Hearsay Ethnography

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In this paper we describe a method developed to augment data collected by demographers. In 1997 a group of researchers from the University of Pennsylvania began to study the role of social networks in influencing responses to the AIDS epidemic in rural Malawi. Because of our academic specialization, demography, the primary data we planned to collect would come from surveys. After two rounds of the survey we found that we had learned a great deal about the characteristics of the social networks in rural Malawi, and the effects of these networks on the attitudes and behavior that were measured in the survey. We did not however, learn much about the content of the social interactions: what people said to each other about AIDS or their strategies for avoiding infection and death. We thus supplemented the survey data with semi-structured interviews in which we asked respondents about their conversations about AIDS, e.g. who said what to whom. The interviews were disappointing. As with responses to the survey, they appeared to be influenced by the interactions between the respondents and the interviewers, who were perceived to have the capacity to act as patrons, with the potential to bring material benefits to the respondent or to his/her community. In particular, the responses were laconic: we believed we were still missing much of what we believed was occurring as rural men and women attempted to formulate responses to the epidemic.

We then considered ethnography. Ethnography as prescribed in the anthropological canon is quite demanding. It requires deep immersion: classically, the anthropologist prepares by choosing a remote village and learning as much as possible of the language, then she or he enters the field site and spends the next year or two, or even more, observing, listening and talking, and keeping detailed field notes of everything. We attempted to locate a graduate student in anthropology (or sociology) willing to learn at least one of the local languages and spend at least a year in rural Malawi concentrating on social networks and responses to AIDS. Here again we were unsuccessful, in large part, we think, because graduate students (perhaps especially in anthropology) have their own interests and are wary of participation in large projects.

We asked several residents of villages in one of the project research sites to be village ethnographers. Specifically, we asked them to keep journals in which they would record conversations they overheard or participated in as they went about their daily lives. to recall conversations they overheard about AIDS (and, later on, religion). Because we did not want the journalists to edit mentally the conversations they overheard, they were not trained but rather simply asked to recall and write down anything they heard about AIDS. Some incidents are conversations they overheard on a bus, walking around the

community, shopping in the village centre, at a bar, etc. Others are conversations they participated in, for example when a group of men that include the journalist are drinking at a bar, or at a funeral. Some journals present a sermon the journalist heard at his or her church or mosque, some a radio program on AIDS. One journalist, who is the only one who is employed, attends health meetings in conjunction with his job, and writes about what was said about AIDS at these meetings; another journalist is active in several community groups, and writes about their meetings.

There are certainly problems with hearsay ethnography. For example, some forgetting almost surely took place, and some editing of the recollections as they were written probably occurred: however, both of these are also problems with more formal procedures of data collection. More worrisome is whether an ethnographer steers the conversation to topics that would provide material for a journal or whether the conversation would have turned in that direction if the journalist weren't keeping a journal. The ethnographers were paid handsomely, relative to their alternative options. Overall, however, the impression of spontaneously occurring conversations is strong in the journals. This does not mean, however, that participants are not managing their presentation of selfBrather, the management is directed to their peers or other members of their community, rather than peers transformed by clip-boards and project T-shirts into temporary outsiders.

In the paper we propose, we discuss these and other disadvantages of hearsay ethnography. We also provide examples of the sort that convince us, and we hope others at the PAA session, that if hearsay ethnography is properly implemented, it is a valuable addition to demography's arsenal of techniques.

We thus adapted classical ethnography to our purposes. We asked several residents of the villages in our study to act as our eyes, and, especially, our ears. They were to simply go about their daily routines. If anything concerning AIDS came up, they were to make mental notes, and then write their recollections, their field notes, that evening or soon thereafter. Their notebooks were given to an intermediary who mailed them to us. The notebooks were then typed, and the texts analyzed. This approach depends on hearsay evidence: we only hear secondhand, through the journalist hears.

: It is a demanding approach, however.