

Microhistory and Qualitative Research Methods

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This paper surveys the literature on the methodology of microhistory—a representative approach to qualitative research methods in the field of history. Historiography, which is traditionally categorized as a humanities discipline, requires qualitative analysis at some point, no matter how extensively it adopts quantitative methods. However, a trend of quantitative research emerged in historical studies, accompanied by the expectation that quantitative methods can transform history into a “true science.” Consequently, “serial history,” which focuses on statistical analysis of serial sources, became the mainstream of historical research for a period. Microhistory emerged in Italy in the 1970s as a critical response to this trend in historical research. Importantly, qualitative and quantitative methods are not necessarily in opposition, as recognized by not only the first generation of microhistorians, such as Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, but also historians of serial history, such as Michel Vovelle. This work traces the development of microhistory from a historiographical perspective and introduces its basic methodological ideas and issues. First, I introduce Carlo Ginzburg’s evidential paradigm (*paradigma indiziario*) and Giovanni Levi’s approach, which focuses on social relationships as the first-generation methods of microhistorians; I then provide an overview of the subsequent developments in microhistory from the viewpoints of postmodernism, global history, and new quantitative research.

The discussed transition in microhistory constitutes a methodological pluralization that is connected to historians’ new academic interests, rather than a development that has overcome the challenges that microhistory faced when it was first established. Therefore, it is not the case that the problems inherent in Ginzburg’s microhistory have been overcome in subsequent developments or that his methodology has faded. In particular, when discussing the scope of individual case studies in historical research, his evidential paradigm remains a valid and important reference point today.