Interoperating Irish Death and Census Data, 1864-1922

Vast quantities of historical Irish 'big data' are in the public domain but they exist as silos, much of it is unstructured and consequently they cannot interact or are not 'interoperable' with one another. This paper will provide an overview of the initial findings of an Irish Research Council funded project entitled Death and Burial Data, Ireland 1864-1922 (DBDIrl). One of the project aims is to create linkages between historical registered deaths, census and burial data. Using Graham, Milligan and Weingart's (2017: 3) definition of Big data as 'more data that you could conceivably read yourself in a reasonable amount of time … information that requires computational intervention to make new sense of it' both civil registration (CR) and census data meet the criteria. All of these data derive from increased levels of statecraft or what Michel Foucault's terms biopower 'to make live and to let die' and governmentality, the way in which the state exercises control over, or governs, the body of its populace (Foucault, 2003: 241) both concepts provide theoretical underpinnings to this project. By taking death and burial as key themes this study adopts a 'life events' approach to the study of social class, gender and power in Ireland from macro and micro-history perspectives.

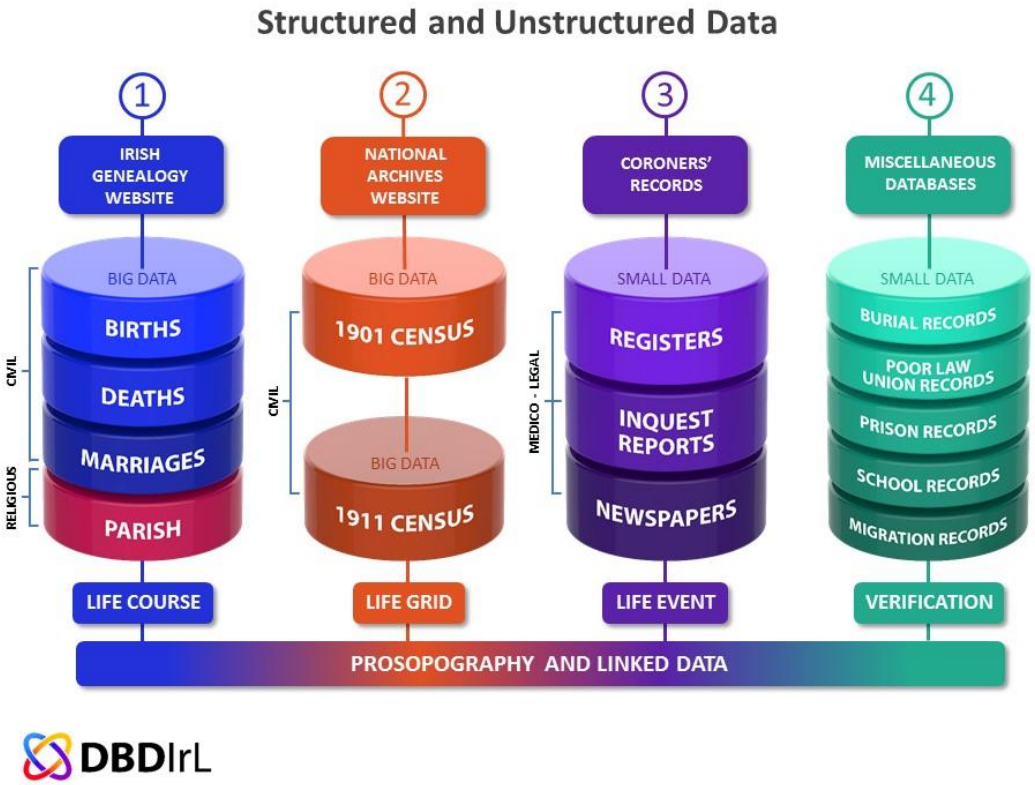
Problematising the Data

Figure 1 shows the data types we are using (1-4) which I further categorised into life course, life grid, life event and verification data. We use open source software CINCO (https://cinco.scce.info/about/) to underpin our data platform (Noujokat et al, 2018) and this paper will provide an overview of its utility and our initial findings. Using linked data techniques to render these siloed data 'interoperable', DBDIrl aims to yield new knowledge about biopower behaviours, to maximise their full knowledge potential and to open up new horizons for interdisciplinary research and teaching. I am particularly interested in how ordinary Irish people (non-elite) engaged with medico-legal power. After centuries of failed English attempts to enumerate the Irish, the responsibility for CR of births and deaths finally devolved to the medical profession in 1864 and patrons were tasked with volunteering information. CR represented a massive paradigmatic shift in the 'modalities of power' that existed (Foucault, 1991, 2003) in Ireland as responsibility deferred from religious to medical authorities. In broad terms, this shift formed, and continues to form, the basis of Nikolas Rose's (2007) 'biological citizenship'.

Doctors employed in the public health system, which was firmly established as a component of the poor law under the Medical Charities act in 1851, were men drawn from the middle classes and nearly all were Anglican. By contrast the Irish population was largely Roman Catholic and poor, and it took some time before the process gained traction (Breathnach & Gurrin, 2017). The gendered nature of the biopower dynamic receives specific treatment in this project as the majority of Irish physicians were male and the conversion of women to the merits of 'medicalisation' was vital to achieving general compliancy (Breathnach, 2012). Peter Conrad described medicalisation as 'defining a problem in medical terms, using medical language to describe a problem, adopting a medical framework to understand a problem, or using a medical intervention to "treat" it' (1992: 211). I view CR as a crucial moment in the biopower relationship as for many it was the first biomedical encounter and put an onus on individuals to become literate in a medico-legal sense (Breathnach, 2017, 2016a). The CR encounter at the hour of death is of particular interest from socio-cultural perspectives. Dr Thomas Wrigley Grimshaw, Registrar General of Ireland from 1877 to 1900, was well aware of how life event underreporting posed dangers to public

health, so he used burial returns to reconcile the deficient death register for parts of Dublin city.

Figure 1.



In the CR encounter, the informant was required to name, claim relation to and give an account of cause and place of death. All of these meta data (Alter, 2014) offer unique identifiers and ways of interoperate all the structured and unstructured data types shown in Figure 1. By placing the history of individual bodies and lives at the core of this research it will offer new ways of understanding death and the treatment of the dead body from civil, secular and religious perspectives. In this paper I hope to demonstrate how small data can elucidate and indeed contradict the big data (Kitchin, 2014) from which it is derived or how micro-history (Ginzburg, 1993) speaks to macro-history.

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