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An evaluation of demographers' use of ethnographies

Short title: Demographers' use of ethnographies

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A survey of papers reporting the use of ethnographies in three population journals and an examination of two case studies show that the criticisms made by anthropologists and others of demographers' use of ethnographies are well founded. In their use of these accounts, demographers tend to present an excessively static view of social organization, to use ethnographic evidence selectively to support other findings, to be indifferent to how long ago an ethnography was produced, to take for granted the validity of the ethnographic evidence, to ignore the broader historical context in which the ethnography was produced, and to be unaware of the ways in which demographic evidence can be used at all stages of the research process. The adoption of anthropologists' suggestions for establishing the plausibility and credibility of ethnographic evidence could improve the value of the contribution made by these studies to demographic research and theory.

Keywords: anthropology, culture, ethnography, qualitative research, research methodology

Introduction

An ethnography is an account of the observation and interpretation of the activities of a cultural group. The use of these accounts to inform demographic research has a long history (Lorimer 1954), but demographers have often been criticized, especially by those engaged in anthropological demography, for failing to take full advantage of the ethnographic data available. For example, in their survey of the methods and uses of anthropological demography, Basu and Aaby describe the lack of attention paid by demographers to ethnographies as an important shortcoming (1998, p. 8).

In this paper, I am concerned with how demographic research has used existing ethnographies, not with how these were produced. A brief review of the nature of ethnography is followed by an assessment of the ways in which demographic research has drawn on ethnographies, as revealed by a survey of papers in three demographic journals over a thirty-year period and an examination of two case studies. The final section suggests the potential value for future demographic research of adopting suggestions made by anthropologists for the reading of ethnographic research.

The nature of ethnography

Ethnography is generally associated with social or cultural anthropology (Atkinson et al. 2001), though there are distinct national traditions, including those of American cultural anthropology (Faubion 2001) and British social anthropology (Macdonald 2001). The process of ethnography has been described as ‘the work of describing a culture’ (Spradley 1980, p. 3) and ‘ethno-graphy—the writing of culture’ (Atkinson

1992, p. 5), where culture refers to a group's common beliefs, experience and practice, often defined by variables such as region or language (after Basu 1992). The process can take a variety of forms and draw on a wide range of research methods, though the methods used will include some kind of participant observation. Recent developments in demography involving the incorporation of notions of culture (for example, Hammel 1990; Greenhalgh 1990; Fricke 1997) imply that ethnographies will form an increasingly important source of data and theory for demographers

The ethnographer represents reality to the reader (or viewer), from a standpoint that recognizes that there is not one reality but only multiple representations of it (Atkinson 1992). In fact there is extensive debate among practitioners about the production and use of their accounts. Indeed Greenhalgh suggests that 'Issues of ethnographic method and representation have occupied such a large place in recent anthropological discourse that it is hazardous to try to summarise what has been said' (1997, p. 821). A major theme of this discourse has been about the shift from an approach in which social structure was seen to produce rules that governed people's behaviour and maintained social order to an approach that emphasized the active contribution of individuals and groups to interpretations of and changes in their society. The issues are complex and confronting them, which Fricke (1997) has described as 'not for the faint of heart', is beyond the scope of this paper.

The written ethnography involves a representation of reality as interpreted by the ethnographer, and not simply a description. Here a parallel may be drawn with Geertz's (1973) distinction between *thin* and *thick* description. Jacobson (1991) equates the former with the image taken by a camera—an accurate but superficial

representation of reality. In contrast, thick description involves interpretation and synthesis by the ethnographer, which (to continue with the photographic metaphor) could be equated to putting a filter over the camera lens. The selection of information for the account will be influenced by the ethnographer's theoretical perspective and by any particular arguments the author wishes to support or refute.

In the next section, demographic journals are surveyed in order to examine how demographic research has used ethnographic texts over the past thirty years. This sample seemed adequate for the purposes of this paper, though of course it excludes many important studies, such as Lesthaeghe's (1989) *Reproduction and Social Organisation in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

How have demographers used ethnographies?

A survey of three demographic journals—*Population* (English summary), *Population and Development Review*, and *Population Studies*— from 1970 to 1998 supports Hammel's (1990) view that the critical use of ethnographies by demographers has far to go.

The search yielded a total of 101 papers that mentioned the term ethnography, and the way an ethnography had been used in each case was assessed. Of the 101 accounts, 85 were found to be relevant for this study; the remaining 16 referred to ethnography simply as a form of data collection in the research methods used.

The distribution over the 28-year period of papers referring to ethnography reflects the rapid rise in interest in qualitative information and research (Kertzer and

Fricke 1997; Greenhalgh 1995): 1990–98, 55 items; 1980–89, 40 items; 1970–79, 6 items. Given the debate within and outside demography about the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches, it is perhaps surprising that so little published research incorporates existing ethnographic information. While this study has used a sample of 85 reports, this represents less than five per cent of all papers published over the 28-year period. The following section identifies three main ways in which published demographic research has used ethnographies: to provide context; to validate results and conclusions; and to inform research questions. The section closes with a discussion of some more general features of the use of ethnographies.

Context-setting

The most common use of ethnographies reported in the papers surveyed was to provide background context for the research, either directly—referring to ethnographic work in the text, or indirectly—citing ethnographies in the bibliography, but not referring directly to ethnographic work in the text. One author in the latter category explains that detailed information about context is unnecessary ‘Since both the history and the ethnography are easily available to interested readers’ (Wolf 1984, p. 95).

As noted earlier, ethnography has undergone important shifts in its core ideas over the last century. An important transition relevant to this study entailed the shift away from the British tradition in which social structure was seen as a coherent system of functionally interlinked institutions that satisfied society’s requirements, and that largely controlled the behaviour of individuals. Supplanting that tradition has

been an approach that sees individuals actively constructing and interpreting their world rather than being controlled by its institutions.

Several authors (most notably Hammel (1990) and Lockwood (1995)) have been highly critical of demographers' uncritical use of ethnographies. Does their use of ethnographies to provide context in their studies warrant such criticisms? The short answer is 'Yes'. When they use ethnographies for this purpose, demographers tend to report very generalized statements about cultural norms, rules, and structures. A typical example is provided by Gage's study of premarital childbearing in Kenya and Namibia. She refers to 'a range of cultural norms governing female premarital sexual activity. On the one hand the Luo, Luhya, Maragoli and Masai [*sic*] traditionally cherished virginity and did not permit girls to engage in premarital sexual relations. On the other hand, the Akamba allowed premarital sexual intercourse for boys and girls following circumcision' (1998, p. 22). That ethnographies in the colonial British tradition are attractive to demographers (and other social scientists) is unsurprising, because they involve the subordination of an individual's behaviour to the needs of a social system that is constructed of rules and norms that govern an individual's behaviour (Lockwood 1995)

As context-setting tools, ethnographies can be invaluable to demographers, a point emphasized by Greenhalgh in the report of her study on Taiwanese land reform and entrepreneurship: 'Of all the literature on Taiwan, only ethnographic studies adequately convey the near-manic flavour of the acquisitional drive characterising Taiwanese farmers-turned-petty entrepreneurs' (1989, p. 95).

Validation

The second most common use of ethnographies in demographic research found in the survey was as information to corroborate or support the investigator's conclusions. The following examples illustrate this use. 'This result is consistent with ethnographic findings that marriage is often not a prerequisite for childbearing among blacks' (Manning and Smock 1995, p. 518). 'Both ethnographic and anecdotal evidence have long suggested the importance of structural constraints in shaping the behaviour of black teens living in inner-city neighbourhoods' (Brewster 1994, p. 611). '[The] survey has been useful in demonstrating ways of obtaining demographic results that are consistent with the ethnographic literature on marriage customs' (Meekers 1992, p. 73). Two quotations drawn from Balk (1997) are interesting because they illustrate the 'bi-directional' flow of her conclusions. In the first quotation, it is the ethnographic evidence that supports the conclusions she draws from survey data: 'Women who live with their in-laws are less mobile than those who do not, as expected from the ethnographic evidence' (1997, p. 163). In the second quotation, she presents her survey data as supporting the ethnographic evidence: 'This confirms ethnographic evidence of the powerful and controlling effect of in-laws' (1997, p. 166). The following are noteworthy among many more examples of this way of using ethnographies: Mason and Palan (1981); Jones and Grupp (1983); Suchindran et al (1985); Fricke et al (1986); Cherlin and Chamrathirong (1988); Budd and Guinane (1991); Preston et al (1992); Rosenbaum (1992); Desai and Jain (1994); Reher (1995)

Ethnographic evidence tends to be used as a way of establishing the credibility of demographic research—ostensibly to demonstrate that the integration of

ethnographic with other evidence represents 'data triangulation' (Denzin 1997). This use of ethnographic information does at least acknowledge that it is an appropriate source of complementary evidence. On the other hand, because the supporting ethnographic evidence tends to be used in the discussion or conclusions, there is usually little discussion of its reliability or validity. Further, very few researchers note whether their own results were at odds with or contradicted the ethnographic evidence they employ. In short, ethnographies are often invoked selectively by demographers to confirm the reliability and validity of their own results and conclusions.

Generation of research questions

A third group of authors among those surveyed had used ethnographies to inform their research questions. Perhaps it is this group that most closely identifies with leading practitioners of anthropological demography in calling for demography to try to integrate ethnographic information and theorising into its research. It is rare for an author to refer explicitly to this kind of integration, but here are some examples. In her study of sexual stratification in east Asia, Greenhalgh says 'My argument is based on study of my own data, data collected from parents and household registers, and on reading of ethnographic and economic studies of women in Taiwan' (1985, p. 275). In discussing the influence of social learning on fertility and developing their social effect model, Montgomery and Casterline draw on 'Ethnographic accounts of poor black neighbourhoods' (1996, p. 160). Ethnographic evidence on the low quality of reported calendar dates provides part of the impetus for Meeker's (1991) study on the effect of data entry and cleaning procedures on the measurement of first birth intervals. While there other examples, including Basu 1989, Duncan and Hoffman 1990 Bentley et al.1993, and Geronimus et al (1994),

overall there is relatively little evidence of ethnographic information being incorporated into the design and formulation of research questions.

General features

Having identified the three main ways in which demographic research uses and refers to ethnographies, I now turn to three general features that emerged from the literature review: calls for more ethnographic evidence; the ‘cautious’ tone of references to ethnographies; and the use of dated ethnographies.

Demographic researchers frequently call for more ethnographic information, perhaps better tailored to their own needs. Some examples follow. ‘Further ethnographic and clinical studies are needed to throw light on the mechanism responsible for this difference [in infertility]’ (1995, p. 344). Awusabo-Asare’s study of Ghanaian interpretations of demographic concepts concludes, ‘data collection did not make use of available ethnographic information relating to demographic variables’ (1988, p. 684). Here he is endorsing the notion, now accepted though less often put into practice, that the design of standardized research instruments should make use of culturally relevant information (for example, Greenhalgh 1982; Meekers 1992). Other researchers calling for greater use of ethnographic information include Geronimus (1987) and Chidambaram and Pullum (1981).

A second feature that emerged from the literature review was the ‘cautious’ way in which authors referred to ethnographies. For example, Carey and Lopreato note, ‘we know little of such variations [in the number of surviving children] beyond what recent ethnographic data would imply’ (1995, p. 622). Here, they acknowledge

the existence of a body of ethnographic information of relevance, but choose not to explore it, despite the paucity of information available to them. Similarly, Telford concludes, 'The figure of 300 girl babies being killed per 1,000 live births is, in fact, the level Dickeman has reported, based on rather scanty ethnographic evidence' (1992, p. 33). Rindfuss and Morgan express this cautiousness about ethnographies rather more directly, concluding, 'It is always possible in relying on ethnographic literature that one is dealing with the unusual rather than the ordinary' (1983, p. 270).

The third feature of many of the references to ethnographies is simply their age. While historical ethnographies are of course useful in constructing a chronological comparison, the use of an ethnography written decades prior to a study as though it provided contemporaneous evidence suggests a lack of attention to changes over time. Some examples drawn from the literature reviewed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 here

The use of an ethnography requires some acknowledgement of its broader historical context. The writers of early ethnographic accounts included missionaries, explorers, and colonial administrators (and their spouses). It is reasonable to assume that the reliability of such accounts varies considerably, and that this also applies to their authors' motivation for writing the ethnography in the first place. The ethnographer may have misinterpreted what he or she saw, or may have had an ulterior motive in portraying a particular version of the society studied. When reading classic ethnographies, it is often important to understand the historical circumstances

in which they were written. Using the example of Evans-Pritchards' ethnography *The Nuer*, Rosaldo points out that a context of domination can affect ethnographic accounts more deeply than their authors are prepared to admit. He notes, 'The anthropologist, a British subject, collected information from unwilling Nuer informants in a period when the British raided their camps' (1986, 93).

One study that acknowledges explicitly the time difference between the research and the quoted ethnographies is that by Fricke et al, who state 'our sources for ethnographic and survey data are often separated by approximately two decades' (1986, p. 505). They go on to note the drawbacks of using ethnographies that refer to villages different from those in which their survey was carried out.

Case studies

In order to illustrate some of the shortcomings in the use of written ethnographies by demographers, this section considers examples from two substantial pieces of research drawn from the work of J.C. Caldwell. He is one of the few demographers to have acknowledged explicitly the limitations of ethnographies, and is also one of the few demographers to have welcomed their use. The discussion of Caldwell's work, which has made an immense contribution to the development of demography over the past few decades, is not confined to the journals used in the literature review presented above.

The first example illustrates what has been described by Heald (1995, p.490) as a 'fairly cavalier' approach to source material and is from Caldwell's model of 'African sexuality' (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1987; Caldwell et al 1989; Caldwell et al

1991). The Caldwellian model of African sexuality is described as ‘a distinct and internally coherent African system embracing sexuality, marriage, and much else’ (1989, p. 187). More broadly, the model describes the fundamental importance of lineage organization, with an emphasis on reproduction and descent. According to his account, the desire of males for descendants is so strong that it is manifested in high levels of polygyny and divorce. When describing the extent and value of the virginity of females at marriage in traditional Yoruba society (1991), Caldwell draws upon work by Ward (1937), Ellis (1964), Bascom (1969), Talbot (1969) and Fadipe (1970). What should be noted, however, is the date of the fieldwork upon which the ethnographies are based. For example, Ellis's work (published in 1964) was based on fieldwork in Yorubaland in the 1880s and early 1890s. At no point in the review of this work is any reference made to the validity of these accounts.

The second example is drawn from the debate about the link between the circumcision of males and rates of HIV infection reported by Caldwell et al (1993). Briefly, their argument states that the geographical correlation between the areas of sub-Saharan Africa where males are not circumcised and those with the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS is so high that it cannot be explained as accidental, but must demonstrate either direct or indirect causation or both. These conclusions were based largely on the use of ethnographic data, most notably Murdock's (1967) *Ethnographic Atlas*. Conant (1995) roundly criticizes the foundations on which Caldwell et al drew their conclusions. Firstly, he suggests that the study ‘could benefit from a more critical approach to the ethnographic data’ (p. 109). Secondly, he suggests the need for ‘a “contemporary relevance index” for ethnographic and other source materials’ to take into account change over time.

Replying to Conant's criticisms, Caldwell acknowledges that 'There are gaps in the circumcision status data, and doubtless some information was wrong at the time and some other information has since become outdated' (1995, p. 114). However, he then states that he and his colleagues 'tested' the circumcision data in three ways. Firstly, after returning to the original reports collected by Murdock from anthropologists, they concluded that the summaries in Murdock's Atlas were reliable 'because most of the anthropologists from whose research the conclusions were drawn were males in a position to deal with male matters' (p.114). Secondly, they compared Murdock's reports with 'as many contemporary ethnographic accounts as possible to ascertain currently reported circumcision status...[but]...this was not very rewarding as anthropologist's interests have changed' (p.114). Caldwell's third 'test' was to take 'the opportunity of visits, lectures and seminars across sub-Saharan Africa to raise the question of the current circumcision status of ethnic groups with as many people from different ethnicities as possible' (p.114). They do acknowledge that this approach was not particularly scientific.

These case studies illustrate the way demographers use descriptions of social behaviour that support and reinforce static notions of society, without questioning the role of individuals in creating, shaping and maintaining that society (Lockwood 1995). The following section considers what 'tools' are available to the reader of ethnography, and attempts to address the question 'How *should* an ethnography be used?'

How should ethnography be used?

There is a large body of literature that discusses ethnography and its production in great detail (most recently, Atkinson *et al* 2001), but much less has been published on the assessment and reading of ethnographic research. This may in part explain the demographer's lack of attention to the interpretation of that research. Specific tools and skills are necessary if ethnographic information is to be adequately incorporated into a demographic study.

Jacobson's description of how ethnographies are commonly read identifies the approach to be avoided: 'Readers may understandably approach an ethnography as if it were a simple account of a people, society, or culture. They may assume that an ethnographic monograph portrays directly, in an unfiltered fashion, the subject with which it is concerned. They may read an ethnography as if it were a documentary or journalistic story, an example of straight reportage. When they this way, however, they miss much of the meaning of the monograph and the significance of the ethnography it contains.' (1991, p. 1)

This section summarizes frameworks proposed by two authors that prescribe how an ethnography *should* be evaluated. The utility of these frameworks for demographers is then illustrated using the example of Caldwell's exchange with Conant reviewed above.

Jacobson suggests three ways in which the claims made in an ethnography can be evaluated. Firstly, an ethnography can be compared with 'accounts of other societies that are similar...thereby providing a framework for evaluating its

interpretation' (1991, p. 11). Secondly, the reader can compare the account with other ethnographies of the same society. Finally, Jacobson suggests an 'internal' evaluation of the ethnographer's interpretation. That is, 'the reader tests the fit between the ethnographer's interpretations and the evidence presented within the ethnographic account' (p.11).

Another framework for assessing ethnographic accounts, proposed by Hammersley (1998), is explicitly directed at establishing their validity—the degree to which the method of collecting information results in accurate information (Madrigal 1998). His schema comprises a three-step procedure for applying the criteria of plausibility and credibility. Plausibility he defines as 'whether or not it [a knowledge claim] is very likely to be true given what we currently take to be well-established knowledge'. Credibility refers to 'whether it seems likely that the ethnographer's judgement of matters relating to the claim are accurate given the nature of the phenomena concerned, the circumstances of the research, the characteristics of the researcher, and so on' (*op cit.*).

The three steps proposed by Hammersley are as follows. Firstly, one asks the question 'How plausible is the knowledge claim?' He suggests that there are rarely cases where one is able to accept knowledge claims without first needing to have some background information about the researcher's motivation. Secondly, the credibility of the knowledge claim should be assessed. Again, Hammersley argues that there are very few occasions on which credibility can be accepted immediately. The final step is an assessment of the validity of the evidence, achieved by examining the plausibility and credibility of the evidence itself. Thus, the plausibility and

credibility of both the researcher and the evidence are assessed. Hammersley is aware of the limitations of the schema, and notes them: there is no way of knowing for certain whether judgements are correct; and judgements will not necessarily be generally agreed because opinions about plausibility and credibility will differ.

The utility of Hammersley's and Jacobson's frameworks can be illustrated by applying them to Caldwell et al's work on the relationship between HIV and the circumcision of males. First, to what extent did their use of ethnographic material match Jacobson's evaluation criteria? In their response to Conant's criticisms of their work, Caldwell does not present evidence of having completed an internal evaluation of the ethnographer's interpretations. He does, however, compare the accounts he uses from the *Ethnographic Atlas* with other, more recent, ethnographic accounts of the same societies. The fact that he uses many ethnographic reports from one source could be interpreted as being equivalent to making comparisons with ethnographies of other, similar societies.

Do the three 'tests' of the circumcision data described by Caldwell in his response to Conant's criticisms correspond with the tests of plausibility and credibility proposed by Hammersley? One indication of plausibility is the fact that the data were collected by male anthropologists on a decidedly 'male' topic. Issues of credibility do not appear to have been explored. Validity was assessed by comparing the ethnographies used with other (more recent) ethnographies and by ad hoc enquiries among people of different ethnicities.

Hammersley's approach is attractive for two reasons. The first is pragmatic. He offers a practical step-by-step strategy to the non-ethnographer seeking an effective way of reading and assessing ethnographic work. The second attraction lies in the scope and rigour of the method: the evaluation of validity by an assessment of the credibility and plausibility of both the ethnographer and the evidence. In stressing the importance of examining the role of the ethnographer in the production of an ethnography, Hammersley introduces an element that is missing from Jacobson's schema.

Discussion

Over the past two decades, developments within demography have included a greater willingness to use sources of information, approaches, and techniques not traditionally associated with the field. Part of the evidence for this is the rapid rise since 1970 in the number of articles referring to ethnographies. Accompanying their increased use have been debates about method, most notably those dealing with the development of the 'micro-approach' or 'quasi-anthropological' methods largely associated with the work of Caldwell and his colleagues. Their use has not always been greeted enthusiastically by non-demographers. Fricke, for example, described demography as having a 'creative anarchy of methods and measures' (1997, p. 250) resulting in a 'methodological free-for-all'. (1997, p. 26). Several reviewers have commented on the practical (Knodel 1997) and epistemological (Greenhalgh 1997) problems for demographers in successfully incorporating ethnographic methods into their research. Indeed, Hammel concludes, 'Teamwork with an ethnographer experienced in the area may be the only practical solution, if the ethnographer can be taught to count' (1990, p. 472).

The trend towards greater use of ethnographies in demographic research shows little sign of reversing and should be encouraged. However, ethnographers' misgivings about the ways in which these accounts are used or incorporated in their studies by demographers appear to be justified. The literature review suggests that demographers have tended to read ethnographies as straightforward accounts of contemporary reality, even though the account might be nearly a century old. The review shows also that very rarely do authors present (however obliquely) evidence that they have sought to confirm the validity or reliability of the ethnographic evidence, and that rarely is there any allusion to contradictions between this evidence and findings from other sources.

From this study's examination of trends in demographers' use of ethnographies, it is clear that the case for using ethnographies at all stages of the research process—formulation of research question, design of study, fieldwork (if involved), analysis, and interpretation—has yet to be accepted. Given the long history of ethnography as an intellectual endeavour, and the recent emergence of anthropological demography, it is perhaps surprising that so little attention has been paid to the consumption of ethnographies by demographers. Hentschel suggests that 'Partly, this is due to researchers and analysts remaining within their methodological and epistemological heritage; partly, it is due to quite practical problems of integrating the macro, broad picture with the micro analysis' (1998, p. 3).

There are few societies in the world for which ethnographies do not exist, and this extensive coverage should appeal to demographers. By developing the skills

needed to use this form of evidence (skills not normally associated with demography) demographers can draw on the strengths of ethnographers to enhance their own work, though some authors have queried whether the skills needed to do quantitative demography and use ethnographies can reside in one person (Hammel 1990; Basu and Aaby 1998). Their use could be facilitated by the application of frameworks such as Hammersley's (1998), which are compatible with the values of demography as a field with a 'strong tradition of attending to issues of data quality' (Knodel 1997, p. 849).

It has to be conceded that ethnographies do not always provide information tailored exactly to the needs of a demographic study, a shortcoming that demographic researchers have been quick to point out. Hill's study of demographic responses to Sahelian food shortages, for example, notes 'The ethnographic literature contains descriptions and analyses of most of the major ethnic groups but very little comparative work on, for instance, links between the groups' ecological circumstances and their social organisation' (1989, p. 173). Lockwood makes a similar point 'the social demographer seeking detailed ethnographic data on such issues as sexuality, abstinence, breastfeeding, and use of contraception has until recently had little to go on' (1995, p. 25).

There can of course be no single interpretation of an ethnography. The meanings that demographers will derive from one will be shaped in large part by the ideas prevailing in the disciplinary communities to which they belong (Tedlock 2000, p. 459). But it is important for the demographer to be aware of the wider context in which the ethnography was produced, not least of the motivation that led to its production. The integration of ethnographic detail at all stages in the research process

does require specific skills, but can lead to a strengthening of demographic research and theory.

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Table 1: Examples of demographic research using dated ethnographies

Author	Year of demographic research	Year of ethnography
Borgerhoff Mulder	1989	1939, 1947, 1963, 1967, 1972, 1973, 1988
Hogan <i>et al</i>	1985	1962, 1964
Morgan and Rindfuss	1984	1963
Malhotra	1991	1961, 1969
Preston <i>et al</i>	1992	1939
Tucker	1986	1959