

**Discussion (Eric O. Udjo)**

**African households: what for and how?**

*In African culture,... we do not make the same distinctions among relations practices by whites. We have no half-half brothers. My mother's sister is my mother; my uncle's son is my brother; my brother's child is my son, my daughter. (Mandela N.: 1994; Long walk to freedom).*

I confine my comments to methodological issues. My spirit drives me to two pertinent questions in this conference: (1) what is the purpose of household information in African censuses and surveys? (2) How should household information be collected?

In attempting to answer these questions, African households may be conceptualized in several ways including the following:

1. As economic units – units of production in non-industrialized, subsistence and agricultural economies, and as income earning units in modern market economies.
2. As family units including pivotal points in demographic events and processes.
3. As explanatory variables in understanding certain socioeconomic and demographic phenomenon (for example, clustering of high mortality in certain households).

Implicit in a number of papers in this conference are elements of one or more of the above conceptualizations. As in other studies of households, a number of papers in this conference utilize the “relationship” question in examining African households. But the

“relationship” question in African censuses and surveys is not necessarily intended for the purpose analysts would want to utilize them. The following illustrate this point.

According to Crone (1990), “A household is the smallest social unit with which the census is concerned, and questions on the names and relationships of individuals within it enable an enumerator to form a clear idea of its composition and to set down its members in an order which allows him to control the interview, to direct questions, to work conversationally and to understand what he hears”. Furthermore, crone notes, “A question on relationship, besides helping an enumerator to organize and control the interview, allows for various checks on internal consistency and produces information about household composition”

Crone also points out “Relationships may ramify almost endlessly and much time and effort is sometimes spent in trying to express them, especially as a person may be related to more than one member of a household. The enquiry should concentrate on relationships which are essential for understanding the record”.

In the same vein, UNECA (1974) observes “Most censuses and demographic surveys in Africa have included a question on relationship, which can be of value both because it opens the way to several checks of internal consistency and because of the information which it provides on household size and composition. It may also be used for matching purposes in a dual record system”.

It would appear from the above that the main purpose of the “relationship” question in censuses and surveys in Africa is for fieldwork control; the study of household composition appears to be a secondary consideration.

It is pertinent to note that the household schedule of the DHS Model “B: questionnaire unlike the WFS did not have a question on “relationship”.

With regard to the second question above, a number of approaches have been used in collecting household information (others have been proposed in this conference). The simplest and perhaps commonest approach is by relating everyone else in the household listing to the head of the household (see Labov’s paper). A more complex approach was adopted by WFS in which the relationship is specified in relation to some person higher up on the list. Van de Walle and Gaye’s, and Townsend, Madhavan and Collinson’s papers describe variants of this approach. For a better understanding of household composition the more complex approach is preferred. Should this typology be recommended in collecting household information? I am up to this point, reluctant to recommend this for the following reasons:

1. It is difficult to train enumerators, time consuming and cumbersome to implement the typology in fieldwork. (The typology presents a challenge in coding during data processing). To overcome this in the Agincourt situation an anthropologist was used (see Townsend, Madhavan and Collinson’s paper). I doubt very much whether in national censuses or large-scale surveys that census/survey designers would have the luxury of using anthropologists in training and fieldwork. In a survey of the Kanuri in North East Nigeria in the early 1980’s, this commentator used the WFS typology in the specification of relationship. However, enumerators had considerable difficulty implementing this despite two weeks of training on the questionnaires. In view of this experience, this commentator abandoned the “relationship” question altogether in a subsequent survey in the same region a few years later. This commentator has since then also gone to the extreme during a

training workshop on sample surveys organized by IUSSP in 1991 in Harare, called for the scrapping of the “relationship” question from census and survey questionnaires. Aside the difficulty of implementing complex “relationship” specifications on the field, this extreme position is due to other factors as discussed below.

2. The “relationship” question usually, is the least analysed of all the variables in a census/survey questionnaire/schedule. In the case of the WFS, despite the implementation of a complex “relationship” specification, it did not receive as much attention as other variables in the volumes that were published by WFS (am I correct, Ian?). An extra question in a census/survey questionnaire usually costs a lot of money and human resources. One may ask: why spend so much money and resources on a question that is only of interest only to a “few” analysts?
3. The quality of the Answers to the “relationship” question may be doubtful due to the meaning of the concept of “relationship” in African cultures. I cannot describe this better than Mandela (see the quote at the beginning of this discussion). This problem rears its head in other aspects for example in orphanhood reports. The biases attributable to the “adoption” effect have well been reported on in the literature (see Timeaus, Blacker and others on this subject).

Finally, I would like to conclude that despite the reservations expressed above, researchers analyzing the “relationship” question in conjunction with other variables have produced useful results. One of such analyses in recent years is the resurrection of the “Own child” method by Zuberi and Sibanda in the estimation of fertility. The “relationship” question is critical in this context. Another example is papers in this conference. A number of papers used the “relationship” question together with other variables to shed some light on

household composition in different settings. Elaborating on the implications of some of the results presented could further enhance our knowledge of these issues

## **. REFERENCES**

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