

Ethics in Demographic Research

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Demographic research, has increasingly become field-based involving primary data collection and the nature of inquiry and its scope has widened a great deal in recent years.

The ethical considerations that stem in order to conduct such enquires begin from asking ourselves the very first question: Is such an enquiry doable or does it violate the basic privacy of human beings? Also, would the information enhance our understanding of the issue, which would have larger implications for policy or programme?

A lot of demographic research has tended to examine secondary sources of information. The sources have been: (1) Decennial censuses of which India has an uninterrupted series since 1881 giving basic demographic information; (2) the Sample Registration system data that have been important source of information on vital events since the early 1960s; (3) the National Sample Surveys from early 1950 onwards; and (4) for the decade of the 1990s the two National Family Health Surveys. Besides these, there have been a number of other state or district level surveys, conducted by Population Research Centres or those sponsored directly by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (the three family planning surveys conducted during 1970, 1980 and 1989, for example) whose results have been periodically reanalyzed by demographers. All these data sources, although collected mostly by government machinery (and therefore, we can take a stand that the ethical considerations are not our concern) are readily available and do not pose any ethical issues to the analysts since they are not directly or even indirectly involved in collection of the data. Although at a larger level, as users of data, it does concern us whether any ethical guidelines were provided to those who have been involved in the collection of data, and how the issues such as whether the anonymity of the individual respondents has been maintained or safeguarded and whether the respondents have not been coaxed into giving responses against their wishes etc.

The relatively straightforward demographic variables on which information is sought is generally in the public domain in the community and is rarely perceived as sensitive to require any adherence to ethical standards. The standard variables at the individual level are age, sex of the individual, place of residence, marital status, education, and occupation. At the household level information is collected on basic amenities, assets and household characteristics such as religion and caste. Very rarely, are respondents unwilling to respond to these questions or very rarely a need for privacy is felt or that the interview should be conducted in privacy and not in public view of the onlookers or neighbours or other members of the family.

However, since about 1970s, many demographers have been involved in primary data

collection. What began as KAP or knowledge, attitude and practice surveys of family planning methods, over the years, cultural and behavioural questions got included in the surveys in order gain deeper understanding of the factors that determine use or non-use of contraception or fertility decisions. Researchers at Population Research Centres, social science research institutes and to a lesser extent university departments began to canvass questionnaires to collect information on a range of issues including intimate or personal behaviour of individuals, sexuality issues that would normally manifest in the private domain.

Thus, increasingly, the demographers have gone much beyond simply collecting information on demographic characteristics or ascertaining the levels of contraceptive use or reasons for nonuse and are seeking information to understand the differentials within and between population groups. They are also trying to probe into why differentials or variations are observed. They have also been exploring much more deeply into the intimate partner relationships, knowledge and practice not just of contraception, for example, but of sexuality, sexual norms prevalent or acceptable in the population groups, use of violence and how it affects behaviour, relationships and outcomes, sexual behaviours which have repercussions on health outcomes and a host of such issues. The ethical considerations that stem in order to conduct such enquires begin from asking ourselves the very first question: Is such an enquiry doable or does it violate the basic privacy of human beings? Also, would the information enhance our understanding of the issue, which would have larger implications for policy or programme?

Ethical Issues

In this context, I would like to raise a few questions and not always try to answer them. Several of these are general questions that are pertinent to all social science research. If we do not prepare written documents for investigators as answers to many of them, these issues have to be discussed during the orientation of the field staff. Some are relevant to demographic research, which has increasingly become field-based involving primary data collection and whose nature of inquiry and the scope has widened a great deal in recent years.

- Why do we want to conduct a particular research? Or seek information from

individuals? How will it benefit us as researchers, the people from whom we are seeking information or the programme managers and policy makers who design programmes and would they or are they likely to take into account the findings in modifying the existing programme or designing new programmes?

- If we are sure of this first step, do we at the very outset inform the respondents the purpose of our research enquiry? What do and how do we inform the individuals from whom we are seeking information the purpose of our research? Do we promise much more than what we can deliver? In order to justify our inquiry, do we tell them that the findings will make a lot of difference to them, when we know that the process involved in making a difference to people is often difficult, a number of actors involved who all have to agree to make the change, or that such a process would take enormous amount of time, even if positive measures are expected. In our enthusiasm do we make false promises?
- Who are our investigators? How well are they trained? There often is a curiosity about the background of the investigators among the respondents. How much of our own background do we reveal? How do we handle such situations?
- The next concern is what care are we taking to frame the questions in a language that does not hurt the sensitivities of the individuals? How do we introduce the sensitive questions? When do we introduce them in the course of canvassing the questionnaire?
- One of the questions that social scientists in general and demographers in particular face is the sample selection. Invariably, when randomly selected few households are visited, the questions posed to the investigators are: why I and why not others have been chosen to answer the questions. There are fears in the minds of some that they have done something wrong or that we will deny or distribute some benefits to some only. How do we dispel such fears or myths? Do we do it truthfully?
- Demographic inquiries are increasingly touching on issues of gender relations, domestic violence, sex selective abortion, pre-marital sexual encounters, which are all very sensitive issues. These are issues that require obtaining from the participants informed consent, ensuring complete privacy and the comfort level of the respondent. How are we handling all these ethical concerns while asking questions related to these issues?
- As many of you are probably aware, the Third NFHS will be collecting blood samples to test hemoglobin level of all the women in reproductive ages and a sample of households where all the respondents will be tested for HIV. This requires very careful handling both with regard to how do we explain the purpose of taking the blood sample, especially for HIV and the actual drawing of blood since fear is associated with the very act of drawing of blood.
- Similarly, questions on domestic violence themselves can sometimes trigger violence. Do we have a mechanism to address such an eventuality? How do

we comfort or protect the women who report violence and who fear violence after talking to the investigators? On such sensitive questions and issues that are likely to have repercussions later on, ensuring absolute privacy and confidentiality is very essential. If we cannot ensure that, do we think that it is better not to canvass the questions than to face the dilemmas of this nature?

- Another general ethical concern that must be observed in the field is that when the field investigators meet after their work and while walking towards their destination, they must NOT discuss what happened with particular respondents or what information on specific questions that they obtained. The tendency to share unusual responses immediately with the colleagues is quite natural but the investigators have to be clearly instructed that they must wait until they are out of the field area to do so. Remember, someone somewhere is curious to know what field investigators talk among themselves.