of the study population. However, as they are heterogeneous, they do not always allow researchers to collect systematic information. Their value is therefore often more interpretive than strictly comparative. For example, in our study of kinship ties among Swiss elites between 1890 and 1957 (Benz et al., 2024), encompassing sources were needed to collect comparable information on kinship relations for more than 5,000 elites. Family dictionaries and genealogy websites made it possible to identify individuals, reconstruct family ties, and build a network of kinship ties across the study population. However, to analyse the structure of the kinship network in greater depth, qualitative data drawn from biographical notices were also necessary. These case-specific sources provided a finer-grain understanding of some families, making it possible to examine such matters as matrimonial strategies, the reasons behind the formation of alliances, and the role of kinship in the reproduction of elite positions.

Assessing reliability, contradictions, and missing information

Combining different sources in prosopographical research requires careful assessment. We believe three aspects of this assessment deserve particular attention.

First, sources should be assessed according to the reliability of the information they provide. Not all information has the same evidential status. An annual report or a public register may be considered highly reliable for identifying official positions, mandates, and dates, because these sources contain officially reported information required by law. However, they may also

be structured through administrative categories that were designed for institutional purposes and that cannot always be reused directly as analytical categories (Connelly et al., 2016). Conversely, sources based on information produced by the actors themselves may appear reliable because they offer first-hand information, but they can also raise methodological challenges. For example, in the study of careers, professional profiles on online platforms such as LinkedIn or in *Who's Who* publications may be useful for identifying career phases. Yet they remain self-presentations, shaped by social desirability and by the need to present a coherent valued trajectory (van Dijck, 2013). They may omit interruptions, short-term jobs, less prestigious positions, or any career phase considered irrelevant to display. Reliability is thus better assessed in relation to the specific information sought, rather than attributed once and for all to a source as a whole.

Second, researchers should define and document how to deal with contradictions between sources. In prosopographical research, it is common to find divergent information about the same individual. Names may appear with different spellings, and women may be referred to by their maiden names in some sources but by their married names in others. Dates of birth or death may vary, and positions may be described with different titles. These examples of contradictions should not be treated as simple errors to be corrected silently. They are part of the data construction process and should be addressed through explicit rules. In some cases, one source may be considered more authoritative than another. In other cases, the contradiction cannot be resolved with sufficient confidence. Researchers should then document the competing information, indicate the source used for coding, and, where relevant, record a degree of certainty. This makes it possible to preserve the traceability of decisions and to revise them later if new information becomes available. The aim is not to eliminate uncertainty at all costs, but to make it visible and manageable within the dataset.

Third, researchers should not treat missing information only as a limitation of the data. In some cases, the systematic absence of information on a given variable or category of individuals can itself be sociologically meaningful. Carter (2006) points out that 'archival silences' are not always simply the absence of written traces but can also reflect relations of power that determine which voices, experiences, or social properties are worth being recorded and preserved. For example, in historical research, information on men's biographies is often more systematically recorded than information on women's activities or on less powerful social groups, reflecting broader archival silences surrounding women's lives and the experience of other under-represented populations (Lerner, 1979). Similarly, information on wealth or social origins may remain deliberately discreet. This reveals something about the social field itself, in the form of the degree to which economic capital and privilege are visible, institutionalised, or hidden. Assessing and documenting missing information is thus essential for data quality and for understanding the social conditions under which biographical traces were produced.

3.3 TURNING BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION INTO VARIABLES

The first stage of prosopographical research, as shown in Figure 1, consists in defining the population. Once the population has been provisionally delimited, researchers must determine, in a second stage, what information is needed to analyse it. This requires reflection on data collection and on the transformation of biographical information found in different sources into standardised variables. Depending on source availability, the definition of these variables may also lead researchers to refine the initial population.

Establishing a prosopographical ‘questionnaire’

In prosopographical research, collecting data has similarities with survey research. As in surveys, prosopography involves establishing what historians practising prosopography often call a *questionnaire* (Verboven et al., 2007), which defines the types of information to be collected. In a survey, standardised information is collected directly from respondents. In prosopographical research, information is collected indirectly through the consultation of sources by the researcher. The prosopographical questionnaire is therefore not a questionnaire in the strict sense, with questions addressed to respondents and predefined response categories. It is used here as a ‘metaphor’ (Lemercier & Picard, 2012) for an explicit formulation of the information that needs to be collected. Following Verboven et al. (2007:55), in the historical tradition of prosopographical research, the questionnaire can be handled in a ‘flexible way’, especially at the beginning of a research project, when it may be useful to collect broad information on selected dimensions of individual profiles before transforming it into comparable data. Table 1 presents some of the dimensions that may be included in a prosopographical questionnaire to guide the consultation of sources according to the research questions.

Table 1. Typical dimensions of a prosopographical questionnaire

Dimensions	Examples of information collected
Biographical	Names, life dates, place of birth, social origin
Family	Parents, siblings, marriage, kinship ties
Education	Degrees, educational institutions attended
Career	Professional positions, employing organisations, age at different phases

Note: Example created by the authors.

The function of the questionnaire is not to lock data collection into a rigid framework but to ensure that the same types of information are collected across the entire population, while leaving room for non-systematic information that may be available only for some individuals. It therefore clarifies what information should be collected and how this information relates to the research questions. Without such formalisation, data collection risks producing a set of heterogeneous biographical notices rather than material that can later be transformed into a dataset supporting systematic comparison.

Defining variables and coding rules

The prosopographical questionnaire defines the types of information to be collected for each individual. In social science research, however, a further step is often required to transform this information into standardised and comparable data that can be used with a wide choice of quantitative methods. In this new step, researchers must specify how the information should be entered, coded, and standardised, while remaining open to revising these choices as the consultation of sources progresses. One way of doing so is to translate the information needs defined in the questionnaire into variables. In this process, the codebook becomes a central instrument, as it formalises the variables, coding rules, controlled vocabularies, and data entry conventions used throughout a research project.

The *World Elite Database* (WED)¹ provides a useful example. This consortium of scholars from more than twenty countries aims to study contemporary economic elites across the world

¹ For a detailed presentation of the project, see <https://worldelitedatabase.org>.

through the development of a standardised data regime. The approach chosen by this consortium is digital prosopography (Bühlmann et al., 2025). In such a project, where the comparative dimension is central, the need for standardisation is particularly strong. Data collection is conducted with a codebook that specifies the research context, the selection criteria, the variables to be collected, the formats and modalities according to which they should be entered into a spreadsheet. Such conventions help to harmonise the data as much as possible.

The transformation of biographical information into coded data can be illustrated through a few fictional and simplified examples based on the WED codebook. Tables 2 and 3 show how biographical information found in sources can be transformed into segmented variables and coding decisions.

Table 2. Transforming biographical information into coded career variables

Biographical information	Variables	Coding
'Maria Silva is CEO of Banco Nacional'	1. Family name(s)	Silva
	2. Given name(s)	Maria
	3. Gender	Female
	4. Criteria of inclusion	Criteria 1a
	5. Country	Brazil
	6. Headquarter City	São Paulo
	7. Headquarter Country	Brazil
	8. Benchmark year	2020
	9. Role string	CEO
	10. Organization string	Banco Nacional
	11. Sector NACE	K – Financial and insurance activities

Note: Example created by the authors.

In the first example (Table 2), a source states that 'Maria Silva is CEO of Banco Nacional'. This short piece of information on an individual's career is transformed into eleven variables. In the WED project, the first criterion of inclusion in the study population is the fact of holding a CEO position in one of the largest national listed companies (entitled 'Criteria 1a'). Because this is the case for the individual described in the source, the position can be coded 'Criteria 1a' in variable 4. Information such as family name, given name, role, and organisation can be extracted directly from the source. Other variables require specific coding rules. For gender, for example, the pronouns used in the biographical notice from the source may be checked to avoid relying only on first names or other gendered assumptions. The information can then be entered using a controlled vocabulary, such as 'female', 'male', or 'Other'. Some entries also need to follow predefined formats and conventions. The country and city of the organisation's headquarters, such as 'Brazil' and 'São Paulo', can be inferred from contextual information. These variables should be recorded consistently across the database using standardised formats to avoid different spellings of the same place. Finally, the sector of activity linked to the elite position is coded using the Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community (NACE). In this case, a bank is coded as 'K – Financial and insurance activities'.

Table 3. Transforming biographical information into coded education variables

Biographical information	Variables	Coding
‘田中明は1986年に東京大学法学部を卒業した。’	1. Family name(s)	Tanaka
	2. Given name(s)	Akira
	3. Gender	Male
	4. Degree text string	東京大学法学部
	5. Year graduated	1986
	6. Educational institution string	University of Tokyo
	7. Educational institution Wikidata QID	Q7842
	8. Main discipline code	3.8 Law

Note: Example created by the authors.

The second example (Table 3) starts from a source stating in Japanese that ‘Akira Tanaka graduated from the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo in 1986.’ This short piece of information on an individual’s education is transformed into eight variables. As in the first example, information such as family name, given name, gender, and year of graduation can be extracted from the source and entered according to predefined coding rules and formats. The original formulation of the degree can also be preserved in the language of the source through a string variable. This makes it possible to remain close to the source, especially when recording the original names of degrees, institutions, or organisations. At the same time, the educational institution can be entered using a standardised name, here ‘University of Tokyo’, and linked to its Wikidata QID, ‘Q7842’. Wikidata provides unique identifiers for organisations and institutions. The use of such persistent identifiers makes it possible to identify the same institution unambiguously across languages and to connect it to existing metadata, such as alternative names, location, address, and related institutional units. Finally, the main discipline can be coded using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), here ‘3.8 Law’.

These examples illustrate three distinct dimensions in the construction of prosopographical data: the information as it appears in the source, the preservation of this original information in the database, and its transformation into standardised or coded variables. The latter involves explicit coding rules, standardised formats, controlled vocabularies, and external classifications or identifiers. Distinguishing these dimensions makes it possible to transform biographical information into comparable data while preserving the connection between the coded data and the original source.

Using existing standards and interoperable identifiers

As shown in the examples above, biographical information can be transformed and enriched through coding schemes. These can be developed by researchers for their specific needs or based on existing coding standards and inter-operable identifiers that make it possible to connect prosopographical data to other datasets. This becomes particularly important in the current context of digital prosopography, where researchers increasingly work with multilingual sources, large volumes of data, and information on persons, institutions, places, organisations, and positions that may already be documented in other databases.

Coding rules do not have to be created entirely from scratch. When relevant standards already exist, researchers should consider using them to classify their data. For example, the ISCED can be used for educational levels and fields of study, while NACE codes can be used for

economic sectors.² Such standards help researchers harmonise data internally, but they also facilitate comparison with other datasets and may make it easier to combine different prosopographical databases. Historically, prosopographical databases were often developed within specific research projects. With the development of digital prosopography and more standardised forms of data collection, however, there may be greater opportunities to connect and integrate them.

Inter-operable identifiers play a similar role. They make it possible to connect a person, institution, organisation, place, or company recorded in a prosopographical dataset to an external reference database. For example, as shown in Table 3, Wikidata QIDs can link information found in sources to existing metadata. Among the many other inter-operable identifiers can be useful for prosopographical research are: the Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID) for researchers, the Virtual International Authority File (VIAF) for authors, the International Standard Name Identifier (ISNI) for organisations, GeoNames for places, and the Legal Entity Identifier (LEI) for companies.³

4. MANAGING PROSOPOGRAPHICAL DATA

This section examines challenges in managing prosopographical data throughout the different stages of prosopographical research. It focuses on two key dimensions of data management: the organisation of data within a database, and their preparation for preservation, reuse, and sharing.

4.1 STRUCTURING A RELATIONAL DATABASE

A central challenge in managing prosopographical data is choosing a database structure adapted to the scope of the research project. In prosopography, individuals are often associated with several observations of the same type. For instance, one person may obtain several degrees, hold several professional positions, belong to several organisations, or have kinship ties with several individuals. One possible solution is to organise all this information in a single *flat table*. A flat table, for example in the form of a spreadsheet, contains all variables in one table, with data organised in rows and columns. Rows usually represent individuals, while columns represent the different variables. This may be sufficient for relatively small projects, especially when each individual is represented only once and the number of variables remains limited. However, a flat table becomes more difficult to manage as the data become more complex, notably when individuals have several observations of the same type or when researchers wish to include non-standardised qualitative descriptions that are difficult to read in such a structure. In these situations, researchers commonly face two main options.

The first option is to use a *wide format*. In a wide-format database, the data are spread horizontally in the spreadsheet. Typically, one row represents one individual, while columns are multiplied according to the number of observations. For example, an individual with three university degrees would have three separate columns: 'Degree 1', 'Degree 2', and 'Degree 3'. The same principle can be applied to each professional episode recorded in a curriculum vitae, with variables such as 'Position 1', 'Position 2', and so forth. This rapidly produces a

² See the UNESCO Institute for Statistics page on ISCED: <https://www.uis.unesco.org/en/methods-and-tools/isced>; and the Eurostat page on NACE: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nace>.

³ See Wikidata: <https://www.wikidata.org>; ORCID: <https://orcid.org>; VIAF: <https://viaf.org>; ISNI: <https://isni.org>; GeoNames: <https://www.geonames.org>; and the Global LEI search: <https://search.gleif.org>.

large number of columns and makes the database difficult to read. A second solution is to use the *long format*. Instead of multiplying columns for each new observation of the same type, each observation is recorded on a separate row. For example, the three university degrees of the individual mentioned above would be recorded on three different rows. This avoids multiplying columns but it also means that the same individual appears on several rows, which may again make the data difficult to read and manage.

A relational database offers an alternative to these two common solutions. Rather than concentrating all information in a single table, a relational database distributes different types of data across several linked tables. Stable information about individuals can be stored in one table, while repeated information, such as degrees, positions, or organisational affiliations at different benchmark years, is stored in separate tables. These tables are connected through unique identifiers. This structure offers several advantages in prosopographical research. First, it reduces unnecessary repetition and makes it possible to represent complex relationships. An individual can be linked to several degrees, positions, organisations, family members, or other individuals without having to repeat all personal information for each observation.

Second, although the data are distributed across several tables, they can be brought together and displayed in a form that is easier to consult. A database interface can retrieve information from different tables and present it as a single biographical notice. Figure 2 illustrates the public online interface of the OBELIS database. In this interface, selected information stored in different tables is combined into a biographical profile containing personal information, education, positions and mandates, kinship ties, and network relations. The relational structure is therefore not necessarily visible to the user, but it makes it possible to create an ergonomic tool for consulting complex biographical data.

Third, a relational structure facilitates the updating, enrichment, and reuse of data over time. New degrees, positions, organisations, family ties, or benchmark-year observations can be added as separate records without redesigning the database.

Finally, a relational structure can prevent the database from being organised around a single analytical use. The same prosopographical database may support the analysis of career trajectories, educational profiles, family ties, organisational affiliations, and networks. These analyses do not necessarily require the same selection of data. By decomposing the database into linked tables covering individuals, positions, organisations, education, and other dimensions, researchers can produce targeted datasets according to their analytical needs without restructuring the entire database. This represents a powerful tool for filtering specific data and then exporting them.

Figure 2. Example of a biographical interface from the online OBELIS database

Calmy-Rey, Micheline

ADMIN (1980)

POL (2000)

POL (2010)

1945 -



Données biographiques

Nom :	Calmy-Rey
Prénom :	Micheline
Sexe :	F
Naissance :	08.07.1945
Lieu naissance :	Sion (VS)
Nationalité :	Suisse
Principales professions :	Directrice d'une société de distribution de livres, Conseillère d'Etat, Conseillère fédérale

Formation

Universitaire : oui

supérieure	année	titre	catégorie	institution	lieu	canton	pays
-	-	Licence	sciences politiques	UniGe	Genève	GE	Suisse

Fonctions et mandats

Politique			
durée	organe	fonction	parti
1981-1997	GE (Législatif)	Membre	Parti socialiste suisse
1986-1990	Parti socialiste GE (Comité dir)	Président	Parti socialiste suisse
1993-1997	Parti socialiste GE (Comité dir)	Président	Parti socialiste suisse
1997-2002	GE (Exécutif)	Membre	Socialiste
2003-2011	Conseil Fédéral (DFAE)	Membre	Parti socialiste suisse

Administration			
durée	entité	fonction	affiliation département
(1980)	Commission pour les questions scolaires des enfants étrangers	Membre	DFI

Généalogie

Grands-Parents	Parents	Enfants
	Rey Charles	Calmy Alexandra
	Fournier Adeline	

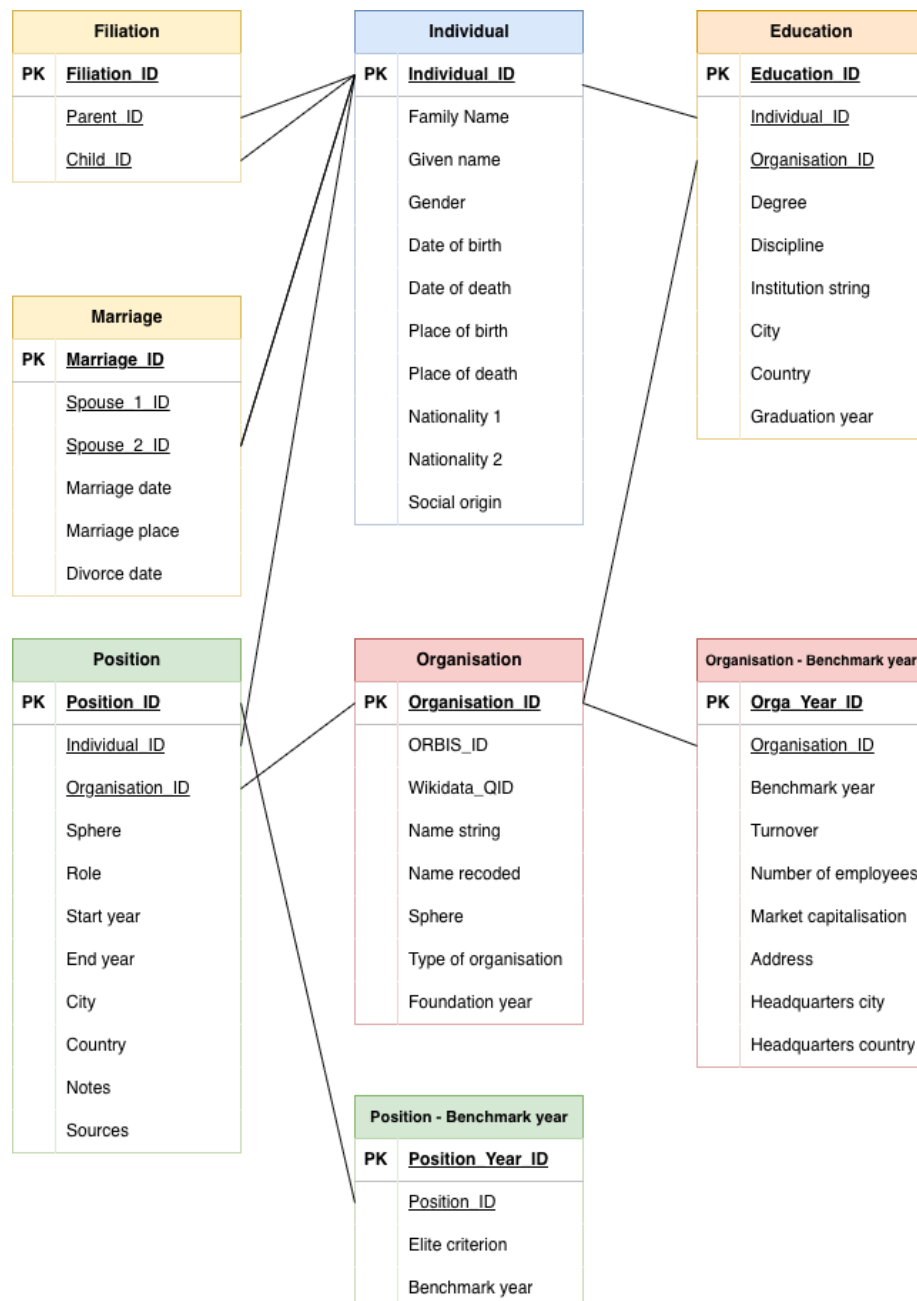
Réseau

Réseau
Calmy-Rey, Micheline
Commission pour les questions scolaires des enfants étrangers (1980-1980)
Parti socialiste GE (1986-1997)
GE (1981-2002)
Conseil Fédéral (2003-2011)

Note. From Calmy-Rey, Micheline (1945–), 2025, Base de données des élites suisses, OBELIS, Université de Lausanne.

Figure 3 provides a simplified fictional example of a relational structure for prosopographical data, inspired by our experience in building such structures within the OBELIS and the WED. The aim of the figure is not to propose a universal model, but to illustrate how prosopographical information can be distributed across several tables rather than concentrated in a single one.

Figure 3. Fictional example of a simplified relational structure for prosopographical data



Note: Authors' own elaboration.

In this example, the database is organised around an *individual* table, which records stable information about persons. Each table has a primary key (PK)—that is, a unique identifier that makes it possible to link tables to one another. For instance, an individual can be linked to the *education* table each time a degree is recorded, with each degree having its own PK and associated variables. The same individual can also be linked to the *position* table, which describes a position held by this person. This position is itself linked to the organisation in

which it is held, and to another table indicating whether the position corresponds to an elite position in a specific benchmark year. The *organisation* table can then be linked to a benchmark-year table containing information on the organisation at a specific point in time, such as the address of the headquarters, the market capitalization, the turnover, or the number of employees. By linking these entries through unique identifiers, the database also makes it easier to follow the historical evolution of individuals and organisations over time.

This structure also makes it easier to preserve and navigate through different layers of information. String variables can be used to record information as it appears in the source, before or alongside recoded variables used for analysis. They are useful for preserving original information without losing the possibility to harmonise it with additional coded variables. Free-text fields, such as 'notes' in the position table can also be included to record qualitative information that cannot easily be coded into standardised variables, especially when it comes from case-specific sources or when it concerns only one or a few individuals.

4.2 PREPARING DATA FOR PRESERVATION AND REUSE

Given the amount of work required to produce a prosopographical database, and given the potential richness of the data collected, such a database is often not limited to a single research project. It may later be modified, corrected, enriched with new variables, extended to new populations, or reused for new research questions. In this sense, a prosopographical database can become a cumulative research infrastructure rather than a one-off dataset produced for a single project. Several conditions can support this cumulative use. We would like to focus on three of them: *documentation*, *source granularity*, and *transferability*.

A first requirement is to document both the structure and the content of the database. If the prosopography involves a relational database, the structure should be documented through a clear description of the tables and the relations between them. In any situation, the content should be documented through a codebook presenting the variables and the controlled vocabularies. Documentation should also include data entry guidelines explaining how information should be entered, transformed, or standardised. This is particularly important when several people contribute to the same prosopographical database. Even with controlled vocabularies, divergences may appear in the way information is recorded. Keeping a written record of the sources used, the coding rules applied, and the methodological decisions made during data entry reduces dependence on informal knowledge accumulated by a single researcher or data manager and facilitates the reuse of data in other research contexts.

A second requirement is to preserve the granularity of the information collected from sources. As Lemerrier and Picard (2012) argue, information should ideally be entered as closely as possible to the source. This means avoiding the impoverishment of information at the moment of data entry. Exact titles, precise dates, and brief contextual notes should be preserved whenever they may later matter. Keeping a trace of the information before recoding is important for future reuse. Detailed information can always be aggregated after data collection, whereas distinctions lost at the time of entry are difficult or impossible to recover. Preserving granularity also helps to correct or refine coding decisions, revisit material that initially seemed secondary, and adapt the database to new research questions. For example, recording the exact dates of different career stages from a curriculum vitae allows a career sequence to be reconstructed and later analysed through sequence analysis, even if this level of detail was not required for the initial research question.

A third requirement is to ensure the transferability of the data. In prosopographical research, the same data may be used in several formats and technical environments. Information may first be entered in a spreadsheet, then imported into a dedicated database management system, before being exported again in adapted formats for analytical purposes or archiving. The data should be structured in a way that allows them to move easily from one environment to another. This means, for instance, avoiding excessive dependence on proprietary formats or on features that work within only one specific tool. Whenever possible, data should be exportable in open and widely readable formats, such as CSV for tabular data, and JSON or XML for more structured exports. The aim is not to prescribe one format for all projects, but to ensure that the database can still be opened, understood, and reused beyond the software in which it was originally created.

4.3 HOSTING DATA IN A SECURE AND ENCRYPTED WAY

The question of secure data hosting is an important methodological and legal concern, and not merely a technical one. Data should be hosted on a server designed to support legal compliance and long-term sustainability. The choice of a database management system is a separate but related question. Different solutions exist, and the appropriate choice depends on the scale of the project and the institutional context.

The WED and OBELIS provide two concrete illustrations of this diversity. The WED centralises its data within *Heurist*, an open-source software that allows data to be imported, stored, and managed in a unified environment, hosted on a controlled-access virtual server in Switzerland and validated by both the IT Department and the Data Protection Office of the University of Lausanne. OBELIS, by contrast, uses *FileMaker Pro*, a proprietary but stable and widely supported solution, hosted under equivalent institutional security conditions. Both are defensible choices, although the use of proprietary solutions may create tensions with open science principles, particularly when access to the software or infrastructure depends on licences or other institutional resources that are not equally available to all researchers. Beyond the choice of the specific tool, an essential consideration is whether the infrastructure meets the security requirements defined in collaboration with the relevant institutional bodies and researchers. This includes defining who can access the data, internally or externally, and how access is tracked, regulated and monitored.

Regardless of the data management system, data should preferably be hosted on institutional servers. Institutional infrastructure offers important guarantees that personal storage solutions or general-purpose cloud services typically cannot provide, such as controlled access, encryption, regular backups, documented security protocols, and a clear chain of institutional responsibility. Such arrangements protect not only the individuals included in the dataset, but also the researchers themselves, particularly when they are required to demonstrate compliance before an ethics committee. Moreover, data protection regulations vary across jurisdictions and the conditions under which personal data may be lawfully collected, stored, and shared depend on the nature of the population, the sensitivity of the variables, and the legal status of the processing activity. Consulting institutional data protection guidelines and dedicated staff ensures that both the data and the hosting infrastructure are compliant from the outset.

4.4 DEFINING CONDITIONS FOR SHARING

When considering the sharing of prosopographical data, particular attention should be paid to the conditions of dissemination and to the role of anonymisation.

Public data are not automatically shareable

Prosopographical data are often based on a variety of public sources. However, this does not mean that they can be shared without restriction. Before sharing a dataset, researchers should assess the legal framework, the nature of the sources, the sensitivity of the variables, and the possible consequences of making the data available in a structured form.

In Europe, social science research involving personal data is subject to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Union, 2016). In Switzerland, data protection is regulated by the Federal Act on Data Protection (FADP) (Swiss Confederation, 2020), which follows broadly similar principles. These legal frameworks allow the processing of personal data for scientific research, including prosopography, under certain conditions, especially when the data collected are necessary and proportionate to the research purpose. In prosopography, this proportionality depends in particular on a delimited population, as suggested in this guide.

However, the fact that personal data can be collected and processed for research purposes does not mean that they can automatically be shared. Researchers should assess which variables can be included in the shared dataset. Sensitive data, as defined by the relevant legal framework, should be excluded from open sharing. Some sources may also impose specific restrictions. For example, access to certain archives, especially private archives, may be subject to conditions limiting the reuse or dissemination of the information consulted. Finally, researchers should assess the disclosure risks created by the structured dataset itself, since bringing together information from different sources may increase the visibility of personal information.

Anonymisation is not always possible or desirable

In many research contexts in the social sciences, anonymisation is an essential condition for publishing results and sharing personal data. In prosopographical research, however, anonymisation is not always possible or desirable. For example, a study of the profiles of members of the Swiss Federal Council at specific points in time could hardly anonymise individuals completely, since readers could quickly infer who they are. The identification of these individuals can also be central to the research design itself. In some cases, removing names or institutional positions would impoverish the analysis.

For this reason, depending on the legal context, researchers may need to consider whether non-anonymisation can be justified. The case of OBELIS provides a good illustration. OBELIS shared part of its database on Swiss elites in the data repository SWISSUbase without anonymising individuals (see, for example, Mach et al., 2025). The shared datasets do not include sensitive data as defined by the FADP, such as data concerning health or religious views. They do, however, contain personal data on Swiss elites, such as names, dates and places of birth. The decision to keep these data identifiable was based on three main considerations.

First, a significant part of the database concerns *deceased persons*, for whom the FADP does not apply. This does not mean that there is a legal vacuum for deceased people. Other legal and ethical obligations may still apply. For instance, damage to reputation and defamation

remain punishable under Swiss criminal law. Copyright law also continues to protect personal writings, correspondence, or photographs for seventy years after an author's death. When information is drawn from archival records, researchers must also consider the applicable federal or cantonal archival legislation, which may impose protection periods and restrictions on access or reuse. While it is possible to publish personal data on deceased persons, researchers must nevertheless remain cautious, since they are navigating several legal regimes.

Second, the individuals included in the datasets were selected because they occupy, or occupied, publicly visible positions of power. They can be considered *public figures* under the FADP.⁴ The notion of 'public figure' appears in this law as one possible ground for justifying the processing or disclosure of personal data. Similarly, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court has introduced the concept of 'people of absolute renown', defined as those who are 'part of contemporary history in a lasting way' due to their position, function, or achievements.⁵ The individuals included in the OBELIS datasets were therefore considered public figures and part of contemporary history. Their identification is part of the object of study.

Third, most information collected comes from *publicly available sources*, such as official registers, annual reports, institutional websites, press materials, or published biographical sources. This does not mean that publicly available data can automatically be redistributed, as discussed above. It does, however, support the argument that the data concern public activities and publicly documented positions, rather than private information collected in a confidential setting.

This example should not be read as a general rule that prosopographical data do not need to be anonymised. It shows instead that anonymisation must be assessed in relation to the scientific purpose of the database, the public status of the persons concerned, the nature of the sources, and the legal framework in which the project is conducted. Even when anonymisation is not applied, researchers should still consider whether all collected variables need to be shared, or whether some information should be removed, aggregated, or placed under restricted access.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Here we provide key recommendations that summarise the main points of this guide:

Recommendation 1 — Define the study population explicitly

Prosopographical data should be constructed on the basis of a clearly delimited population. Inclusion criteria should be documented, since they shape the sources consulted, the variables collected, and the possible analyses.

Recommendation 2 — Assess sources before extracting information

Sources should not be treated as neutral repositories of information. Their producers, purposes, coverage, biases, and limits should be assessed before information is extracted and transformed into data.

⁴ Federal Act on Data Protection of 25 September 2020 (FADP), SR 235.1, Art. 31 para. 2 let. f.

⁵ Swiss Federal Supreme Court, ATF 147 III 185 (judgment 5A_247/2020 of 18 February 2021).

Recommendation 3 — Standardise data collection without losing source granularity

A prosopographical questionnaire, codebook, and controlled vocabularies help ensure comparability. At the same time, precise dates, original formulations, titles, and contextual notes should be preserved when they may be useful for later interpretation or reuse.

Recommendation 4 — Document coding decisions and uncertainties

Coding rules, source choices, contradictions, missing information, and degrees of certainty should be documented. This is essential for transparency, quality control, reuse, and later correction or extension of the database.

Recommendation 5 — Choose a database structure adapted to the project

A spreadsheet may be sufficient for small projects, but relational structures are often more appropriate when individuals are linked to multiple positions, organisations, sources, events, or benchmark years.

Recommendation 6 — Prepare sharing conditions carefully

Publicly available information is not automatically shareable. Before dissemination, researchers should assess the legal framework, source restrictions, sensitive variables, and disclosure risks, as well as whether anonymisation is possible or desirable.

6. FURTHER READINGS

This guide focused on issues related to population definition, data collection, and the management of a prosopographical database. For further methodological insights on how prosopographical data can be analysed, Lunding et al. (2020) offer a practical discussion of elite prosopography and its articulation with relational methods, with examples of how different quantitative methods can be combined. Rossier (2019) discusses the relationship between prosopography, relational methods, and a Bourdieusian framework.

For a broader overview of the development and application of prosopography in historical research, Stone (1971), Charle (2015) and Keats-Rohan (2007) offer useful introductions to its main traditions, uses, and methodological issues.

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