Introduction.

The concepts of technological change, technological progress, and the technological division of labor are widely used in economics and some other strands of social science. Adam Smith's (1937) view of the division of labor is, for example, one grounded in a technological division of labor, rather than a division of labor based on ecclesiastical, administrative, or military grounds. Due to the combinatorial nature of technological change, which we will discuss in the next section, it is possible to make inter-societal comparisons of technology, and to judge one technology as more or less advanced than another. Unfortunately, the leading cross-cultural database, the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) (Murdock and White 1969), does not have a good theoretically grounded ordinal measure of technology. The best available measure is a three-technology ranking found in SCCS v153, which ranks metalwork as higher than loom weaving which is higher than pottery; the most advanced societies have all three technologies and the least advanced have none.

In this paper we present a more detailed measure of technological level, ranking societies from more advanced to less, where we base that ranking on a theoretical view of technological change first presented by the sociologist S.C. Gilfillan, and then by the Institutional economist Clarence Ayres and the urban theorist Jane Jacobs.

Technology as a cumulative process.

Technology develops as the elements of preexisting technology are combined into new forms (Gilfillan 1935:6; Ayres 1944:112). The tent, for example, combines the technology of leatherwork or weaving with the technology of wood, stone, or bone frame construction. An element of technology like the tent is “essentially a complex of most diverse elements” (Gilfillan 1935:6)—a society can only possess the tent if it has the technology to access the required raw materials (skin, fiber, wood), if it possesses the technology to manufacture the tools (needles, knives) needed to process the raw material, and if it has the technology (travois, cart, sled; domesticated canids, camelids, equids) to carry the tent from place to place. Thus, not only does the element of technology emerge as the combination of preexisting elements, but the use of that technology requires yet other preexisting elements.

Technology is cumulative in this sense, that each new element of technology is enabled by those that already exist. The more elements of technology that exist, the greater the possibilities for new combinations, so that new technology can emerge at an accelerating rate. While social evolution has no necessary direction, the cumulative nature of technology and its potential to accelerate make technological change “progressive” (Ayres 1944:111,119), such that technological “change is continuous and cumulative and always in the same direction, that of more numerous and more complex technological devices” (Ayres 1944:123).

Nevertheless, a variety of factors affect the rate at which combinations are actually made, so that technology will develop at different rates in different social environments. Clarence Ayres (1944:131) suggests that sedentism greatly facilitates technological progress, since the ability to reside in one spot allows the “accumulation of technical materials”, which then become available for further combinations. The development of agriculture therefore constitutes a new technology especially favorable to technological change—since it not only provides new elements for further combinations, but also makes it easier to create those combinations. Ayres (1944:152) sees
printing as another element of technology that facilitates technological change; one could argue that writing and record-keeping generally work in this way. Ayres (1944:117-118) also points out that new elements of technology are often created by outsiders who can look at existing tools with innocence, and that it is in regions where different cultures come into contact that an existing tool is most likely to be appraised with new eyes. Cross-cultural contact is thus favorable to new and innovative combinations; a striking example of this is the development of the early modern European ship as a vessel combining features of Mediterranean and North Sea ships (Ayres 1944:143). Ayres views technology as a dynamic force that is stifled by what he terms “ceremonial” patterns—beliefs, norms, and behavior that establish and maintain status (Ayres 1944: Chapter 8). Urbanization is therefore favorable to technological change, since cities are collections of strangers with relatively weak attachment to shared traditions (Ayres 1944:146).

Jane Jacobs conceives of economic development as the process of an economy “adding new work to old” (Jacobs 1969:47), where this process occurs through combinations of “divisions of labor”. Cities contain elaborated divisions of labor and are therefore the locations where most new work is created (Jacobs 1969:48). Trade between cities exposes a city to new products, spurring imitation (Jacobs 1969: Chapter 5); a process David Hume (1985) called the “demonstration effect of trade”. For example, Tokyo imported bicycles in the late 19th century, and there soon appeared small repair shops. Spare parts were expensive to import, so repair shops began to manufacture bicycle parts—each shop specializing in one part and buying other parts as needed. Eventually a few shops began to buy large numbers of parts in order to assemble them into completed bicycles. The introduction of bicycle manufacturing thus took the form of small incremental additions to the division of labor within the Tokyo economy (Jacobs 1969:61-62). Like Ayres, Jacobs sees outsiders as the usual source of new work. For example, the modern brassiere was developed by a dressmaker’s shop, not an undergarment firm. Where restrictions such as zoning or guild regulations keep work within stable categories, little new work is created (Jacobs 1969:60).

S.C. Gilfillan (1935:47), much like Jacobs, finds urbanization and a highly articulated division of labor conducive to technological change. He emphasizes that the integration of the specialized parts is especially critical, giving transportation technology a special importance in facilitating technological change. The Roman failure to achieve accelerating technological progress he attributes to their inferior transportation technology—no horseshoe, a harness that could strangle a horse, a hard-to-steer cart, and unseaworthy merchant ships (Gilfillan 1935:51). New technology displaces the old, and where enterprises have durable physical capital (such as solid, well-built structures) there is an incentive to preserve that capital and to resist innovations. Likewise, when new technology would make obsolete the human capital of workers or the social capital of principals and managers, that technology is resisted (Gilfillan 1935:56-57). Thus, a growing population is especially favorable to the introduction of new technology, since that technology can enter as an addition to the current stock of capital, rather than as a replacement (Gilfillan 1935:58-59).

The development of new technology thus requires pre-existing elements of technology and the hands and minds of persons who will combine that technology in new ways. The greater the

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1 See Hume’s essays "Of Commerce" (1752) and "Of the Jealousy of Trade" (1758).
number of pre-existing elements and the greater the number of combining persons, the greater
the rate at which technology will develop.

Data and method

Variables v2126 through v2175 in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) are dummy
variables indicating the presence of tasks such as water-fetching or weaving in each of the 186
SCCS societies. Since technology is cumulative, a society with advanced tasks will contain the
less-advanced tasks that are prerequisites for the advanced tasks—e.g., a society with “net-
making” (v2158) will also have the ability to make “rope or cordage” (v2160). We base our
measure of technological level on these dummy variables, employing the 186 x 47 data matrix D,
each row of which is a society, each column a task, and each cell either a one (indicating the
presence of that task in that society) or a zero (indicating the absence of the task in that society).²

Our measure of the technological level of a society is the weighted sum of the number of tasks
present in that society:

\[ \tau = Dw \]  

(1)

Where \( \tau \) is a 186 x 1 vector giving the ordinal technological level of a society, D is our 186 x 47
binary data matrix with ones indicated the presence of the column task in the row society, and w
is a 47 x1 vector of weights where more advanced tasks correspond to higher weights.

We derive the weights w by reasoning that more advanced tasks are enabled by the presence of
less-advanced tasks. We thus find how tasks are associated with each other in the 186 societies of
the SCCS, employing the 186 x 47 data matrix D:

\[ B = D'D \]  

(2)

B is a 47 x 47 matrix giving the number of times each row task is found together with each
column task across the 186 societies. The diagonal gives the total number of times each task
occurs. Dividing each row in B by its diagonal element gives the matrix V, where each cell gives
the probability that the column task is present, conditional on the row task being present.

\[ v_{ij} = b_{ij}/b_{ii} = \text{Prob(task } j \text{ is present } | \text{ task } i \text{ is present}) \]  

(3)

If technology \( j \) is a precursor to a technology \( i \), then \( j \) should be present whenever \( i \) is present,
and \( v_{ij} \) should be close to one. On the other hand, if \( i \) is a precursor to \( j \), then \( i \) should exist in
many societies without \( j \), and \( v_{ij} \) would be a number considerably lower than one. Thus we
interpret \( v_{ij} \) as the probability that \( j \) is a precursor technology to \( i \).

We subtract the transpose of V from V to get matrix \( N = V-V' \). Each cell \( n_{ij} \) gives the net
difference³ between the probability that task \( j \) is a precursor to task \( i \) and the probability that task
\( i \) is a precursor to task \( j \). A positive number indicates that task \( j \) is the precursor to \( i \); a negative
number indicates that \( i \) is the precursor to \( j \).

² Three of the 50 variables are redundant and therefore dropped: v2148 (Cooking) and v2152 (Water Fetching) are
present in all societies, and v2137 (Planting) is identical to v2139 (Harvesting).
³ The term net difference is borrowed from Lieberson (1976), who uses the term to describe a similar subtraction of
probabilities.
\[ n_{ij} = \frac{b_{ij}}{b_{ii}}-\frac{b_{ji}}{b_{jj}} \]
\[ = \text{Prob(task } j \text{ is present } | \text{ task } i \text{ is present} ) - \text{Prob(task } i \text{ is present } | \text{ task } j \text{ is present}) \]  

(4)

Since a task with more precursors will be a more advanced technology, we sum across the net to get a measure of the technological level of task \( i \):

\[ w_i = \sum_j n_{ij} \]  

(5)

The technological level \( \tau \) should be calculated in a multiple imputation context, since all of the SCCS variables contain missing data. Below is a snippet of R code that calculates \( \tau \) for a dataframe \( \text{smi} \) containing multiple imputed datasets indexed by the variable \( \text{smi}$.imp \). All 47 technology dummies must be present in \( \text{smi} \), and the following code executed after imputation.

```r
tchx<-paste("v",c(2126:2175),sep="")
tchx<-setdiff(tchx,c("v2137","v2148","v2152"))
is.na(smi$tech)<-TRUE
for (i in 1:max(smi$.imp)){
  zh<-which(smi$.imp==i)
  ddd<-as.matrix(smi[zh,tchx])
  bb<-(t(ddd)%*%ddd)
  bb<-bb.diag(bb) #Prob(column task present|row task present)
  rs<-round(rowSums(bb-t(bb)),4)
  smi[zh,"tech"]<-as.numeric(scale(ddd%*%as.matrix((rs)))*1.5+10)
}
```

**Discussion of estimated values.**

Table 1 gives some descriptive statistics for the 47 SCCS task dummies, as well as the weights for each of the 47 tasks. The weights \( w \) are the means from 30 imputed datasets; the maximum and minimum values across the 30 imputed datasets are also shown. Table 2 presents the average technological level \( \tau \) for each of the 186 SCCS societies across the 30 imputed datasets.

The weights \( w \) in Table 1 seem reasonable. Loom weaving is higher than spinning which is higher than cordage; dairy is higher than milking which is higher than large domestic animals; leather is higher than skins, and so on. At first glance, it may seem anomalous that smelting is higher than metal, but since metal sources are localized, and metal is a weight-losing product, much cheaper to process close to the source, it is clear that many societies would obtain metal through trade, and only a few would obtain it through their own smelting.

The SCCS societies differ in their focal dates, so that societies coded from more recent ethnographies are likely to have access to more advanced technology. Figure 1 shows a map of the technological level \( \tau \) scores: small, yellowish points are societies with the lowest levels and large, reddish points are the highest levels. The light blue borders are convex hulls showing regions of high positive spatial autocorrelation (in these regions, a society's technological level is likely to be similar to its neighbors). The highest ranking societies have both dairy and
metalwork, and include most African pastoralists. Societies in the Americas and Melanesia lack large domesticated animals, and tend to have low values.

Figure 1: Technological level (not spatially smoothed). Larger red points represent higher values, smaller yellow points low values. The cyan lines demarcate convex hulls around regions of significant local autocorrelation.

In our brief discussion of the views of Gilfillan, Ayres, and Jacobs, we mentioned that technological level was hypothesized to be higher in societies that are sedentary, possess writing and record-keeping, engage in significant cross-cultural contact and trade, are urbanized, have advanced transportation technology, and have a growing population. Figure 2 (top) shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between technological level $\tau$ and measures of these hypothesized covariates. All correlations are highly significant and of the expected sign. Perhaps the only surprise is that sedentism is one of the weakest of these covariates: pastoral peoples with dairy and metal technology rank high with our measure of technological level.

Our measure of technological level correlates highly ($r=.59$) with the SCCS measure of overall societal complexity (SCCS v158.1), which is formed as the sum of ten different ordinal measures: Writing and Records; Fixity of Residence; Agriculture; Urbanization; Technological Specialization; Land Transport; Money; Density of Population; Political Integration; and Social Stratification. Societal complexity includes much more than simply the level of technology, and one can see from the bottom chart in Figure 2 that some less complex societies
have high levels of technology (such as the Masai) and some complex societies rank relatively low on level of technology (such as the Siamese). Thus, our measure of technological level should be useful for those who seek a metric for the technological division of labor, not confounded with the elements of division of labor based on hierarchy and stratification.
Figure 2: Correlation coefficients for measures hypothesized to covary with $\tau$ (top). Technological level correlates highly with cultural complexity, but is nevertheless different (bottom). Dotted red lines mark median values; the solid blue line is the lowess smoother (Cleveland 1979).
## Tables

Table 1: Weights $w$ for the 47 identifiable technologies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCCS</th>
<th>description</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>$b_{ij}$</th>
<th>$w$</th>
<th>$w_{max}$</th>
<th>$w_{min}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v2164</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Wood</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>0.995</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>-12.166</td>
<td>-12.026</td>
<td>-12.312</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2175</td>
<td>Miscellaneous: Housebuilding</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.995</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>-12.164</td>
<td>-12.024</td>
<td>-12.313</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2150</td>
<td>Extractive Industries: Fuel Gathering</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>0.994</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>-12.153</td>
<td>-12.016</td>
<td>-12.301</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2143</td>
<td>Food Preparation: Vegetal: Food Preparation</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>0.989</td>
<td>0.106</td>
<td>-11.882</td>
<td>-11.599</td>
<td>-12.068</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2169</td>
<td>Miscellaneous: Fire</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.984</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>-11.718</td>
<td>-11.580</td>
<td>-11.867</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2160</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Rope or Cordage</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>0.982</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>-11.647</td>
<td>-11.370</td>
<td>-11.868</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2173</td>
<td>Miscellaneous: Burden Carrying</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>-11.226</td>
<td>-10.604</td>
<td>-11.611</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2168</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Musical Instruments</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>0.953</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>-10.430</td>
<td>-10.020</td>
<td>-10.639</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2144</td>
<td>Food Preparation: Butchering</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>0.952</td>
<td>0.214</td>
<td>-10.265</td>
<td>-9.649</td>
<td>-10.706</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2126</td>
<td>Food Collection: Vegetal</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>0.944</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>-9.634</td>
<td>-9.175</td>
<td>-9.947</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2140</td>
<td>Food Production: Small Domestic Animals</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>-9.232</td>
<td>-8.693</td>
<td>-9.505</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2171</td>
<td>Extractive Industries: Bodily Mutilation</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.921</td>
<td>0.271</td>
<td>-8.215</td>
<td>-7.513</td>
<td>-9.016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2127</td>
<td>Food Collection: Insects, and/or Small Land Fauna</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>-5.588</td>
<td>-4.443</td>
<td>-6.489</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2132</td>
<td>Food Collection: Trapping</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>0.883</td>
<td>0.322</td>
<td>-5.490</td>
<td>-4.853</td>
<td>-6.756</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2165</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Bone</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>0.900</td>
<td>0.301</td>
<td>-5.158</td>
<td>-4.211</td>
<td>-6.499</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2131</td>
<td>Food Collection: Fishing</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>0.841</td>
<td>0.367</td>
<td>-4.916</td>
<td>-4.441</td>
<td>-5.087</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2157</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Matmaking</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>-4.473</td>
<td>-3.564</td>
<td>-5.143</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2145</td>
<td>Food Preparation: Preservation</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>0.807</td>
<td>0.396</td>
<td>-4.381</td>
<td>-3.787</td>
<td>-4.819</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2133</td>
<td>Food Collection: Large Land Fauna</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>0.800</td>
<td>0.401</td>
<td>-2.386</td>
<td>-1.864</td>
<td>-3.085</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2146</td>
<td>Food Preparation: Drinks</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td>0.414</td>
<td>-2.207</td>
<td>-1.741</td>
<td>-2.906</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2135</td>
<td>Food Production: Land Clearance</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>-1.732</td>
<td>-1.612</td>
<td>-1.909</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v2139</td>
<td>Food Production: Harvesting</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.762</td>
<td>0.427</td>
<td>-1.732</td>
<td>-1.612</td>
<td>-1.909</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2162</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Clothing</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>0.779</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>-0.837</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>-1.665</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2138</td>
<td>Food Production: Crop Tending</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>0.442</td>
<td>-0.691</td>
<td>-0.566</td>
<td>-0.868</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2136</td>
<td>Food Production: Soil Preparation</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>0.734</td>
<td>0.443</td>
<td>-0.430</td>
<td>-0.314</td>
<td>-0.614</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2153</td>
<td>Intermediate Processing: Skins</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0.723</td>
<td>0.449</td>
<td>0.234</td>
<td>1.059</td>
<td>-0.360</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2166</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Stone</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>0.727</td>
<td>0.447</td>
<td>0.741</td>
<td>2.188</td>
<td>-0.530</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2158</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Netmaking</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0.710</td>
<td>0.455</td>
<td>1.982</td>
<td>3.325</td>
<td>0.572</td>
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<td>v2161</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Leather</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>0.478</td>
<td>3.393</td>
<td>4.397</td>
<td>2.600</td>
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<td>v2163</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Pottery</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>0.645</td>
<td>0.480</td>
<td>3.767</td>
<td>4.426</td>
<td>2.968</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2154</td>
<td>Intermediate Processing: Spinning</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>0.641</td>
<td>0.481</td>
<td>4.665</td>
<td>6.422</td>
<td>3.696</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2129</td>
<td>Food Collection: Honey</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>0.642</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>5.112</td>
<td>6.488</td>
<td>3.877</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2172</td>
<td>Miscellaneous: Bonesetting/Surgery</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0.622</td>
<td>0.487</td>
<td>5.650</td>
<td>7.780</td>
<td>3.373</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2141</td>
<td>Food Production: Large Domestic Animals</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>0.587</td>
<td>0.494</td>
<td>6.692</td>
<td>6.832</td>
<td>6.492</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2170</td>
<td>Miscellaneous: Laundering</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>0.591</td>
<td>0.494</td>
<td>7.048</td>
<td>9.594</td>
<td>5.170</td>
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<td>v2174</td>
<td>Miscellaneous: Boatbuilding</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>0.549</td>
<td>0.499</td>
<td>8.966</td>
<td>9.595</td>
<td>8.304</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2155</td>
<td>Intermediate Processing: Loom Weaving</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>0.524</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>10.331</td>
<td>11.541</td>
<td>9.611</td>
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<td>v2128</td>
<td>Food Collection: Shellfish/Small Aquatic Fauna</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>0.475</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>12.363</td>
<td>13.440</td>
<td>11.603</td>
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<td>v2167</td>
<td>Manufacturing: Metal</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>0.480</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>12.754</td>
<td>13.062</td>
<td>12.330</td>
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<tr>
<td>v2142</td>
<td>Food Production: Milking</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.465</td>
<td>20.581</td>
<td>20.762</td>
<td>20.401</td>
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<td>v2134</td>
<td>Food Collection: Large Aquatic Fauna</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>0.282</td>
<td>0.451</td>
<td>20.679</td>
<td>21.097</td>
<td>20.380</td>
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Notes: $N$, mean, and $sd$ are from the original SCCS data. Last four columns are results from multiple imputed datasets ($m=30$); $b_{ij}$ = the average number of times task was present across the 30 imputed datasets (average diagonal of matrix B); $w$ = measure of technological level (row sums of matrix P); and the maximum and minimum values of $w$ across the 30 imputed datasets.
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Notes: The number of variables with missing values for each society is given; there are 47 variables in all. Technological level $\tau$ is the mean from 30 imputed datasets, using equation 1. The scores are standardized, with a mean of 10 and a standard deviation of 1.5. The maximum and minimum scores across the 30 imputed datasets are also given.
References


