

Ethnographic demography: the use of ethnographic texts by demographers

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The use of ethnographies to inform demographic research has a long history. Lorimer's (1954) publication of "Culture and Human Fertility" attempted to draw together "a mass of incidental, though generally inconclusive, evidence...in historical, anthropological, sociological and demographic studies" (1954:i). That demographers have failed to exploit fully anthropological information is acknowledged, particularly by those engaged in anthropological demography¹. 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" (1998:8). This study is concerned with how demographic research has used existing ethnographic information. A brief review of ethnography precedes a survey of peer-reviewed articles in demographic journals spanning a thirty-year period. This provides a systematic assessment of the way in which demographic research² has drawn upon ethnographic writing. The final section assesses some of the frameworks that have been proposed for the reading of ethnographies, and demonstrates their utility for demographic research.

It is important to be clear that this study is concerned only with ethnography as product³, not ethnography as process, although the two are inextricably linked. This distinction is critical, and must be underlined. An ethnography is the product of doing ethnography or ethnographic research. An ethnographer does the ethnography and then writes an ethnography. The issue is not merely semantic; it underlines a basic need for clarification. As Atkinson and Hammersley point out "Definition of the term ethnography has been subject to controversy. For some it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate. And, of course, there are positions between these extremes" (1998:110). Thus, ethnography is both a method of data collection and a type of data or information.

It is with ethnography as process or data collection that most debate has evolved within demography. Fricke notes, "Given demography's appropriately empirical nature, much of the innovation and debate hovers at the methodological level" (1997: 826). In 1981, a workshop on the Anthropology of Human Fertility at the National Academy of Sciences was held. The outcome of the workshop was an important chapter called "Effects of culture on fertility: Anthropological contribution" by Levine and Scrimshaw (1983). Levine and Scrimshaw's paper has much in common with the "micro-demography" associated with Jack Caldwell. Levine and Scrimshaw emphasise the methodological contribution of anthropology, namely, ethnographic fieldwork. They described ethnography as "a single anthropologist (or a couple) in direct and prolonged contact with individuals of the population under study, using

¹ Basu and Aaby point out "the concept of a 'sub-discipline' of anthropological demography is not yet unanimously accepted. Many demographers would prefer to subscribe to the more limited view that demography can be enriched by borrowing from the methods and findings of anthropology rather than by branching out into a new sub-discipline" (1998: 19). Other commentators (for example, Knodel) would prefer not to have such a close identification with anthropology, preferring instead a broader term such as "qualitative demographic research" (1997:847)

² Although not necessarily conducted by demographers - sociologists, historians, economists to name but three, all contribute to these journals. However, the inclusion of these items in demographic journals is the determining factor here.

³ Normally textual, but also visual

various techniques and perspectives to record social behaviour patterns in their natural contexts - ecological, socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural” (1983:682). Caldwell has been described as "the leading voice" (Kertzer and Fricke, 1997:12) within demography for the application of qualitative (although not necessarily anthropological or ethnographic) methods. As early as the late 1960s, Caldwell began to investigate the use of what he was to subsequently call "unconventional" methods for the collection of demographic data. Dissatisfaction with a survey methodology, and the attendant tendency "to obtain normative responses or reflections of the rules, particularly on sensitive topics" (Caldwell & Hill, 1988:4) led to the evolution of the micro-approach. Caldwell is almost universally accredited with the development of a "micro-level", "quasi-anthropological" or "anthropological" approach⁴ within demography.

However, this review is concerned with what can be achieved by using information that is already available. The focus is therefore on existing ethnographies, the culmination of ethnographic fieldwork done by ethnographers. Several reviewers have commented upon the practical (Knodel, 1997) and epistemological (Greenhalgh, 1997) problems for demographers to successfully incorporate ethnographic methods into their research. To illustrate this point, imagine a job description for a demographic researcher undertaking ethnographic fieldwork, based on Hammel's (1990) review. The individual would require the following attributes: technical demography skills; fluency in another language; prolonged residence in the study context; and, skills of textual analysis. No mean feat. Indeed, Hammel ruefully concludes, "Teamwork with an ethnographer experienced in the area may be the only practical solution, if the ethnographer can be taught to count" (1990:472). Hammel's emphasis is on ethnography as a type of data collection and gives much less credence to the use of existing ethnographies by demographers, the focus of the current study.

Ethnography is largely associated with social or cultural anthropology. Atkinson *et al* conclude "when anthropologists seek the defining characteristics of their own discipline, they more often than not cite the centrality of ethnographic fieldwork" but acknowledge that "we cannot equate ethnography with only one disciplinary tradition...[it]... has never been the sole preserve of anthropology, nor of Chicago sociology nor of symbolic interactionism, nor of any other interest group" (2001:2). There are also distinct national intellectual traditions in ethnography, including for example, American cultural anthropology (Faubion, 2001) and British social anthropology (Macdonald, 2001). It is pertinent to acknowledge here the vast intellectual debate by ethnographers about the production and consumption of ethnographies. Indeed, Greenhalgh suggests, "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." (1997:821).

Ethnographies (like most academic disciplines) have their own "internal" chronological development. Denzin (1997), for example, describes ethnographies as having passed through four "historical moments": the traditional (1900 to World War II), modernist (World War II to the mid-1970s), blurred genres (1970-1986) and,

⁴ This development must be contextualised within concurrent developments in demography involving the incorporation of notions of culture. See, for example, Hammel (1990), Fricke (1997), Greenhalgh (1990)

crisis of representation (1986 to present)⁵. The use of an ethnography therefore necessitates at least an acknowledgement of this broader disciplinary historical context. Different “types” of ethnography have also been stylised, including Spradley’s (1980) typology of six “levels” of ethnographic writing. This describes a nested hierarchy of writing, from the most general to the most specific, but all of which he identifies as types of ethnographic writing⁶. Alternatively, Atkinson identifies two main types of ethnography: “Nouveau Ethnography” and “straightforward versions of plain-speaking ethnographic realism” (1992:v). Thus, acknowledgement is made here of epistemological debates about ethnography and the shift from structural functionalism towards ideas of “agency” and “actors”, but no effort is made to enter into this internal dialogue. The task has been described as “not for the faint of heart” (Fricke, 1997:271), and is beyond the scope of this review.

Hammersley suggests that ethnography is currently in a “crisis of fragmentation” (1998:18). Whilst frank, such revelations are less than helpful for the demographer wanting to use ethnographies. For, if ethnographers cannot decide amongst themselves exactly what ethnography is, then what chance for the non-ethnographer? Put simply, “Ethnography is the work of describing a culture. The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view” (Spradley, 1980:3). Similarly, Atkinson suggests “ethno-graphy - the writing of culture” (1992:5)⁷. Regardless of the presentation style, Atkinson concludes that ethnographies “still rest their slender or fat truth claims on the old ethnographic chestnut that having been there provides warrant to hold forth on what one makes of it” (1992:v).

To summarise the preceding review of “What is an ethnography?” the following statements can be made. An ethnography can take a variety of forms, based upon a wide range of research methods that will include some kind of participant observation. “Reality” or “the field” is represented by the ethnographer to the reader (or viewer) of the ethnography. Underlying this representation is the premise that there is not one reality; there are only multiple interpretations of “reality”. There is therefore what Atkinson terms “a tension between the complexity of social life and the modes of representation - both for the writer and reader” (1992:2). Ethnography “combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives” (Tedlock, 2000:455). Figure 1 highlights the stages in the production and subsequent use of an ethnography.

⁵ Denzin includes a fifth moment, represented by the present, which is defined and shaped by previous crises. Other commentators eschew such definitive notions and suggest that whilst they “can serve useful pedagogical functions...can ultimately do violence to the complexities of research and its historical development” (Atkinson *et al*, 2001:2).

⁶ Spradley’s schema includes: universal, cross-cultural descriptive, general statements about a society or group, general statements about a specific cultural scene, specific statements about a cultural domain, and specific incident statements.

⁷ Here, culture is taken to refer to “a set of beliefs and practices common to a group defined by characteristics such as region or language, other than the standard economic and social variables. That is, cultural practices and beliefs are those that transcend socio-economic variables to embrace a whole regional group for example and, conversely tend to differ between different regional groups of similar socio-economic status” (Basu, 1992:2).

Fig 1: Schematic representation of ethnography production and use

Whilst necessarily reductive, Figure 1 underlines the complexities involved in both doing, writing and reading ethnography. The ethnographer implicitly imposes an interpretation in trying to make an ethnography readable. The reader then uses her own “toolbox” of skills in order to understand the ethnography. Regardless of the style of writing employed by the ethnographer, Atkinson suggests that “Cutting across all styles is a paradox: The more readable an account the less faithful it will seem to those who live in or closely attend to the world described, and vice versa.” (1992:v). That is, the written ethnography involves a representation of reality as interpreted by the ethnographer, and not simply a description.

Here, parallels 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 yet 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 a filter over the camera lens. In addition, an ethnography will contain that information that has been selected by the ethnographer in order to support an argument and/or theoretical perspective. The next task is to examine how demographic research has used ethnographic texts.

It is perhaps useful to explain briefly why I became interested in the use of ethnographies in demographic research. As a doctoral student, I studied the demography of the Maasai ethnic group in Kenya and Tanzania (Coast, 2000). The Maasai are arguably one of the best-known populations in the world. Indeed, Spear suggests that “Everyone “knows” the Maasai” (1993:1), and everyone knows the Maasai not least because of the large volume of ethnographic writing about them. One of the first steps in the research was a literature review of information relating to the demography of the Maasai. On this topic information was virtually non-existent. However, while searches for *data* on the demography of the Maasai drew a blank, there was a wealth of information available on the Maasai, mainly in the form of ethnographies.

Table 1 attempts to summarise the major ethnographies relating to specifically to the Maasai, but it should be underlined that this is not a full bibliography of all ethnographies of the Maasai. The richness of the Maasai ethnographic record is complemented by the existence of several ethnographies written by Maasai (Ole Sankan, Ole Saitoti, Kipuri, and Sicard).

For a demographer beginning a study of the demography of the Maasai, the question was “What to do with all of this information?” The temptation with an ethnography is to “read” it at face value. However, it soon became apparent that specific tools and skills are necessary if ethnographic information is to be incorporated into a demographic study. Jacobson's description of how ethnographies are commonly read provides some insight into “How *not* to read an ethnography”:

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 read this way, however, they miss much of the meaning of the monograph and the significance of the ethnography it contains." (1991:1)

To accept a published ethnography at “face value” ignores the extreme variety in what constitutes an ethnography (and indeed), an ethnographer. For example, the writers of early ethnographic accounts included missionaries, explorers, colonial administrators (and their spouses) - and the reliability of such accounts varies considerably, as does their motivation for writing the ethnography in the first place. For example, the ethnographer may have misinterpreted what they saw, or may have had an ulterior motive in portraying a particular stance⁸.

So, not only did I have access to a vast amount of information (both contemporary and historical) about the Maasai, I also needed to learn *how* to use this information. I turned first not to anthropologists, but to my own discipline, demography⁹, in order to assess how other demographers had used ethnographies.

⁸ Many “classic” ethnographies must be contextualised historically. Using the example of Evans-Pritchards’ ethnography *The Nuer*, Rosaldo points out that a context of domination affects 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).

⁹ Being part of a “disciplinary culture” myself (after Greenhalgh, 1997).

Table 1

Author	Year	Title
Fischer	1884	Dr Fischer's journey in the Masai
Thomson	1885	Through Masailand
Sheldon	1892	Adventures among the Masai and other tribes of east Africa
Baumann	1894	Durch Maasailand zur Nilquelle
Hinde	1901	The last of the Masai
Hollis	1905	The Maasai
Hollis	1910	A note on the Masai system of relationship and other matters connected therewith
Merker	1910	Die Masai
Shelford	1910	Notes on the Masai
Sandford	1919	An administrative and political history of the Masai Reserve
Leakey	1930	Some notes on the Masai of Kenya Colony
Fox	1930	Further notes on the Masai of Kenya Colony
Whithouse	1933	Masai social customs
Fosbrooke	1948	An administrative survey of the Maasai social system
Jacobs	1965b	A chronology of the pastoral Maasai
Jacobs	1965a	The traditional political organisation of the pastoral Maasai
Koenig	1965	The Masai story
Jacobs	1970	Maasai marriage and bridewealth
Llewelyn-Davies	1974	Maasai women
Ole Sankan	1976	The Maasai
Berntsen	1976	The Maasai and their neighbours
Kipuri	1978	Engagement and marriage among the Maasai
Jacobs	1979	Maasai inter-tribal relations: belligerent herdsmen or peaceable pastoralists?
Waller	1979	The Lords of Africa: the Maasai in the mid nineteenth century
Llewellyn-Davies	1981	Women, warriors and patriarchs
Galaty	1983	Ceremony and society: the poetics of Maasai ritual
Kipuri	1983	Oral literature of the Maasai
Llewellyn-Davies	1984	The women's olamal
Arhem	1985	Pastoral man in the garden of Eden
Ole Saitoti	1986	The worlds of a Maasai warrior
Talle	1987	Women as heads of houses
Talle	1988	Women at a loss
Spencer	1988	The Maasai of Matapato
Waller	1988	Emutai: crisis and response in Maasailand, 1883-1902
Kipuri	1989	Maasai women in transition
Kituyi	1990	Becoming Kenyans: socio-economic transformation of the pastoral Maasai
Ole Saitoti	1991	Maasai
Rigby	1992	Cattle, capitalism and class
Llewellyn-Davies	1993	Memories and dreams
Matampash	1993	The Maasai of Kenya
Spear & Waller	1993	Being Maasai
Oddie	1994	Enkop ai: my life with the Maasai
von Mitzlaff	1994	Maasai women
Ibrahim & Ibrahim	1995	Pastoralists in transition
Helmut	1995	Nachocho
Sicard	1998	A tale of a Maasai girl

How have demographers used ethnographies?

A survey of demographic journals¹⁰ from 1970-1998 supports Hammel's (1990) view that the use of ethnographies by demographers has far to go in terms of "how to read" the ethnography. The search yielded a total of 101 items that mentioned ethnography¹¹, which were then assessed in terms of how the ethnography was used. Of the 101 items, 85 were relevant for this study, the remaining 16 referring to ethnography as a form of data collection in the research methodology¹².

Of contextual interest is the distribution over the twenty-eight year period of items referring to ethnography: 1990-1998 (55 items), 1980-1989 (40 items), 1970-1979 (6 items). The rapid rise in interest in qualitative information and research topics, alongside shifts in intellectual enterprise (Kertzer and Fricke, 1997, Greenhalgh, 1995) is clear. Given the debate within and outside demography about the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches, it is perhaps surprising that not more published research, particularly since the mid-1980s, incorporates existing ethnographic information. While this study has used a sample of 85 items, it must be noted that this represents less than five per cent of all items over the 28 year period¹³. The following sections identify three main ways in which published demographic research has used ethnographies: as "scene-setters", to validate conclusions and results; and, to inform research questions.

"Scene-setters"

The most common use of ethnographies was to provide background context to the research, either directly¹⁴ or indirectly¹⁵. That ethnographers and ethnography have undergone important epistemological shifts over the last century has been noted. An important transition in the context of this study is that from the structural-functional¹⁶ approach of the British tradition towards notions of individual agency. It is this group of items that provides the most grist to the mill for critics¹⁷ of demography's use of ethnographies and ultimately, culture. Several authors (most notably Hammel (1990) and Lockwood (1995)) have been highly critical of demographer's uncritical use of ethnographies. This notion is perhaps best summed up by Hammel's colourful and frequently quoted (see Fricke, 1997; Lockwood, 1995; Hayes, 1994) description that, "the use of culture in demography seems mired in structural-functional concepts that are about forty years old, hardening rapidly, and showing every sense of fossilisation" (1990:xx). Does this current review support such conclusions? The short answer is "Yes", demographers (when they do use ethnographies) tend to report very generalised statements of cultural "norms" and "rules" and "structures". A typical example is provided by Gage. In her study of premarital childbearing in Kenya and

¹⁰ Population (English summary), Population and Development Review, Population Studies

¹¹ Also included ethnographies, ethnographic, ethnographer

¹² Forste and Tienda (1996); Clark *et al* (1995); Axinn (1993); Fricke and Teachmann (1993); Axinn (1992); LeVine *et al* (1991); Vlassoff (1991); Axelrod (1990); Fein (1990); Cornelius (1989); Stonich (1989); LeVine (1987); Knodel *et al* (1984); Dixon (1982); Ericksen *et al* (1979); Galt and Smith (1979).

¹³ Estimating approximately 1,900 items included in this study.

¹⁴ By referring to ethnographic work in the text

¹⁵ By citing ethnographies in the bibliography, but not referring directly to ethnographic work in the text.

¹⁶ Structural-functionalism is a theoretical framework in which social institutions are perceived as a set of structures that have identifiable functions in sustaining the social order (after Das Gupta, 1997)

¹⁷ Mainly anthropologists

Namibia, she notes “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: 22)¹⁸. That structural-functional ethnographies are attractive to demographers (and other social scientists) is unsurprising, as Lockwood recognises, “it has a simplified theory of action and a relatively fixed concept of social structure” (1995:25).

As context setting tools, ethnographies are an attractive option for demographers, a sentiment demonstrated by Greenhalgh’s study on Taiwanese land reform and entrepreneurship, noting “Of all the literature on Taiwan, only ethnographic studies adequately convey the near-maniacal flavour of the acquisitional drive characterising Taiwanese farmers-turned-petty entrepreneurs” (1989: 95). Occasionally, an author declines to give detailed context information “Since both the history and the ethnography are easily available to interested readers” (Wolf, 1984: 453).

Conclusion support

The second most common use of ethnographies in demographic research was as information to corroborate or support the research conclusions. A small selection of examples of such usage includes: Manning and Smock “This result is consistent with ethnographic findings that marriage is often not a prerequisite for childbearing among blacks” (1995:518); Brewster “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” (1994: 611); and, Meekers “survey has been useful in demonstrating ways of obtaining demographic results that are consistent with the ethnographic literature on marriage customs” (1992: 73). An example drawn from Balk (1997) is interesting because of the “bi-directional” flow of her conclusions. In the first quote highlighted here, it is the ethnographic evidence that is supporting her conclusions: “Women who live with their in-laws are less mobile than those who do not, as expected from the ethnographic evidence” (1997:163). In the second quote, she presents her data as supporting the ethnographic evidence: “This confirms ethnographic evidence of the powerful and controlling effect of in-laws” (1997: 166). Many more examples of this type of use of ethnographies can be found, notably Reher (1995), Desai and Jain (1994), Rosenbaum (1992), Preston *et al* (1992), Budd and Guinane (1991); Cherlin and Chamrathirong (1988); Fricke *et al* (1986); Suchindran *et al* (1985); Jones and Grupp (1983); Mason and Palan (1981).

Ethnographic evidence tends to be presented in order to establish the credibility of the demographic research, ostensibly as evidence of triangulation¹⁹. Because the supporting ethnographic evidence tends to be used in the discussion/ conclusion, there is no discussion about the reliability or validity of the ethnography. However, even though the ethnographic evidence is referred to only in order to confirm the research

¹⁸ Although it should be noted that, on the basis of the ethnographic record, the statement relating to the Maasai is incorrect.

¹⁹ Although it is interesting to note that triangulation, the use of multiple data and methods, is an approach rarely mentioned in demographic literature. The integration of ethnographic evidence represents “data triangulation” after Denzin’s (1997) four basic types of triangulation: data; investigator; theory; and, methodological.

results, this approach does at least acknowledge that ethnographic information is an appropriate source of complementary evidence.

Very few researchers appear to be prepared to admit that their own results were at odds with or contradicted ethnographic evidence²⁰. This is a very interesting phenomenon and highlights the highly selective way in which demographers have used ethnographies, mainly for asserting the reliability and validity of their own results and conclusions. That demographers choose not to comment that their results are different to those that might be expected on the basis of ethnographic evidence implies one of four outcomes. Either, that demographers are either unwilling (or feel unable) to contradict ethnographic information. Or, contradictory ethnographic evidence is dismissed as irrelevant. Or, ethnographic information was not assessed in the first place. Or, there was no relevant ethnographic evidence upon which to draw.

Research agenda setting

A third group of authors use ethnographies to inform their research questions. It is this group that perhaps most closely identifies with calls from leading protagonists of anthropological demography that demography should try to integrate ethnographic information and theorising into its research. It is rare that authors explicitly refer to this integration of ethnographic literature, as Greenhalgh does in her study of sexual stratification in east Asia, “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: 275). Montgomery and Casterline’s discussion on the influence of social learning on fertility draws on “Ethnographic accounts of poor black neighbourhoods” (1996: 160) as part of the development of their social effect model. Ethnographic evidence provides part of the impetus for Meeker’s (1991) study on the effect of data entry and cleaning procedures on first birth intervals. Other examples include Geronimus *et al* (1994), Bentley *et al* (1993), Duncan and Hoffman (1990), and Basu (1989). Overall, there is relatively little evidence of ethnographic information being incorporated into the overall design and formulation of research questions. Given the breadth and depth of extant ethnographic evidence, why is it not included more often in demographic research? Either demographic researchers are unaware of ethnographic information. Or, they are aware of its existence but choose not to use it. Or, there is no ethnographic evidence appropriate to the topic being studied. Or, demographers do not know/ have the tools to read the ethnographies.

General aspects of use

Having identified the three main ways in which demographic research uses and refers to ethnographies, the following section notes three general aspects of their use: a call for greater use of ethnographies; the use of dated ethnographies; and, the “hesitant” tone of reference to ethnographies.

Demographic researchers frequently call for more ethnographic information, perhaps better tailored to their own needs. For example, Larsen notes, “Further ethnographic and clinical studies are needed to throw light on the mechanism responsible for this difference [in infertility]” (1995: 344). Awusabo-Asare’s study of Ghanaian

²⁰ A rare example is provided by Weinstein *et al* (1990) stating, “There is no evidence of any dilution of the strong patrilineal basis for co-residence in Taiwan...One might have expected an increase on the basis of some ethnographic reports” (1990: 222)

interpretations of demographic concepts concludes, “Unfortunately, the procedures for data collection do not make use of available ethnographic information relating to demographic variables” (1988:684). His study reinforces the now accepted (although less often put into practice) idea that the design of standardised research instruments should make use of culturally relevant information (for example, Greenhalgh, 1982; Meekers, 1992)²¹.

A second feature that emerged from the literature review was the “hesitant” or even “dismissive” way in which the ethnographies were referred to. 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: 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. Telford concludes, “The figure of 300 girl babies being killed per 1,000 live birth is, in fact, the level Dickeman has reported, based on rather scanty ethnographic evidence” (1992: 33). Rindfuss and Morgan express this hesitation 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: 270).

A further feature of many of the references to ethnographies is simply their age. This is not to deny the usefulness of historical ethnographies in constructing a chronological comparison. Rather, the use of ethnographies written two or three decades prior to the research suggests a lack of attention to critical issues of agency and change. Examples, drawn from the demographic literature, are included in Table 2.

Table 2: 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 & Rindfuss	1984	1963
Malhotra	1991	1961, 1969
Preston <i>et al</i>	1992	1939
Tucker	1986	1959

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" (1986:505). Indeed, in the same refreshingly frank article, they go on to note the drawbacks of using ethnographies that refer to villages different to those in which their survey was carried out. Lockwood’s discussion of demographers’ forays into “culture” acknowledges there is an “understandable desire for authoritative guides: the problem arises when the guides are using the wrong map” (1995: 1). Based on this literature review, I would extend this metaphor to include out-of-date maps (ethnographies) as a further problem.

²¹ Other researchers calling for greater use of ethnographic information include Geronimus (1987) and Chidambaram and Pullum (1981)

Detailed examples

In order to highlight the issues surrounding the use of written ethnographies by demographers, the following section uses two examples drawn from the work of Jack Caldwell. The two substantial pieces of research presented here provide clear examples of issues in the use of ethnographies by demographers²². The sheer volume of Caldwell's work allows a detailed exploration of some of the issues raised by the literature review.

The first example of a "fairly cavalier" (Heald, 1995:490) approach to source material is 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" (1989:187). More broadly, Caldwell's model of "African sexuality" describes the fundamental importance of lineage organisation, with an emphasis on reproduction and descent. Namely, the male desire for descendants is so strong that it is manifested by high levels of polygyny and divorce. The resultant conjugal bond is described as weak, with both husband and wife maintaining strong links with their natal lineage.

When describing the extant and "value" of female virginity at marriage in "traditional" Yoruba society (1991), Caldwell draws upon work by a variety of disparate authors²³. What should be noted, however, is the date of the fieldwork upon which the ethnographies are based. For example, Ellis' work (published in 1964) was based on fieldwork in Yorubaland in the 1880s and early 1890s. At no point in the review is any reference made to the validity of these accounts. As Heald points out "they are pictures of a past projected into the present. The Caldwell's thesis rests on the idea that the tendencies they have identified are so deeply rooted that they will go on reproducing themselves" (1995:502).

The second example is the debate surrounding the link between male circumcision and rates of HIV infection reported by Caldwell *et al.* (1993a, b). 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 extant ethnographic data, most notably Murdock's (1967) *Ethnographic Atlas*. Conant criticises roundly the bases on which Caldwell *et al.* made their conclusions. Firstly, he suggests that the study "could benefit from a more critical approach to the ethnographic data, including a closer look at accounts of circumcision rituals" (1995:109). Secondly, Conant suggests the need for "a "contemporary

²² Paradoxically, Jack Caldwell is also one of the few demographers that have explicitly acknowledged the limitations of ethnographies. Caldwell is, however, one of the few demographers to explicitly address and welcome the use of ethnographies for and by demographers. The following quote is taken from a review of Kertzer and Fricke's (1997) *Anthropological Demography*. "The person to whom the field demographers appeal for explanation turns out not to be an anthropologist at all but a type of researcher from earlier times, the ethnographer, or an extinct species, the cultural-structuralist anthropologist of the British school. If anthropologists no longer count ethnographers among their numbers, then demographers will have to reinvent them" Caldwell (1998:159). This detailed example of Caldwell's work is not confined to the journals used in the preceding literature review.

²³ Ward (1937), Ellis (1964), Bascom (1969), Talbot (1969) and Fadipe (1970).

relevance index” for ethnographic and other source materials to reflect something of the way the data were originally gathered as well as their present value in the light of the sometimes tumultuous changes taking pace in Africa during the past 100 or more years” (*op cit.*).

Replying to Conant’s criticisms, Caldwell is forced to acknowledge, “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” (1995:114). However, he then states that he and his colleagues “tested” the circumcision data in three ways. Firstly, by returning to the original reports collected by Murdock from anthropologists, they concluded that “Murdock’s conclusions with regard to circumcision status seemed to se to be better supported than some of the other information in his ethnographic atlas, partly because most of the anthropologists from whose research the conclusions were drawn were males in a position to deal with male matters (*op cit.*). Secondly, they compared Murdock’s reports with “as many contemporary ethnographic account as possible to ascertain currently reported circumcision status...[but]...this was not very rewarding as anthropologist’s interests have changed” (*op cit.*). Caldwell’s third “test” involved “the opportunity of visits, lectures and seminars across sub-Saharan Africans to raise the question of the current circumcision status of ethnic groups with as many people for different ethnicities as possible”. They acknowledge that this “may not be a very scientific procedure but it may be...the best current assessment of the situation”²⁴.

These detailed examples are exemplars of some of the issues surrounding the use of ethnographies in demographic research. They provide support for Lockwood’s contention that demographers use "reports of social norms or behaviour in support of the influence of social structure" (Lockwood 1995:25) and for failing to "ask about whether structure, norms, and actions really fit together in the way implied" (*op cit.*). Importantly, the role of the ethnographer in "constructing" the reality of the ethnography tends to be ignored. 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 read?

There is a large body of literature that discusses in great detail the ethnography and its production (most recently, Atkinson *et al*, 2001). Issues surrounding the consumption and use of ethnographies tend to be less well represented. This paucity of literature relating to the assessment and reading of ethnographic research must in part explain the demographer’s lack of attention to ethnographic interpretation. The following section identifies those contributors who have explicitly tackled *How to read* the ethnography. By illustrating schema that are accessible to demographers, this section demonstrates that the skills necessary for the integration of ethnographic information are within the grasp of the demographer. The utility of these frameworks is then illustrated using the now familiar example of Caldwell’s exchange with Conant.

Jacobson suggests three ways in which the claims made in an ethnography may be evaluated. Firstly, an ethnography can be compared with "accounts of other societies

²⁴ Although it is interesting to note that in the same article, Caldwell states “A recent field visit to southwestern Tanzania has taught me that changed circumcision behaviour is more likely than I previously thought” (1995:177).

that are similar...thereby providing a framework for evaluating its interpretation" (1991:11). Secondly, the reader can compare the account with other ethnographies of the same society, "the strategy here is to place one ethnographic account within a context of others' observations on the same society" (*op cit.*). 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" (*op cit.*). The first two of these methods involves comparison with materials outside or beyond the limits of the specific ethnography being studied. The latter involves an "internal check" of the consistency between evidence and representation.

Hammersley (1998) develops a framework for the assessment of ethnographic accounts, which has at its base one of the most basic tenets of research: validity. Validity is taken here to refer to the degree to which the method for collecting information results in accurate information (Madrigal, 1998). Hammersley argues that the traditional quantitative-qualitative or positivist-naturalist divide is unproductive for research. The result is a framework that embraces a notion of validity in order to read and assess qualitative work (in this instance, ethnography). Hammersley proposes a schema that is based on "judgements of the likelihood of error" (1998:67), which involves two concepts and three steps. The two concepts are 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 needing to know some background information about motivation and evidence. 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. Finally, when it is decided "that a [knowledge] claim is neither sufficiently plausible nor sufficiently credible, we will require evidence to be convinced of its validity" (1998:67). The evidence's validity is assessed by examining the plausibility and credibility of the evidence itself. In summarising the disadvantages of this approach, Hammersley includes: there is no guarantee that judgements will be correct; there is no way of knowing for certain whether they are correct; and, judgements will not necessarily be consensual, as opinions as to what is plausible and credible will differ. Different people's interpretation of what is "correct" will vary substantially. However, Hammersley points out that his approach does not preclude the "possibility of cumulative knowledge" (1998:68).

Returning to the case study of Caldwell's work on the relationship between HIV and male circumcision, it is pertinent to apply Hammersley's critical schema in order to demonstrate its use. Caldwell *et al's* defence of their thesis highlights some of the key points surrounding the use of extant ethnographies. Do the three "tests" constitute tests of plausibility and credibility, as proposed by Hammersley? Plausibility appears to derive from the fact that the data were collected by male

anthropologists on a decidedly “male” topic. Validity was assessed by reference to other extant (more recent) ethnographies and *ad hoc* enquiries by the authors. Issues of credibility do not appear to have been explored. The interest here, however, is not with the specific debate on the link between male circumcision and HIV transmission. Rather, it is as an example of the issues involved in using written ethnographies. Given that ethnographies form an integral part of the data used in testing the hypothesis, it is unsurprising that the authors do pay at least some attention to them. However, it must be noted that their explanation of their use of ethnographies was produced only in response to an explicit critique (by Conant) of their work, and was not included in the original research (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1993).

Hammersley's approach is attractive for two reasons. The first is pragmatic; for the non-ethnographer seeking an approach to effectively read and assess ethnographic work, Hammersley provides a practical, step-by-step approach. In a field notoriously impenetrable for the non-expert, this is a blessing. The second attraction is epistemological. Hammersley explicitly rejects the imperative of the dichotomy²⁵, and replaces it with a framework that simultaneously incorporates a core principle of "scientific inquiry" (i.e.: validity) with an iterative, judgement-based schema (credibility and plausibility). The use of ethnographies must therefore begin with the acceptance that an ethnography is the interpretation of reality as produced by that ethnographer.

Discussion

Developments within demography over the past two decades have meant a greater recognition of information, approaches and techniques not traditionally associated with demography. It is therefore understandable that ethnographies, as one source of information, will be referred to more frequently within demographic research. The rapid rise in articles referring to ethnographies since 1970 is testament to this. It has been with reference to ethnography as process, rather than ethnography as product, however, that most of the debate has been concerned. Most notably, this has been concerned with the development of the “micro-approach” or “quasi-anthropological” methodologies, largely associated with Caldwell. This development has not always been greeted enthusiastically by non-demographers. Fricke, for example, described demography as having a “creative anarchy of methods and measures” (1997:250) resulting in a “methodological free-for-all”. (1997: 26).

The focus here is on the use of ethnography as product in demography, using a review of demographic journal articles. Demographic research does use ethnographies, a trend which is showing little sign of reversing and should be encouraged. However, when study is made of the way(s) in which these ethnographies are used or incorporated, then ethnographers’ misgivings appear to have some basis. Based on the literature review, demographers have tended to read ethnographies as straightforward accounts of “reality”, even though that “reality” might be nearly a century old.

The literature review shows that very rarely do authors present (however obliquely) evidence that they have sought to confirm the validity or reliability of the ethnographic information. Rarely do we see reference to the contradictory nature of

²⁵ Positivist versus naturalistic; qualitative versus quantitative, etc.

ethnographic information, such as noted by Caldwell *et al* "The exact situation is often ambiguous, as can be seen in the Abomey area of Dahomey (now Benin). Bohannon (1968) reported that, if a girl was found not to be a virgin on marriage, she had to name her seducer, who would then be fined. But Herskovits (1938) had found that pre-marital sexual relations were not rare among women in the society, but that even the girls who did indulge claimed, apparently successfully, on marriage to be virgins" (1992:402)²⁶. However, the small number of references by demographers to ethnographic contradictions is testament to the low priority accorded to a critical use of ethnography by demographers.

Rather than providing examples of the ways in which ethnographies can be incorporated throughout the research process, this study has concentrated on examining trends in the use of ethnographies in demographic research. The case must be made, however, for the practical integration of ethnographies at all stages of the research process (research question, design, fieldwork (if involved), analysis and interpretation). Given the long history of ethnography as an intellectual endeavour²⁷, and the recent emergence of anthropological demography, it is perhaps surprising that so little explicit attention is paid to the consumption of ethnographies by demographers. As Hentschel notes, "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: 3). The cultural differences between and within academic disciplines cannot be ignored.

There are few societies in the world for which ethnographies do not exist, and this extensive coverage should appeal to demographers. It is by relying on ethnographers in order to do the ethnography and produce the ethnographies, disciplinary strengths can most profitably be drawn upon. By developing the skills in order to use the ethnographies, demographers can fully exploit the ethnographies in support of their own work. The use of ethnographies necessitates the acquisition of skills not normally associated with demography in order to examine critically the information contained in them. Indeed, 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). I would argue that use of frameworks such as Hammersley (1998) are compatible with demography, being a tradition with a "strong tradition of attending to issues of data quality" (Knodel, 1997: 849).

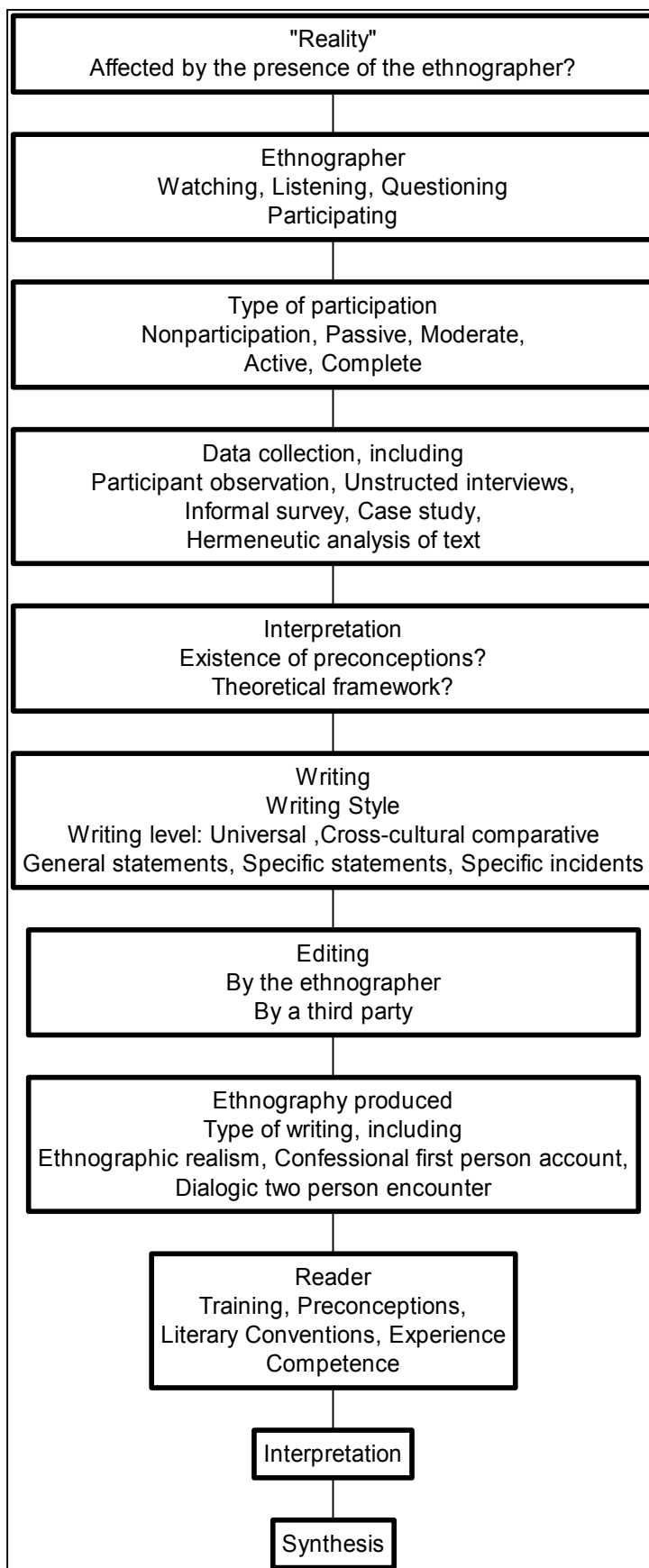
I do not suggest that ethnographies can provide information that is tailored exactly to the needs of a demographic study. Indeed, this is a shortcoming that demographic research is quick to note. Hill's study of demographic responses to Sahelian food shortages, for example, notes "The ethnographic literature 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: 173). Lockwood notes, "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: 25). Rindfuss and

²⁶ But it may be seen, even from this example, the use of two ethnographies, separated by 30 years in their publication, and by 24 and 54 years from the date of the demographic research.

²⁷ Ethnography as a "professional" field is generally considered to have emerged in the early Twentieth Century, with Malinowski's (1922) account of the life of Trobriand Islanders.

Morgan note, “Most of the ethnographic literature suggesting a relationship between coital frequency and how the marriage was contracted describes the relationship from the woman’s perspective, and is silent regarding the husband” (1983: 271). Kreager notes, “Published ethnography, as a source of data, contains relatively little discussion of demographic implications as such” (1982: 237).

This study does not argue for a single demographic interpretation of ethnographies. Of course, the meanings derived from an ethnography by demographers will be shaped in large part by the “discourse communities to which they belong” (Tedlock, 2000: 459). Rather, it argues that demographers need to be aware of the wider context surrounding ethnographies, not least their motivations and production. The challenge is how to integrate the ethnographic detail within the overall research process. The integration of ethnographies at all stages in the research process has to recognise that specific skills are necessary, but that the acquisition of these skills can strengthen demographic research and theory.



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