Understanding the demographics of food insecurity:

A praxis-oriented reflexive approach

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Short abstract:

The politics of location is intrinsic to demographic knowledge creation. Demographers can, however, move beyond a (problematic) epistemic focus on 'objectivity' by integrating more reflexive, praxis-oriented methods. We use food insecurity in demography as a case study to suggest practically possible tweaks to data collection and analysis to generate data that is closer to lived realities. Drawing from our experiences as a multi-cultural team collecting, transcribing, and analysing sensitive data in two Indian states (UP and Goa), we outline what a *praxis-oriented reflexive approach* entails, e.g. shifting power to the participant, recognising positionality and iterative course corrections. We suggest how this approach can be implemented using examples (both successes and challenges) from our research. We argue that not only can demographers generate better quality *qualitative* data by incorporating some of these methods, but also improve the quality of survey data, which have been the core of demographic research.

1. Introduction

The question of food has been central to demographers since the very inception of the discipline. Several theories of population growth (Malthusian theory, Limits to Growth, Demographic Transition theory) stressed the need to *control* population as a '*solution*' to the problem of food insecurity. Long-standing demographic discourses around population being the major reason for poverty and 'under-development' in the Global South gained popularity backed by these theories (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1995; Klancher Merchant,2021). What such debates obfuscated, however, was the local and global politics of reproduction—more specifically, 'whose' fertility needed to be controlled and limited, as articulated by a very narrow and specific group of privileged researchers and policymakers in the Global North. Kabeer (1994) explains this as 'the dual strategy' where poor women from the Global South are discouraged from breeding more poor people who might one day claim a share of wealth robbed from them, while middle class women, particularly in the North are encouraged to breed because they add to the consumption demand (pp 194). As a scientific discipline, evidence from demography has long been invoked as an 'objective' justification for this blatantly geopolitical double standard.

Traditional demographic methods, with their focus on mathematical objectivity and scientific rigour, have consciously tried to dissociate from the politics of knowledge creation. The data and resultant policy recommendations by demographers thus came to be seen *as 'politically neutral' 'evidence-based facts'*(Klancher Merchant, 2021). Post-positivist and post-modernist scholars, however, have asserted that the present era has been one of 'decline of absolutes' (Lather,1986). They argue that knowledge is extremely context bound, and 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1992) lies in integrating numerous situated perspectives.

In this context we use our experience of collecting and analysing data in India to suggest a *praxis-oriented reflexive approach* to research for demography, which is more mindful of the local and global politics of location. Here we take praxis orientation to simply mean research that is conducted in all its stages with a conscious focus to integrate theory with practice. This entails both- one, integrating the existing knowledge into the process of research and two, making conscious efforts to generate data that is as close to lived realities as possible, so that it can have practical implications for improving lives. It thus involves a dedicated emphasis on understanding the meanings participants associate with their actions while being situated in unique social, political, and environmental contexts. By doing so, the research aims to generate culturally sensitive and locally suitable solutions that can inform policy. Lather (1986) thus suggests involving the researched in a democratized process of inquiry characterized by negotiation, reciprocity and empowerment. An important aspect of praxis orientation is adopting a reflexive approach. This refers to not only a critical reflection on one's own positionality and subjectivity as a researcher but also, learning from the experiences on the field and adopting iterative course correction. In this paper, we use examples

from our research to suggest practical methods to integrate a more praxis-oriented reflexive approach while collecting and analysing data.

2. Research Questions

1. What would a praxis-oriented reflexive approach mean for demography?
2. How can such an approach be adopted while collecting and analysing data?
3. What are the potential benefits/challenges of adopting such approaches?
4. How can these approaches be integrated into survey methods and training?

3. Methods

This study is a part of a larger mixed methods project, Food Security for Equitable Futures, which explores the human cost of food insecurity in the Global South. For this study, we collected qualitative interview data from 87 households in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Goa. In each household, we collected demographic details about each household by completing a household roster designed on the lines of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). This included questions about the infrastructural details of the dwelling, sources of drinking water, sanitation and fuel, demographic details of each member of the household, including age, caste, religion, and educational and occupational status. After the household roster, we conducted semi-structured interviews with as many members of the household as possible, including children and adolescents aged above 7 and adult men and women. We also tried to diversify the sample by caste, religion, location (rural/urban) and family types (joint/nuclear/single parent headed/multigenerational etc.) We used a combination of purposive sampling and snowballing.

For this paper, we did not conduct any traditional thematic or narrative analysis of the data with a substantive research question in mind. Instead, as our focus is on methodological insights, we draw on our fieldwork experiences to detail what a praxis-oriented, reflexive approach can mean for demographers. We then use examples, mistakes, learning, and course corrections from our fieldwork, as well as our experiences with transcription and data analysis, to suggest *how*, specifically, the field of demography can move towards a deeper embracing of these methods. We also draw parallels and contrasts with methods adopted in the DHS surveys as an example to stress how minor tweaks in training and methods can be adopted to generate better quality quantitative and qualitative data.

4. Results

We thematise our methodological suggestions of how to integrate praxis-oriented reflexive approaches in demographic knowledge creation into five broad heads- attempting to shift the power back to the

participant, recognising researcher positionality, conducting interviews as 'conversations', adopting iterative course correction and lastly, recognition of differences in perceived realities.

4.1 Shifting the power back to the participant

The first step towards democratizing the process of research is recognizing the inherent power dynamics in the interviewer-participant relationship and making all efforts towards shifting the power back to the participant. In preparation for fieldwork, we designed Participant Information Sheets(PIS) that explained the details of the research, why the participants were chosen, and that they could stop/skip a question/withdraw at any time. While the PIS and informed consent are necessary, they are not sufficient to ensure participant comfort. In addition, the time and location of interviews in each household was selected based on each member's preference, which sometimes meant making multiple visits to the same household. As much as possible, interviewers tried to ensure maximum privacy for the participants by taking appointments, taking the children out for a walk wherever possible or by just changing the tone while asking and reordering the sensitive questions.

The interviewer needs to be responsive to surroundings and ensure that sensitive information is sought, not just when the participant is comfortable but also when the participant's privacy can be best guarded. This is especially important, in the case of our research, for example, when asking questions about intra-household inequalities. Power hierarchies within the family can dictate responses if participant is answering in presence of others. Being mindful of these is important not only while collecting qualitative data but also when survey responses are being noted.

Another way to attend to the power dynamic is to repeatedly establish that the participant was more knowledgeable. This could be done by statements like- '*I am not from here, could you explain this to me'. 'I know very little about rural areas. What does that mean.' 'Every place has its own specific customs, could you please tell me more about yours?*' This not only attends to the power dynamic but also helps the participants to open-up to the interviewer. Besides this, the team of qualitative researchers tried to answer all the questions that the participants had not only about the research, but also about the researchers.

4.2 Foregrounding researcher positionality

This leads us to the second point of being mindful of one's own positionality and how that might be affecting the data generated. We problematise how our gender, caste, class, religious affiliations, institutional affiliations, marital status etc. might be influencing the data that we collect and interpret. Geertz (1973) discusses how the data collected passes through the researcher's theoretical, practical, experienced, and inexperienced lenses and calls the '*researcher as instrument'*. While interviewer's standpoint might

colour how they are perceiving the participant responses and asking follow-ups, how the interviewer is being perceived by the participant might also change how the participant chooses to engage. To cite an example, in our research we noted that instances of beef consumption were only shared by young children in muslim households. This could be indicative of the fact that adults recognised our positionality as Hindu researchers and hesitated to share something which they felt might make us uncomfortable since beef consumption is considered taboo in Hinduism.

This is not to say that recognizing one's positionality would necessarily help to minimize its effect on data generated. However, a researcher who is more mindful of how they are being/ will be perceived in the field can be more equipped to recognize, and sometimes even minimize the effect of their own location on the data. In both the scenarios, a clear recognition of one's own positionality both as researchers and as members of a stratified society would help to generate data that is closer to the lived realities and help the reader understand the context better.

4.3 Conducting interviews as conversations

In addition to sharing information about oneself, we argue that answering some questions that we are posing helps to make the interview seem more like a conversation. This helps the participants to share details that might not have come out in a one-sided standard 'ask and tell' format. We use examples from our research to share how this must be done tactfully, only in questions which might improve ease of sharing for the participant. For example, in our research questions about family relationships or aspirational foods benefited from this approach. Sharing details like- *'My dad never let me eat (this)',* or *'When I was young I loved to eat (this) but we never had enough money for it'* or simply sharing details of our own favourite foods while asking them theirs, especially helped the children get comfortable and open-up to the interviewer. We argue that adopting this approach, in addition to establishing the participant as more knowledgeable and giving them the power to skip a question or stop anytime helps create a conducive environment for the participant, which can help make data collection slightly less extractive and generate data which is closer to lived realities.

4.4 Iterative course correction

Working in a multi-cultural team, with multi-disciplinary backgrounds, helps to learn from each others' experiences. We conducted a pilot survey for about a week, learnt how people were driving the conversation and thematically arranged the interview guides based on those experiences. After spending some time in the field, we incorporated locally more suitable words for asking our questions. Besides this, we also made time for daily reflections after fieldwork, learnt from other team members' experiences and planned the

course for the next day. Regular team discussions helped to regularly take stock of what was going well and what needed to be changed.

4.5 Differences in perceived realities

Another point of importance which reflexive methods stress and needs urgent recognition in demographic methods too, is the fact that each person's perception of reality varies. In the case of our research, this perceived, socially constructed reality affects each person's access and approach towards food. For example, in the same family, a child who perceives their family as 'poor' might accesses food differently compared to her sibling who sees their family as 'financially comfortable'. *'Factual data'* thus, becomes impossible to divorce from social construction of reality.

Recognizing this, we interviewed at least four members of each household, including children aged 7 and above. One's position in social hierarchy and the position within the household interact to paint a unique picture of lived reality for each individual. To explain with an example, in one of the selected households, there had been an accident a few months back, where the roof of their house collapsed while the members were inside. While all the members discussed the incident during their interview, all of them brought it up as a response to different questions. While the older male was worried about managing household finances as a part of the limited family income was being diverted towards house reconstruction; the younger unmarried male was worried about the effect the incident might have on his marriage prospects as right age was '*passing him by'* and no one would *'give their daughter'* to him till he had a roof over his head. Younger male child who was skipping school to help with the reconstruction talked about the incident in the context of meals at school while the older woman in the house was worried about the limitations the extra expenses posed on 'what could be cooked' in the household.

Thus, demographic surveys which seek responses from one member of the family as representative of the household and consider those responses as 'factual' might benefit from the understanding that an individual's social position in family, society, and community deeply colours the responses. Knowledge generated thus, is deeply subjective and one can only move closer to the *'partiality of truth'* if one is open to looking at all perspectives while recognizing one's own biases.

5. Discussion and Next Steps

Using examples from our data, we suggest how using these methods can lead us towards a deeper embracing of critical methods in demography that foreground the politics of location and use it to generate data that is closer to lived realities of the participants. Using locally-suitable and culturally sensitive methods of knowledge creation, we will be able to generate data that is mindful of local contexts, cultural

sensitivities and thus will be able to better inform policy. We also discuss possible concerns over data validity when engaging in iterative course corrections. Furthermore, we study the DHS training modules and aim to give practically possible suggestions as to how praxis-oriented reflexive methods can be integrated while training for data collection to improve the data quality.

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