

Critical methods and new approaches in demography

Strand organisers: Michaela Sedovicova and Joe Strong (LSE)

9:00 - 10:30 Tuesday 12 September: Critical Methodologies in Demography I: Novel measurements

What's the point of even asking? A review of the reliability of self-reported measures of sexual behaviour Ignacio Franco Vega - University of Bath

Background: Self-reported measures are the primary source of information to study sexual behaviour. However, they present various issues that can potentially bias the results of our research (e.g., social desirability, recall errors, inadequate question and answer structures). This study aims at establishing the effects and strengths of such bias. Methods: I conducted a systematic review to identify studies focused on assessing the reliability of self-reported measures. I was focused on those studies that contrast self-reported responses with biological markers or two self-reported measures. I am interested in the following outcomes: Contraceptive use, Number of sexual partners, and Frequency and Type of sexual activity. (Preliminary) Results: I found 7 studies contrasting self-reported measures and biomarkers of sexual behaviour (Prostate-specific antigen). Most of them studied at-risk groups in Africa. All studies showed substantial inconsistencies between the two sources; around 11% to 64% of participants misreported their sexual activity. There are other, more precise biomarkers, but no study has compared them with self-reported measures yet. I also found 24 studies contrasting self-reported measures between more than one informant or the same informant at two different times. These studies were conducted worldwide, but most were in Africa and the USA. They also found considerable inconsistencies in all outcomes of interest. Said inconsistencies were, in some cases, assessed as minimal through the artificial combination of answers or a superficial understanding of inter-rater agreement scales. Conclusions: Self-reported measures of sexual behaviour are very unreliable; scientists and policymakers should be cautious when concluding anything from them.

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Contraceptive induced menstrual changes: Implications for measuring contraceptive use and conceptualizing unmet need Melanie Channon - University of Bath

Contraceptive induced menstrual changes (CIMCs) have not been sufficiently considered in the measurement and conceptualization of either contraceptive usage or unmet need for family planning. CIMCs are generally conceptualized by demographers and family planning experts as negative minor "side effects" that might cause discontinuation or method switching. However, CIMCs aren't necessarily minor or negative; indeed, specific CIMCs might be the primary – or even sole – reason for using contraception. Current survey questions about contraceptive usage ignore the possibility of a method being used with the primary purpose of inducing menstrual changes, although we know that this occurs in a variety of contexts. This is also a problem for the current conceptualization and measurement of unmet need. This adds to a growing body of literature that argues for a realignment of metrics used when assessing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes. In particular, the concept of unmet need must grapple with the concepts of both method misalignment and dissatisfaction. Current measurement of both modern contraceptive usage and unmet need are theoretically inaccurate and biased if they fail to fully address CIMCs. I propose that both quantitative and qualitative work is required to establish whether these issues cause large or small measurement errors in reality and the extent to which this varies by context. The lack of consideration of CIMCs as anything other than negative side effects and the exclusion of menstruation in SRHR agendas until recently has caused a blind spot in measurement discussions that requires urgent attention.

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Rethinking fertility measurement: All-sex rates for accuracy and gender justice
Leslie Root and Amanda Stevenson - University of Colorado Boulder

We argue for the use of all-sex age-specific fertility rates, generated by dividing births occurring to people of a given age by the person-years lived by the full population at that age. Current definitions of fertility rates are both imprecise and exclusionary; by using estimates of the female population, they ignore important social processes that are changing the way people respond to sex and gender questions in the contexts – bureaucratic, commercial, educational, et cetera – in which this data is collected. In the near future, these naïve rates will fail to be comparable across time, both because of changes in the proportion of the population that identifies as transgender, nonbinary, and otherwise gender expansive, and because of changes in how we measure sex and gender in censuses and surveys. Furthermore, we argue that using all-sex rates advances gender justice. Measuring fertility rates by sex provides an unnecessary justification for the collection of sex and gender data in contexts where it causes harm. It is imperative that social scientists adequately consider the threat of harm created by the tracking of sex data when we use such data. Empirically, we argue that all-sex age-specific fertility rates are at least as effective in measuring fertility in most contexts as traditional “female-only” ASFRs, and are in some ways better, as they capture the effect of changes in population distributions on fertility. We show that, in the recent U.S. context, the two measures are broadly similar, and explore state-level contexts where they diverge.

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5:30 - 7:00 Tuesday 12 September: Critical Methodologies in Demography II: Ways forward

“Eavesdropping is a prevalent issue in these sorts of houses”: Understanding interviewer, structural and environmental effects on data collection in an abortion study in a complex humanitarian setting

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Evidence highlights the significant impact interviewer effects can have on abortion data. However, there remains a paucity of evidence that also acknowledges the role of structural and environmental factors, which are particularly important in complex humanitarian settings because of high population density. This research analyses interviewer, structural and environmental effects on data collection in a study on abortion gathered in 2022 among Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) and their healthcare providers in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Qualitative data from interviews with fieldworkers who conducted quantitative surveys, in-depth interviews or both (n=29) were thematically analysed to interrogate interviewer, structural and environmental effects while conducting research on sexual and reproductive health in the FDMN camps. Preliminary results include that there was some association between the interviewer and patterns in responses to ‘sensitive’ questions, including the impact of the interviewer’s (presented) marital status, non-Rohingya identity and perceptions of interviewer actions possibly demonstrating stigmatising views towards the Rohingya. What emerged unexpectedly were the roles that structural and environmental factors appear to play including the lack of privacy because of the temporary building materials used within the camps, the role of the weather on privacy and noise, and cultural and contextual challenges around the timing of interviews and women’s chores, care roles, and religious engagement. These findings offer recommendations on how to better assess and account for the role of not just the interviewer, but also the role that structural and environmental effects play on data collection.

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Excluded from benefits and survey data: Finding new ways to study migrant child poverty
Ilona Pinter - London School of Economics

There is increasing evidence that children in migrant households are at greater risk of poverty in the UK. But the reasons behind this are varied. The role that immigration policies play in driving poverty risk – for example by limiting access to social security benefits - is under-researched. Existing survey data which enables detailed analysis of socio-economic outcomes of children in the UK more generally, is of limited use when studying the impact of immigration policies in part because no survey captures immigration status. In addition, nationally representative surveys often conflate nationality and ethnicity data, providing limited opportunities for granular

intersectional analysis, which could shed light on structural inequalities based on exposure to immigration policies. The proposed analysis uses data from Understanding Society - a longitudinal panel survey with an immigrant and ethnic minority boost sample - to consider the relationship between different poverty and material deprivation indicators among children and their family's immigration histories. It compares to what extent access to certain benefits - namely children's benefits and those aimed at low-income households - protect children from poverty and material deprivation depending on their immigration background, while controlling for other socio-economic factors. The analysis highlights that Understanding Society provides a useful survey tool for studying this under-researched area.

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How do respondents make sense of the questions measuring their migration attitudes? A mixed-method study of public migration attitudes in Czechia

Michaela Šedovič - LSE, Ivana Rapoš Božič - Masaryk University

Using a unique mixed-method dataset of non-migrants, we answer, "How do non-migrants make sense of the survey questions measuring their migration attitudes and how their interpretation of these questions impacts their answers?" The existing research on the interpretation of migration-related survey questions draws primarily on Western European data, posing the question if such results are generalisable globally. Moreover, these studies rarely employ in-depth interview data. Our dataset draws on 80 in-depth interviews from five localities in Czechia, collecting information on migration attitudes using a combination of open-ended and survey questions from the European Social Survey. Respondents first participated in in-depth interviews and then answered survey questions, while their questions/comments regarding the interpretation of survey questions were recorded. We focus on how the attitudes expressed in the in-depth part of the interview overlap or contradict the attitudes measured by the survey. Czechia is one of the Central and Eastern European countries with the growing immigration flows. The growing immigration into formerly exclusively sending countries can impact public migration attitudes, considering countries' lack of experience with such processes on the cultural and policy levels. Answering our research question, our theoretical contribution is thus threefold – we analyse how individuals express their migrant attitudes in different forms of data collection and how these forms impact respondents' expressions, we offer the interpretation of the survey questions from a new destination country, and, finally, consulting previous research on this topic, we assess the potential difference in the survey questions understanding between the new and old destinations.

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Misconceptions, misinformation, and misperceptions: A case for removing the “mis-” when discussing contraceptive beliefs

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Beliefs about contraception are commonly conceptualized as playing an important role in contraceptive decision-making. Interventions designed to address beliefs typically include counselling to dispel any “myths” or “misconceptions.” These interventions currently show little evidence for impact in reducing beliefs. Based on a literature review of recent research on contraceptive beliefs and primary qualitative research on contraceptive side-effects, we explore the problems associated with using implicitly negative terminology to refer to contraceptive beliefs, which come laden with assumptions as to their validity. By conceptualizing women as getting it wrong or their beliefs as invalid, it sets the scene for dubious treatment of women's concerns and hampers the design of fruitful interventions to address them. We will discuss the advantages gained by using neutral terminology going forward in order to maintain value-free curiosity and remove any implicit assumptions about the origin or validity of a belief. We will provide recommendations for measuring contraceptive beliefs to help researchers better understand the drivers and impacts of the belief they are measuring. Finally, we discuss implications for intervention design once different types of belief are better understood. We argue that tailored interventions by belief type would help address the root causes of beliefs and better meet women's broader contraceptive needs, such as the need for contraceptive autonomy and satisfaction, compared to interventions that blanket dub education as the solution to women's concerns. This talk is based on a recent commentary for the Special Issue on Indicators in Sexual and Reproductive Health for Studies in Family Planning.

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Understanding the demographics of food insecurity: A praxis-oriented qualitative approach

Charumita Vasudev¹, Ankita Rathi¹, Swayamshree Mishra², Jasmine Fledderjohann¹ - ¹Lancaster University; ²Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Demographers have made significant empirical contributions to identifying what drives food insecurity, including the nutritional, health, and sociodemographic barriers to the availability, accessibility, and utilization of food. However, the majority of these studies have largely been quantitative and focused on macro-level phenomena. While valuable for understanding prevalence and risk factors, large-scale quantitative evidence necessarily aggregates experience in a way that loses contextualization and nuance. Here, we contribute to methodological literature on food insecurity by introducing our reflexive, praxis-oriented qualitative approach for studying food insecurity in rural villages and (peri-)urban settlements in the states of Kanpur and Goa in India. We used semi-structured interviews (collected 12/2022-03/2023) along with a household roster modelled after the Demographic and Health Surveys to explore intra-household, intergenerational, and context-specific inequalities. We conducted interviews with not only household heads and other adults, but also young people aged 7-18 in the same household. This allowed us to capture children's and youths' social understanding of food insecurity. Our data provide ground-level contextual evidence and narratives of diverse experiences and understandings of food insecurity. In this paper, we give a detailed accounting of our methodological approach, with a view to articulating context-specific considerations involved in the design and implementation of a qualitative, demographic study of food insecurity in India. We explain how and why our approach gives immense freedom to people to articulate their own notions and understanding of food and nutrition. Micro-level studies like ours complement extant approaches in demography by highlighting the dynamism associated with local food systems and the positionalities of participants.

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