How far have we progressed? Qualitative research in demography during the 21st century

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to investigate the production of qualitative research in demography during the 21st century. This analysis is based on the articles published in three major peer-reviewed journals: Demography, Demographic Research, and Revista Latinoamericana de Población- RELAP. We will quantify the papers using qualitative techniques, their authors and institutional affiliations, countries/regions under study, and qualitative techniques utilized, while also qualifying the findings by answering the following question: what have we learned from these qualitative studies that we would not have learned from quantitative data? Using content analysis, we will search for qualitative research findings in all of the papers published in all volumes of the three journals between 2001 and 2013, except for RELAP, which was first published in 2007. The results suggest that the number of papers based on qualitative research is still quite small.

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Introduction

Despite its quantitative tradition, demography has become more aligned with qualitative research over the past 15 years. There has been a growing recognition that quantitative research offers little information about an individual’s ideals, motivations, intentions, as well as the cultural aspects and processes that surround demographic events. Consequently, many of the important questions relating in general to social science, and in particular to demography, cannot be answered through the sole use of a quantitative approach. According to Randall & Koppenhaver (2004), the aim to increase our understanding of demographic behavior and phenomena is a key motivation for this movement broadening the use of qualitative research methods, that “has also been employed to improve the quality of survey data, to collect data on illegal or clandestine activities or from sub-groups, such as adolescents, who are thought unlikely to respond well surveys” (p. 58). So, demographers are no longer satisfied with determining “how many;” they now want to know “why” and “how.” As the range of questions asked by researchers continues to increase, we must find the best possible method for generating answers.

The end of the 1990s witnessed an explosion of articles dealing with qualitative methodology. Following the path forged by Caldwell, Knodel, and Greenhalg, the 2000s have brought about Johnson-Hanks, Coast, and others who have systematically done qualitative research and whose results have contributed to a better understanding of the demographic phenomena.

The objective of this paper is to investigate, in an exploratory fashion, the production of qualitative research in demography during the 21st century, based on the articles that have been published in three major peer-reviewed journals available electronically: *Demography* (USA), *Demographic Research* (Germany), and *Revista Latinoamericana de Población* (Latin America and the Caribbean). How many qualitative papers are there? Who are the authors and which institutions and home countries do they represent? Which topics were covered? Which countries and regions were studied? Which qualitative techniques were used? What were the contexts in which the papers were written? What have we learned from these qualitative analyses that we
would not have learned from quantitative data? How far has qualitative research in demography progressed in this century?

Data & Methods

We analyzed all the papers published between 2001 and 2013 in the three journals – *Demography, Demographic Research, and Revista Latinoamericana de Población (RELAP)*. Data for RELAP are the only exception to this analysis because the journal was first published in 2007. The three periodicals are available electronically and all but *Demography* are open access journals. *Demography* was accessed through Springer Online Journals Complete, available at the University of Texas at Austin website.\(^4\) We used content analysis to quantify and qualify the production of qualitative research within each specific context (Krippendorff, 2004). We first read each paper’s abstract and, when the data utilized was not mentioned, we searched for that piece of information in the paper. Every time we came across a paper using qualitative techniques, we read the entire paper, trying to grasp information that we would have not obtained otherwise.

We analyzed a total of 1,092 papers – 565 from *Demography*, 462 from *Demographic Research*, and 65 from *RELAP*. Among those, only 41 used qualitative methods – 7 in *Demography*, 25 in *Demographic Research* and 9 in *RELAP*.

Results

The first journal analyzed here is *Demography*, one of the most important journals of the area. Published by the Population Association of America since March 1964, it is celebrating its 50\(^{th}\) issue in 2013. It is now published bi-monthly in February, April, June, August, October, and December. Between 2001 and 2012, it was published four times a year (February, May, August, and November). The current editor is Pamela Smock, from University of Michigan-Ann Arbor.

\(^4\) The first author wishes to thank Joseph E. Potter and the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin for granting her online access to the UT library system.
The period under analysis – 2001-2013 – corresponds to volumes 38 to 50. In 2013, we analyzed only the first issue (February). We excluded from the analysis all the presidential addresses (published in the November issue), as well as exchanges and errata.

Out of 565 articles under study, only seven of them mentioned the use of qualitative methods. Six papers combined quantitative and qualitative techniques and only one of them was classified as a qualitative paper.

Among the six mixed method papers, three of them were written by the same authors – Behrman, Kohler, and Watkins – based on the same data set – Kenyan Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (KDICP) – and dealing with the same main topic – social networks. They appeared on vol.38, issue 1, Feb 2001 (social networks and fertility decisions); vol.39, issue 4, Nov 2002 (social networks and contraceptive use); and vol.44, issue 1, Feb 2007 (social networks and HIV/AIDS risk perceptions). By then, the three authors were from University of Pennsylvania, except for Kohler, who was at Max Plank Institute for Demographic Research when the first paper was published. Although the papers mention in their methods sections either semi-structured interviews and focus groups or quantitative and qualitative data, the main results were drawn from the analysis of survey data. The bibliographical references suggest that more qualitative results have been published elsewhere. Therefore, regarding these three papers, we do not seem to have learned much from qualitative results. It is not a coincidence that Watkins is the third author in all three papers!

The last issue of 2001 (vol.38, issue 4, Nov 2001) brings a paper by Zulu, from the African Population and Health Research Center in Nairobi, Kenya, regarding ethnicity and postpartum abstinence in Malawi. The qualitative methodology included focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, from which we learned that postpartum abstinence is very important to safeguard the health of the newborn child and especially the man. The quotes are quite illustrative! Two other important lessons from qualitative data analysis are related to the frustration that women and men face during postpartum abstinence, which include male verbal and physical abuse, and generational changes, to the extent that not all young couples respect the postpartum abstinence tradition.
In 2005, *Demography* published a paper on network mortality experience and expected family size in a Nepalese village (vol.42, issue 4, Nov 2005), by Sandberg, from McGill University, Montreal, Canada. The methodology included ethnography, informal interviews and survey.

The paper written by Berry (vol.43, issue 3, Aug 2006), from University of Toronto, Canada, was the only one we classified as a qualitative paper. His methodology, quite unique, included the analysis of wedding party pictures, aiming at understanding interracial friendship in the United States. His argument sounded convincing.

“The wedding party, consisting of a bride, a groom, and usually one or more bridesmaids and groomsmen, is a unique social entity with which to examine interracial friendships because groomsmen and bridesmaids are either relatives or presumably close friends of the bride or groom. Friends in wedding parties are also likely to be the subset of the most-durable close friends, a group that may be substantially different but more important than the group of friends measured in surveys of classmates.” (Berry, 2006: 497)

The second journal analyzed here is *Demographic Research*, which was launched in 1999 and, unlike the other two journals analyzed here, it does not have a printed version. It is available free of charge at [http://www.demographic-research.org/default.htm](http://www.demographic-research.org/default.htm). The current editors are James Vaupel and Carl Schmertmann.

We analyzed volumes from January/June 2001 through January/June 2013. During this period, 462 research articles were published. From this total, 427, or 92.4%, draw on quantitative methods, 14 (3.0%) of the articles used qualitative methods and only 11 (2.4%) made use of mixed techniques. We classified 10 (2.2%) articles in the *others* category. Despite its openness to articles based on qualitative methods, *Demographic Research* is clearly a quantitative journal (Table 1).
Table 1: Percentage of articles according to period and method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2001 - June 2003</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2003 - December 2005</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2006 - June 2008</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2008 - December 2010</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011 - June 2013</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>92.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Demographic Research January - June 2001 - January - June 2013

Regarding the authors of qualitative studies, *Demographic Research* presents articles written by researchers from different European countries as well as from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Africa. The majority of the qualitative articles were published by North American authors, who were followed by French and German authors. It is worth emphasizing that most the qualitative papers published focused on Malawi, a landlocked country located in Southeast Africa, portraying a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Other African countries, such as Lagos, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Tanzania were also considered in studies using qualitative or mixed methods and, generally, the purpose of these studies was related to HIV/AIDS infection and birth control. It is not surprising, since van Dalen and Henkes (2012) research results had already showed that demographers view the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa as the third most important population problem for the next 20 years. According to their results, demographers from all other places across the globe think population aging and large-scale migration flows are the most important problems. Although the first two topics that worry demographers all around the world allow innumerable qualitative inquiries, there are no research results on those topics and based on this approach in *Demographic Research*.

Purposes depicted in studies about African countries were quite different from those focusing on European countries, which were mainly concerned with low fertility patterns and effects of family policies on fertility and cohabitation. These different aims mirror the contrasting realities experienced by these continents. Whereas in Europe fertility decline and premarital cohabitation have emerged as new features years ago (LESTHAEGHE, 2003), East and Southern Africa countries remains as the most heavily affected areas by the HIV epidemic. Out of the total
number of people living with HIV worldwide in 2009, 34% resided in 10 countries of Southern Africa (UNAIDS, 2013).

The qualitative or mixed studies examined in *Demographic Research* reveal that semi-structured interviews are the most used qualitative technique (06 articles). It is followed by in-depth interviews (05) and focus groups discussions (03). Other techniques, such as participant observation, structured interviews, conversation analysis and meta analysis appear just once. A combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques appeared in a few articles. In one of them, three techniques were used in order to better understand women’s sexual control within conjugal union and its implication for HIV/AIDS infection and control (OGUNJUYIGBE and ADEYEMI, 2005). In this article, survey, structured interviews and focus groups were employed. Articles using mixed methods generally pooled survey data with some other qualitative technique.

What have we learned from these studies? It became clear that HIV/AIDS in Africa is a major concern for qualitative researchers from different parts of the world and, even though demographers have learned a lot from quantitative studies, a large number of issues surrounding this theme remain puzzling and require a more comprehensive approach for increasing our understanding of “why” people behave in certain ways and their own representations about specific phenomena. As it is well known, possibilities of generalizations through qualitative studies are very small, because in studies of this nature samples are usually small and not randomly selected. However, the key point in these studies is to achieve profundity in the analysis and the articles analyzed here allowed us to better understand the African scenario related to HIV/AIDS and the means researchers have been using to access people’s perceptions, norms and attitudes towards this health problem. In this sense, it is possible to argue that loss in representativeness came along with gains in richness and depth.

Furthermore, our analysis reveals that researchers publishing in this distinctive demographic journal come from different areas of knowledge, what reinforces van Dalen and Henkes (2012) argument that, as the demographic community grows, “research interests become increasingly interdisciplinary” (p. 364). Despite of this crescent diversity in branches of learning studied by demography, demographers are still more concerned with data allowing measurements and generalizations – and they will always be, given the nature of the discipline. Additionally, the
few qualitative articles found in this journal symbolize the unbroken faith demographers have in quantitative methods and their precautions when using qualitative methods in population research.

Besides that, it is striking that qualitative research in Latin America is invisible in *Demographic Research*. Why don’t Latin American demographers publish their qualitative studies there? Is it a matter of lack of submissions, either because of language barriers, either because they publish their results in Latin American journals? Or is it a deliberate editorial decision? Future work will interview the current and past editors of all journals, in an attempt to help answer this question (and many others).

Moving towards Latin America, the Latin American Population Association (ALAP), created in 2002, publishes a journal called *Revista Latinoamericana de Población (RELAP)*, available online and free of charge. Its first issue was released in 2007 (http://www.alapop.org/2009/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=663&Itemid=324). The first editor was Alejandro Canales, from Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico (2007-2010). In 2009-2010, Dídimo Castillo Fernández, from Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México/CIEAP, Mexico was the assistant editor. Since 2011, the editor of RELAP is Marcela Cerrutti, assisted by Georgina Binstock, both from Centro de Estudios de Población (CENEP), Argentina.

A previous study comparing RELAP with REBEP, *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de População* (published since 1984 by the Brazilian Population Association) has shown that, as expected, the vast majority of articles in both journals had a quantitative approach (Miranda-Ribeiro & Simão 2012). Regarding the 190 REBEP papers analyzed then, 70 percent could be classified as quantitative, whereas only 10.5 percent relied on qualitative methodology. The percentage of papers that combined both approaches was even lower – only five percent. The results for RELAP were not very different -- among 53 articles, 15.1 percent were qualitative, 1.9 percent combined both qualitative and quantitative, 13.2 percent were classified as others and most of them (69.8 percent) used quantitative data and techniques.
Regarding *RELAP*, when data from 2012 were included\(^5\), the results changed considerably. All the 12 papers published in the two issues of 2012 used survey data. Overall, out of 65 papers published between 2007 and 2012, only eight were totally based on qualitative results (12.3%) and one combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Seven papers were classified as “others” (mostly essays) and the vast majority used quantitative methods (76.9%). Regarding qualitative techniques, it is interesting to note that four of these papers deal with sexual and reproductive health issues and one Argentine researcher alone has authored two of them – one on sexual and reproductive health and one on migration and gender.

An e-mail interview with Marcela Cerrutti, editor of *RELAP*, conducted in 2012, reveal that the journal is totally open to accepting papers with a qualitative approach. Therefore, the lack of qualitative papers, at least in more recent issues, is not due to any explicit editorial policy, but rather it is a matter of supply – relatively few articles with a qualitative orientation have made their way to the pages of the two journals. Is it because only a few papers utilizing this methodology were submitted or was the quality of the papers not good enough for publication? This question was not asked during the first interview and will be added in a future contact, as it will help us answer the supply-demand question.

The question we posed earlier regarding Latin American qualitative research persists: where are the papers published? Are they going to journals from other disciplines such as sociology or anthropology, as suggested by Van Dalen and Henkens (2012)? Where do qualitative demographers such as Johnson-Hanks and Coast (among others) publish? Of course we are aware that we have analyzed only three journals and one of them has a regional coverage. Therefore, the answer can still be in a demography journal – maybe *Population and Development Review* or *Population Studies*? Some research topics that are keen to demographers, like sexual and reproductive health, would fit into journals such as *Studies in Family Planning* or, depending on the regional focus, *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*.

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\(^5\) The first issue of 2013 (Jan/Jul) was not available when this paper was finished (Aug 2013).
Concluding remarks

The objective of this paper was to take a first look at papers that report the use of qualitative techniques published on *Demography*, *Demographic Research*, and *RELAP*. Out of 1,092 papers, only 41 used qualitative methods, by itself or combined with a quantitative approach – 7 in *Demography*, 25 in *Demographic Research* and 9 in *RELAP*. The preliminary results presented here reinforce our understanding that although qualitative methods and insights from other disciplines are welcome in demography, we still have a long way to go.

Our analysis also brought to light the issue of training in Demography. What are the main difficulties that quantitatively trained demographers may have to accept and understand less familiar data collection tools? Is it possible to overcome such difficulties? How would be the best way to put together quantitative and qualitative researchers? Should we try to train more “eclectic” demographers? As stated in an international seminar held at Cedeplar in the 1980s, “Demography should strive to become more of an interdisciplinary science, training more ‘Caldwells’ and fewer pure statisticians” (WAJNMAN e RIOS-NETO, 2003, p.29).

We are aware that the analysis done so far is quite exploratory and we still need to not only refine our results by giving more details about our findings, but also (and especially) to add more context information regarding the journals and the editorial policies. In addition to the information available on each journal’s website, we will interview present and past editors, in an attempt to use qualitative data to give more consistency to our conclusions.

References


