

Qualitative demographic research: Challenging paradigms

Session convenor: Dr. Rishita Nandagiri (London School of Economics)

4.00pm Tuesday 14 September

India's sex ratio patterning and gender geography: the curious position of Chhattisgarh
Devanshi Chanchani; Brunel University, London

From village-based qualitative research in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarhi, this paper interprets the curious gender characteristics and demographic outcomes that Chhattisgarh presents. From this, it contributes to theoretical debates on the regional geography of female autonomy in India, its economic or cultural underpinnings, and its implications for demographic patterning. It further seeks to unpack the multi-layered dynamic of gender, which defies easy generalisation. Chhattisgarh presents near neutral adult sex ratios and more females to males in the child sex ratio. Although kinship systems for non-advansi groups follow important 'northern' or exogamous principals, which are argued, by Dyson and Moore's thesis, to be unfavourable to female power or autonomy, gender relations are, counterintuitively, relatively egalitarian when judged by indicators such as sex ratio and attitudes towards female sexuality or remarriage. Curiously for this context however, son preference in the family composition finds a sharp expression, and Chhattisgarh presents a challenge to the usually conceived inverse relationship between female autonomy or power and fertility rates. Whereas Chhattisgarh displays unique cultural characteristics, the dependence on women's labour in the state's rice-based agrarian economy may make women's position less susceptible to subordination, and conceivably mitigate the predicted unfavourable-to-women effects of exogamous marriage.

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Using of stories and vignettes to elicit participation and nuanced views in focus group discussions for demographic research
Leigh Senderowicz; University of Wisconsin-Madison

While qualitative methods are still not as widely accepted and understood as quantitative methods in demography, there is a growing understanding that qualitative methods can fill in important gaps in our understanding of demographic phenomena. But qualitative methods in demography tend to be conceived as monolith – as a single totalized approach to research defined in opposition to quantitative methods, rather than a rich tapestry of divergent approaches, each with its own epistemology and approach to data collection/analysis. Here I share some of my experiences with a novel approach to qualitative data collection in demographic research: focus group vignettes. As part of a multi-site mixed-methods study contraceptive autonomy in sub-Saharan Africa, we conducted a total of 17 focus group discussions with women of reproductive age. Focus groups were stratified by age, marital status, religious and level of education to promote sociodemographic homogeneity among participants. The concept of contraceptive autonomy is novel and had not yet been defined by any previous exploratory work, posing challenges for discussion guide development. Our research team chose to use vignettes and stories for two primary reasons: 1) to help promote lively discussion; and 2) to elicit nuanced discussion about the complexities of contraceptive autonomy, and the ways that different social actors (including the contraceptive user, her partner, her provider, and social network among others) impact contraceptive decision-making. The use of vignettes among in our focus group discussion did indeed accomplish these goals, stimulating lively debate and proving effective at eliciting nuanced views of this complex topic.

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Relational Reproduction: Interrogating the centring of qualitative epistemologies in a survey on sexual and reproductive health

Joe Strong; London School of Economics and Political Science

The reproductive body is not a sealed unit, but rather one that is (re)constructed and given meaning through contextual conditions, interactions, and relations. In order to understand the conditions under which people navigate (non)reproduction and parenthood, as well as their experience accessing desired care, it is essential to understand the context and normative environment within which reproductive injustice persists. Quantitative research has been instrumental in providing data on sexual and reproductive health. However, the ability for these data to capture realities are limited, particularly in understanding the relationality of people's reproductive lives. The reliance that sexual and reproductive health is quantifiable and categorizable remains inadequately interrogated within Demography. This presentation interrogates the constructed nature of sex and reproduction. It reflects on the process of using qualitative Feminist and Queer epistemologies in the construction of survey, which collected data from a sample (n=299) of men, that explored the relationships between masculinities, reproduction, and abortions in Accra, Ghana. Responses to the survey provide evidence that sex, reproduction and the reproductive body are socially constructed, deeply embedded in complex and highly gendered processes. Men defined their attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health in relational terms. This was particularly significant in men's understandings of pregnancy supportability and abortion acceptability. Whilst these data are highly complex, they challenge existing assumptions of the quantifiable, easily categorizable nature of sexual and reproductive health attitudes and behaviours. They encourage a relational, constructionist approach towards data collection that allows space for people's lived realities.

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Qualitative approaches to illuminating hidden fertility behaviours: Evidence from interviews on self-managed abortion in the United States

Dana M. Johnson, Kathleen Broussard, Luisa Alejandra Tello Pérez, Carol-Armelle Ze-Noah; The University of Texas at Austin

Research question: Self-managed abortion (SMA) appears to be a growing phenomenon in the United States. Due to abortion stigma and the occurrence of SMA outside of the formal healthcare setting, it is difficult to measure using standard survey methodologies. To illuminate the experiences with and perceptions of abortion among populations who are often under analyzed by researchers, we advocate for the use of multi-pronged, qualitative research methods. Methods and Data: We conducted anonymous, in-depth interviews with 46 abortion care providers and 80 individuals in the United States who self-managed their abortion using medications acquired from a non-profit online telemedicine organization. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using the principles of grounded theory. Results: Abortion care providers and individuals who self-managed their abortion had a wide range of knowledge about self-management. Providers offered an institutional-level view of the practice, with a focus on patient safety and autonomy, and positioned self-managed abortion in the broader context of reproductive rights and justice. People who self-managed provided an individual-level view, detailing their personal experience, as well as the social networks, both in-person and online, that they relied on for support and information about how to self-manage their abortion. Conclusion: Our analysis of two distinct perspectives provides a rich view of self-managed abortion across populations situated both within the clinical setting and outside of it. A qualitative approach allows us to develop valuable insights into an abortion practice that has been difficult to quantify and examine at the population level.

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Rebuilding life in Timor-Leste: Resisting numbers through narratives of population

Laura Burke; University of Kent

My ethnographic research investigates the narratives of population change in Timor-Leste. It explores what it means to reproduce life after conflict and crisis in a country which has experienced intense periods of conflict

and loss of life, followed by rapid population growth. Here I critically consider the relationship between population, reproduction, and environment, questioning these categories and their significance to the multiple actors (including local, state, international development, and Catholic institutions) involved in shaping life in post-independent Timor-Leste. During the 18 months ethnographic fieldwork for this project, I found myself lost in numbers, having 'a crisis of ethnography' as quantitative methods and findings were encouraged and expected from local and non-local actors. How can we research population ethnographically? How can we consider narratives about population, and demographic changes, such as population decline, growth, and theories such as the demographic dividend, from the perspective of those being counted? Taking a qualitative ethnographic approach to the topic of population, my research explores what narratives proliferate around the population and how they relate to different understandings of reproduction and the environment. I draw on the work of Michelle Murphy and Jade Sasser and others who ground their research within a reproductive justice framework whilst unsettling some of the widely embedded Malthusian and neo-Malthusian thinking and what this means for inequalities in reproduction in Timor-Leste's animated, post-conflict development landscape.

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